

## Representation of a Modern City – the Case of Tel Aviv<sup>1</sup>

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The White City of Tel Aviv, the Modern movement was declared by UNESCO a World Heritage Site in July 2003. It was the second city to be declared for its 20th century heritage after Brasilia and followed by Le Havre in France, for the reconstruction of the city by August Perret, and Berlin for the neighborhoods designed by Bruno Taut and others during the 1930s.

The White City includes more than 2000 buildings in a style locally known as the Bauhaus. The name was inspired by the famous German modern school, in which many of the local architects studied. The so-called “style” is a purist-functional design adapted to the local climate and culture of the Jewish community in Palestine. The plan for the city was conceived by Sir Patrick Geddes, an urban planner originally coming from Edinburg, Scotland and working for the British mandate. Geddes visited Palestine in 1925 for the opening of Jerusalem Hebrew University, and was asked by the Jewish community of the city, represented by the mayor Dizengof, to propose a plan for the expansion of Jaffa to the north. It was only in late 1927 that after staying in Tel Aviv for a few months that he sent his final report including some proposals regarding short-term planning questions such as the best location for a train station ext. and a clear vision for the expansion of Tel Aviv to the north that became the city center and its core.

### A group in the sands

The early first representation of the city is the foundation moment photograph (Fig. 1). This photo shows a group of people gathered together, standing in the middle of a deserted dune, dressed up for a joyful ceremony. The image became the first photo appearing in all publication regarding the history of Tel Aviv. What made this image so popular?

The image represents the moment of the change between the emptiness of the sands and the creation of

1. This article is a part of a PhD historical research in Sorbonne-Paris University, directed by prof. Richard Klein.

1. *The foundation of a city as an image. Photo by Avraham Sosskin, April 1909. Source: Conservation Dep. Tel Aviv-Yafo municipality*



a living city, from a deserted land to the application of a utopian idea of a new society. It is the moment of the beginning of a lottery, made by sand shells, to distribute the first 60 parcels planned in the Ahuzat-Bait new and first neighborhood of the city.

There are no clear faces in the image, no clear location, you can even not count the number of people standing there or identify the person standing above all the others and apparently addressing them. You may ask yourself why he decided to leave the group for that historical moment, its clear that the camera was taken in the sands for this particular moment and the people were dressed with their best clothes. The heat in the summer sands of Tel Aviv can give no other explanation for this not-typical behavior.

The Myth of the creation of a city is a part of any act of creation. There are a lot of stories relating to that moment, it has been said that two young children handled two hats filled with shells: one with black ones and the other with white ones. One containing 60 family names and one just parcel numbers.

### A stand-alone house

The new white modern architecture of the first Hebrew city of Tel Aviv was a big contrast relating to the methods of construction used in Palestine, mostly by Arabs, traditionally using stones, domes, arches or tile roofs. The image of the classic oriental Kasbah village was replaced by an abstract new style, using new construction technology as reinforced concrete, enabling large strip windows, suspended balconies with rounded shapes, flat roofs and buildings on pilotis with green gardens filtering until the entrances.

Every building was constructed on a privately owned land and divided to 6-8 apartments sold in the free market.

2. *A building as a representative object: Engel house, 84 Rothschild Blvd. Architect: Zeev Rechter. Photo by Avraham Sosskin, 1934. Source: Conservation Dep. Tel Aviv-Yafo municipality*





3a



3b

**3a.** *White and grey – two languages of architecture* Living-Asherman house, Idelson 29. Architect: Dov Karmi, 1933. Photo by Jean Baptist Avril, 2005

**3b.** *15, Maharal Str.* Architects: Avraham Yaski and Shimon Povsner, 1955. Photo by Jeremie Hoffmann, 2011

The surroundings of each building were planted with trees and vegetables fulfilling the Ebenezer Harvard's idea of the "Garden City" as a contrast to the dense European cities.

The images of Tel Aviv were sent to the Jewish communities in Europe, showing the success of the Zionist ideas and trying to convince them to migrate to Palestine or to give contribution to the national-religious efforts of the fulfillment of the idea of the return to Zion.

In fact the houses were not really white and did not stand alone in big gardens as villas but were a part of a dense urban tissue. The images presented an idealistic architecture, purified, without a general context (Fig. 2). In fact, the expansion of Tel Aviv was accompanied with parallel Arab constructions of the Manshia quarter which was built along the sea shore, and a lot of Eclectic style architecture, brought originally by Jews from their original homelands and presenting mixtures of styles.

**Let's create a state!**

It was only after the declaration of the independence of the state of Israel that the local architecture turned away from the naive white forms to a new language of a post-war, grey concrete construction. The need for fast and efficient housing solutions integrated with the need for a whole infrastructure of public buildings like schools, kindergartens, cultural centers, synagogues, universities, commercial centers and offices. The plastered cubes were replaced by an architecture exposing the structural system of the buildings and their program (Fig. 3).

Influenced by Le Corbusier with his projects of Unite d'Habitation mainly the one known in Marseille, and the works of Alison and Peter Smithson in England, this new approach to architecture represented a post-war identity. It was the self image of a typical young Israeli-born (called Sabra) Jew, Hebrew speaking and creating the new state of Israel. It was a contradictory image comparing to the generation of immigrants fathers. They wanted a new form for a city with mega structures, the utopian city was replaced by a direct realist design, exposing the materials, orders and using new techniques for industrialization of sites such as prefabrication and modulation. New project were proposed to build multi-storey roads with high rise buildings creating bridges and elevated squares. Fortunately, just a small percentage of these were actually realized.

The new images of Tel Aviv showed an international city, with large hotels, populated beaches, cafés and restaurants (Fig. 4). It was the idea of becoming a part of the "normal"

**5.** *Looking at the city from the bedroom: A frame taken from Yoman (Diary), David Perlov, 1983*



**4.** *A symbol of prosperity: Hilton Hotel, Tel Aviv. Architect: Zeev Rechter, 1961. Photo by Jeremie Hoffmann, 2011*



western countries and societies that drove the people to push the city for a rather tourist and hedonistic image. The 1960s presented also an urban approach for the city center giving clear priority to roads and high ways considering the car accessibility to the city as a major factor for a successful living city. The American economical and cultural influence pushes city residence to buy houses in the suburbs enabling the city center to become a void filled with small commercial businesses filtering to historical residential areas.

**The subjective city**

The euphoria of the victory of the 6-day war (1967) followed by the surprise of the Kipour war (1973) which almost led to a defeat and a catastrophe, raised a crisis in the self image of the Israeli society. The feeling of a mutual faith was replaced by the raise of the conciseness of individuality. The movie director and university teacher David Perlov presents his autobiographic film, shot around his house in Tel Aviv *Yoman* (Diary). In a 7-hour-long movie shot between 1973-1984, Perlov exposes his personal life, including his family, daily life, feelings, illnesses and childhood (Fig. 5).

The contrast between the narratives of a one communal society and the new representations of the city life of individual subjects gives birth to a new image of the city. Perlov's life is presented while mixed with national evens such as the demonstrations against the government, the raise of the Likud party after the 1977 elections and the long war and controversial stay of the Israeli army in Lebanon. The center of the city of Tel Aviv becomes a refuge from these national unsolved political and social issues. A series of films made during the 1980s-1990s presenting Tel Aviv as the only place which is outside of the conflict and that can give place to new tendencies in society like homosexuality, Jews-Arabs romantic relationships, punk clubbing and non-heroic approaches towards what was considered as sacred issues like the image of officer soldiers or approaches towards religion.

These tendencies gave birth to the rediscovery of the city's urban values during the beginning of 1990s. New books, showing the architectural qualities of the city started to appear (Fig. 6). Newspaper articles dealing with the Bauhaus style led to an exhibition called "The White City" in Tel Aviv museum in 1984 and an international conference on the same subject in 1994. The city of Tel Aviv got finally its international recognition of the important rule the city of Tel-Aviv plays in the history of the evolution of modern cities in the 20th century in 2003.

It seems the reception of the qualities of a city by its public plays a critical role in the dynamic of its evolution. The city and its myths are not created only by planners of politicians. It is first and above all driven by its users: citizens, visitors, workers, artists, children and researchers.

**6.** *The city as a playground for children's urban fantasies: Gali's soap bubbles, Avirama Golan, 2008. Drawings by Lena Grubman*

