Modernist Vernacular: Architecture and Identity in British Mandate Tel Aviv

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When asked what they know about the history of their city's architecture. natives of Tel-Aviv reply proudly with "Bauhaus Style"—a title which has been reinforced in the few historical analyses or exhibitions focusing on the building activities conducted during the founding years of Tel Aviv.[1] This, ironically, was the same title used disparagingly in Germany by nazi writers and speakers opposed to the Bauhaus, toward the end of the Weimar period.[2] Tel Aviv architecture between 1925-1939, the period corresponding with the 'third aliya' or immigration from Europe to Palestine, is often referred to as 'Bauhaus Style' based on the fact that nineteen of the more prominent architects to build during those years were trained at the Bauhaus. However members and advocates of the school, in both Weimar and in Tel-Aviv of the 1920's had rejected the notion of 'style' and its superficial or formal connotations, perceiving theirs to be an ideologically driven program. The Tel Aviv of those early years, built predominantly on piloti, in an abstract white palette. and with distinctively rounded city block corners, has also been linked to the modernist tenets and stylistic signatures of Le Corbusier and Mendelsohn. Though their ateliers, much like the Bauhaus studios, served as the apprenticeship sites for future Israeli architects, I contend that there exist more compelling and less clearly derivative implications in, and motivations for the use of a Modernist idiom in the building of Tel Aviv.

While revisionist political and social histories of the Yishuv period have recently emerged, still absent from this body of scholarship is a critical review and analysis of the sources and causes which generated the specific quality of the built environment in British Mandate Palestine.[3] Fundamental questions attempting to get to the root of why and how European 'modern style' became the dominant architecture of a new Jewish, Socialist, Zionist city remain to a great degree unasked. If we are to look beyond a set of stylistic formulae we must ask precisely which if any aspects of the Bauhaus training, for example, were in fact implemented in Tel Aviv, and what might Bauhaus have meant culturally and politically in the context of the new Zionist city? Would Tel Aviv become a test site for the Bauhaus' expressed aim (in Gropius'

early presentations) to establish a 'Cathedral to Socialism', a universal language of form representing the elimination of social as well as national barriers? Or did the building of the new city reflect the entire cycle of Modernism - a unitary development in which the avant gardes' vision of utopia became the idealization of capitalism? A similar interrogation might be applied to the other commonly held notions of architectural lineage such as the repeated references to the influence of Le Corbusier which rarely extend beyond the identification of roof gardens or machine à habiter. Was it Le Corbusier's pursuit of the "will to form" (the dionysian drama and sculptural criterion of building art) that served as an example? Or was it Le Corbusier's participation in CIAM and his "international" convictions regarding architecture and city planning's dependence upon markets and technologies beyond the scope of any single culture or individual? Did the urban planning practices implemented in the Geddes plan for Tel Aviv, favoring a village character of detached buildings and gardens, simply follow the (admittedly distinct) utopian visions of the Garden City and American City Beautiful movements? Or did the formal, technical and political rationality imposed on the site (Max Weber's modern scientific instramentalization and bureaucratization) play in the subordination of the desert context and its inhabitants?

The terms themselves—"International", "Bauhaus", "Corbusian", "Utopian"—must be read as rhetorical devices and applied to specific epistemic sites and conditions in Tel Aviv in order to shed new light on the intellectual, political, aesthetic and sociological ramifications of the Modernist project. The broad goal of my research is to unpack theses titles in order to identify the complex strategies associated with the formation of cultural identity as expressed in the architectural landscape of British Mandate Tel Aviv.

In this paper I propose that the unique environment of Mandate Palestine made possible a hybrid typological condition in which the Modern architectural idiom performed as Vernacular architecture. Vernacular architecture is typically defined as structures (or handmade remnants) typically of a pre-industrial era built by common people using traditional methods reflecting a local or indigenous identity. My hy-

pothesis offers somewhat skewed versions of the conventional definition of Vernacular. The transposition of Modernism onto Vernacular in the architecture of Mandate Tel Aviv is constituted and made manifest in the following set of issues particular to circumstances and consequences of diaspora identity. These in turn define a set of methodological approaches to the interrogation of the context:
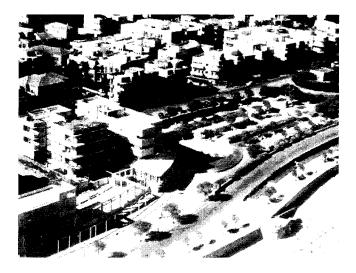
a) The cubic non-ornamental modern idiom as built in Tel Aviv was in fact 'preindustial' in that the most elemental construction techniques were employed by an unskilled and invented work force made up of emigre Jews rather than native Arab laborers.

b) Having spent two millenia in dispersed diaspora sites, Jews had no single national land or region. The notion of a 'local' context must therefore be reconsiderd in that it corresponds to both the specific exilic sites in host nations as well as the imagined, millenarian construction of the site of return. Zion - a place embedded in the shared imaginations and longings of generations of Jews, in this sense, would become a very real 'local' context. One can find representations of this projected site in the convergence of avant garde utopian ideology and and Zionist messianic ideals. These in turn must be reconcilled with the realities of 'local contexts' in the actual territory in Palestine.

c) What might be considered as indigenous to Jewery? Jewish cultural identity forged in exile, resisted definition as Oriental or Occidental though it had been burdened by the prejudices associated with both. As a result a particular kind of marginalized cultural identity emerged, whose aesthetic, political and sociological qualities might be thought of as negational. The non -representational abstract modernist architectural idiom employed in the planning and building of Tel Aviv therefore suited this negated identity. It might be said that given this identity formation the term 'indigenous' like 'preindustrial' and 'local' - qualities which typically delineate the typology of vernacular - the conflation of universalist vocabulary and idiosyncratic, specific identities necessitates another, more nuanced definition of vernacular.

INDIGENOUS IDENTITY FORGED IN EXILE

It is not a mere coincidence that modernist formal vocabulary of Bauhaus architecture, derided in Weimar as "Bolshevik", would be at the center of a recurring debate which raged in Tel Aviv during the founding years. The various factions debated whether the dominant national style should emulate contemporary European projects or the local Palestinian building tradition. The forces that led to the closing of the Bauhaus in 1933 and the implications of the debate between Oriental and Occidental in Palestine extend the possible definitions of the term 'style' far beyond questions of ornamental motif, to the issues surrounding 'identity'. As Stuart Hall and Paul DuGay propose, 'identities' are sites of articulated relationship between subjects and discursive practices. These in turn "relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself; they arise from narrativization of self - constructed within, not outside discourse."[4]

For Jews in their immigration (back?) to their 'homeland', the Oriental/Occidental debate was a poignant prologue to the collective "narrativization of self" and internal struggle to define self identity. Which of the two was the Jew? Paul Mendes-Flohr points out that "despite their eager adoption of Modern Western Culture, the Jews' oriental provenance had never quite been forgotten or forgiven."[5] Edward Said's studies have shown, the various conceptions of the Orient and the distinction between the Occident and Orient were axiomatic in Western thought since the seventeenth century when Europe emerged as self conscious cultural/political entity. In the nineteenth century when Europeans regarded the Orient as a distant and debased civilization, anti-Semites reminded Jews of their non-European origins. Contempt of the Orient exacerbated the status of Jew in Western Europe as well as his own devalued self image. It was not until a more positive image of the Orient emerged from within the self-conscious ethos of the fin de siècle that the Jews' self-perception, refracted through the image of the maligned Ostjude of the ghetto, would begin a restructuring. In the hands of Martin Buber and organizations such as the Bar Kochba Jewish Student Association of 1913, interest in a non-western mysticism turned to the Orient for cultural renewal. Jewish immigration to Palestine was in part motivated by the renewed self-perception. However upon their arrival in Palestine, Jewish presence and projects sponsored by capital from the West would be viewed as colonial and imperialist enterprises representative of the rationalism and materialism of bourgeois west.

If as Hall and DuGay posit—identities are constituted within representation—then details, surfaces and spaces encode the built "narrative" of the modern past. The modern idiom's attendant narrative associations reviled by the Nazis were the same ones that would become emblematic of the negated, maginalized nature of Jewish identity to which I have alluded above. I propose that the architectural imagery of non-representation, one that would not invoke a folk or regional memory, was one with which the Jews, a people

without a recognized nationhood, land or regional memory, would identify even in their passage and 'return' to Palestine.

UNSKILLED INDUSTRIALIZED LABOR

One of the first practical project undertaken by the World Zionist Organization Palestine office was to prepare the planting of the Herzl forest by setting up an olive tree nursery at its farm east of Jaffa. When the agronomist in charge hired Arab labor to do the work a storm of protest ensued. Enraged Jewish workers dug up the saplings and replanted them to demonstrate their determination to use Zionist funds to establish an only Jewish labor force.6 Auto-emancipation, the fundamental principle of Zionism, was fundamentally tied to this transformation of the Jewish identity from the stereotypical image as cerebral, urban, bourgeois, tax collector to that of self possessed laborer, physically working the land. The founding Zionist A.D. Gordon, had declared that:

> "Seventy or eighty thousand people are not too small a number to be considered the beginning of the creation of a national life, especially when our whole idea is to live a life of national labor in peace. ... Accordingly, the problem of the Second Aliya is, together with those settled Jews who are willing and able to work, in the moshavot, the cities and in Jerusalem, to arouse an autonomous national movement not dependent on anyone or anything from the outside".[7]

A consistent posture was adopted by Haifa and Tel Aviv municipal building when they attempted to limit the use of construction methods to those that could employ unskilled Jewish labor. They rejected building designs that specified the use of such materials as stone, which depended on skilled Arab stone masons and Arab controlled stone quarries. In 1926 the Jewish owned Nesher cement factory began production, further facilitating the use of concrete block and reinforced concrete construction. More than merely coinciding with emerging concepts of modern architecture such as Le Corbusier's "five points of architecture" the creation of a Jewish labor force must be recognized as having had a
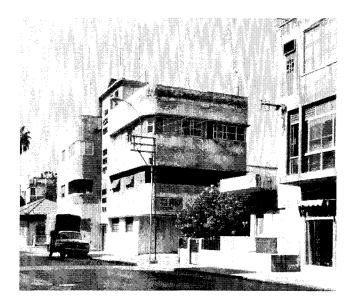
enormous impact on the political and economic as well as formal practices of production. The built landscape was evidence of the absence of an indigenous tradition of craftsmanship—in the form of both willed exclusion and invented work force. The common well educated Jew wished to forfeit his education and accept in its stead the sensibilities of a laborer, builder and farmer. One might say that a primitive construction practice and product was cultivated in a modernized (post) industrial context. The notion of an authentic material culture, a core premise for 'vernacular', must be called into question. Yet it is precisely in this very transposition, where buildings designed by architects were radically influenced by a shift in collective cultural identity, that the vernacular may be found.

TABULA RASA/UTOPIA AS 'LOCAL' CONTEXT

Bruno Zevi, described the building enterprise of Yishuv Palestine as a singularly unique phenomenon of this century: "Even a shack had a utopian flavour for the emigrants from the ghettos. Aesthetics were nourished by ethics and founded on it".[8]

The development of Turkey's national style in the 1930s is an example of nationalism derived from a contextualist sensibility where for example, the cubic tradition of mud brick houses in Anatolia offered justification for a new urban modern form.[9] In Zionist Mandate Palestine it can be said that nationalism also derived from a contextualist sensibility. The glaring difference between the Turkey and Palestine examples is that in the case of the latter the context or region was

located in the non-place of exile. It was the exilic memory and peculiar nature of 'local context' that served as a frame of reference for the formation of collective identity. The Turkish model is an example of the Modernist appropriation of vernacular traditions, while in Palestine what takes place might be described as the vernacular appropriation of Modernism.

In tracing the intellectual origins of Zionism the noted scholar Arthur Hertzberg focuses on what he defines as the ill fitted inclusion of Zionism among the milieu nineteenth century European nationalisms. Zionism, he asserts, cannot be typed as a normal kind of national movement primarily because of the absence of national land or language. Instead Hertzberg argues that Zionism was the "consummation of Jewish history and longing for return under the long awaited propitious circumstances afforded by the age of liberalism and nationalism." Therefore it is important to look to the presence of Messianism's classical eschatological purpose reconfigured through a modern reality rather than to Nationalism as the primary core of Zionism. The transposition of the Zionist idea, developed in the culture of Diaspora, onto an actual ground and site of implementation therefore also contains the fundamental paradox that resulted from the meeting of the forces of modernity with the Jewish internal debate. Once in Palestine the Zionist objective was embodied in the founding of institutions and the necessary transformation in social and economic distribution needed to foster cultural change, rather than in a preconfigured national entity.

At least two equally compelling and dynamic forces can be said to have been at play at once with respect to the founding of a modern city on a 'hallowed ground', and most clearly expose the contradictory ways in which the Jewish émigré community imagined itself. On the one hand the ground was steeped in history and meaning; a receptacle containing five millennia of material and symbolic artifact. On the other hand as a 'promised land' its meaning derived

from what it would become, and was therefore imagined as a clean slate.

In an often quoted statement, the Jewish historian Gershom Scholem spoke of Zionism as a "utopian retreat back into Jewish history." Scholem's statement reveals the compounded set of paradoxes in the Zionist endeavor: the return of a people, exiled for nearly two thousand years, to their homeland with the intention of founding an entirely new existence untainted by sentimentality yet based on an age old dream for the future, to be built on ground dense with symbolic history though perceived as untouched and virgin none the less.[10] Manfredo Tafuri identified a similar conceptual posture when he described the Avant Gardes' relationship to history as follows:

"The artistic avant gardes of the twentieth century have pushed aside history in order to build a new history. Their nihilism and totalitarianism take, therefore, the form of operations directed to the recovery of the only type of historicity still possible...the one founded on the tabula rasa, totally independent from the past. In this way, the neat cut with preceding traditions becomes, paradoxically, the symbol of an authentic historical continuity."[11]

Both Zionism (in its multiple factions) and the artistic Avant-Garde, having emerged from late nineteenth century Europe, shared a set of issues fundamental to the Modern discourse. I reject the notion of an 'imported' Modern style and argue instead that the Avant-Gardes programs and the Zionist movement, in a very real sense, converged in the context of resettled Palestine, and most strikingly in Tel Aviv during the early decades of this century. Theis convergence is most clearly expressed in the construction of the above mentioned 'Tabula Rasa.'

In his ethnographic study of Brasília James Holston describes the Modernist utopian project as one which employed an "aesthetic of erasure." He chronicles the implementation of the "erasure" existing conditions in Brazil and the reassertion by the people of social processes and cultural values which utopia had intended to deny.[12] Holston's work is certainly a precedent for my investigation, the Brasilia case study however, takes place some forty years after the experiment of Modernism in Palestine. Tel Aviv presents a dramatically different set of conditions in which an experimental and therefore fragile reality emerged from a still nascent Modernism as opposed to the considerably more codified, tested and fully convinced version rendered by Costa and Neimeyer. I depart from Holston's theoretical premise as applied to Brasília and propose that in the case of 1920's Tel Aviv the cultural context and the Modernist idiom were in fact in alignment, specifically because the "aesthetic of erasure" belonged as much to the Jewish/Zionist identity as it did to Modernism and the processes of modernization.

CONCLUSION

The notion of "homeland" still and forever reverts to the messianic idiom. From the Zionist framework evolved a dialectical identity - normal, chosen, national, socialist, new, ancient, restored, ruptured, abstract, literal, realistic, utopian, political, mythological - which would accompany the émigrés to Palestine and which in turn would manifest in as complex a set of relationships with the land, economic and social structures, indigenous inhabitants and neighbors, and the built environment. An analysis of the building enterprise and the nature of the 'modern' architecture in Mandate Palestine will require further investigation of Zionism's ideological foundations manifest in the reality of the settlement, objects and policies in situ. It is clear however even from the outset that use of the term 'modern' as attributed to the creation of a Jewish national homeland brings into question the generally agreed upon modern paradigm which is predicated on a sharp break with the past and challenges notions of a formally or ideologically 'pure' modern architecture. d

Benedict Anderson aligns nationalisms with the larger cultural systems out of which they came into being, not with self consciously held political ideologies. The difficult task in his mind, however, is to identify the precise point of origin for a particular set of cultural systems:

"Nations, however, have no clearly identifiable births, and their deaths, if they ever happen, are never natural. Because there is no originator, the nation's biography can not be written evangelically, 'down time,' through a long procreative chain of begettings. The only alternative is to fashion it 'up time' towards Peking Man, Java Man, King Arthur, wherever the lamp of archaeology casts its fruitful gleam. This fashioning, however, is marked by deaths, which in a curious inversion of conventional genealogy, start from an originary present. World War II begets World War I; out of Sedan comes Austerlitz; the ancestor of the Warsaw uprising is the State of Israel."[13]

Anderson proposes that origins are not only bound to, but born of a manifest future. I follow Anderson's inverted schema and propose that the Modernist architectural language, while it may have been born in intra-war Europe, was in effect conceived for Zionist Palestine where a set of 'site specific' ideological, political and psychological phenomena manifest in situ induced the expression of the latent aspects of Modernism.