



Housing in the Israeli project

REVIEWS

The Israeli Project – Planning the National Space

Exhibition review - The Israeli Project

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“The Israeli Project”, an exhibition of architecture, portrays in hundreds of photos, documents and sketches the development of the Israeli built environment during the years 1948-1973. Furthermore, it exhibits the bonds connecting architecture to politics, as well as how architecture is employed not only in the structuring of new cities and neighborhoods, but also in the construction of a new national identity.

Zvi Efrat, creator and architecture researcher, divides the project into two periods. The first, 1948-1967, he calls the period of visioning and structuring, while the second, 1967-1973, he refers to as “the passage from *revakha* (welfare) to *revakh* (profit)”. Throughout this time, Israel has multiplied its number of inhabitants by four, established its governmental, municipal and public systems and institutions, and shaped its newcomers into a complex community, with a defined core and periphery. Constructing the built environment was a significant consequence of these processes and at the same time a major contributor. *The Israeli Project* is an extremely informative exhibition in that it exposes many hidden aspects and circumstances of the construction scheme. (Is this “scheme” something everyone knows about?)

The exhibition’s space, designed by Meira Kobalski, participates in creating the necessary atmosphere, imposing a sudden transition from the hub of the multicolored street, to the big, quiet rooms. Inside, one finds a modernist, minimalist, strictly ruled, world, generously stretching over three stories. The color scheme is black and white, moderated with gray. The few furniture items, as well as all exhibition objects, are temperately composed in straight lines. Defined cells are assigned specific purposes, a computer center and two screenplays, while the rest is presented in open spaces.

A vast collection of documented details arranged in a multi-layered structure invites the visitor on a self-guided tour of *The Project*. Pictures, sketches, plans, films, various official documents, governmental correspondence and other texts, arranged in alphabetical order, is in itself indicative of the

theme's generous proportions. The interesting symbolic lexicon is very helpful when visiting the exhibition.

For one who is familiar with the Israeli urban landscape, the upper surface level (black and white photos of buildings and models) appears surprisingly pleasant and tempting. The clean, straight lines of the 50s and early 60s look as if they were taken from contemporary retro architecture projects, flattered by soft shading and distinguished surrounding. All the houses, new and clean, expose accurate concrete elements or they are painted in solid white colors. The general atmosphere is of genuine, pure architecture and sober beauty aligned with factual, professional, construction. This atmosphere is amplified when one views the ugly buildings of the early 70s (under *Profit*), which lack the discipline of *The Project's* origins and much of its beauty. It goes without saying that there was not a single sign of the imminent "messy environmental protest"¹: there are neither clotheslines in front of the houses, nor are there TV antennas and water tanks on the roofs (not to mention other various building expansions, barred windows, etc.). Instead, a clear message of uniform style and many variations on a single theme, the straight line, is one of unlimited trust in *The Project's* reason.

However, alternative levels of information, offered in drawers and files, relay another, quite contrasting, message. Under the illusion of a self-guided survey, the visitor finds himself/herself on the verge of discovering the excessive, oppressive, face of the allegedly modest architecture. Following World War II, most of the Western world's systems of urban planning reflected the modernist perception of the rational planning theory. Planning, as perceived in theory and within the legal and bureaucratic framework surrounding the "system," was scientific, procedural and comprehensive. At the core of modern planning thought lay circumstantial thinking: the ability to understand the connection between actions and results and employing this understanding to determine society's order and space. Accordingly, planning was conceived as a scientific procedure that leads planners along a clear technical path (Faludi, 1973; Kahn, 1969; Camhis, 1979).

The Israeli Project appears as an extreme, modernist project, scientifically calculated up to its most intricate details, obsessively spreading its products all over the land. The challenges facing the public administration at the time were difficult: there was an urgent need of accommodations for hundreds of thousands of new immigrants, and, a much more important issue was the effort to construct a new collective identity. The planning system, with its modernist ideas, was fully recruited to fulfill this purpose. The whole professional arsenal participated in the creation, leaving nothing to chance. Since this was state-of-the-art rational-comprehensive planning, the country was soon "covered" in plans determining the cities, towns and villages that were about to form the

¹ As Haim Yaakobi, architect and researcher, terms the illegal construction in public housing neighborhoods.

spatial system of the new nation. Their locations were carefully chosen, their sizes cautiously determined/decided on. Each had a purpose and a justifiable function, in the entire creation.

In order to get the impression, all one needs to do is to open the files and drawers and take a good look at the sketches and plans on the walls of the big rooms. The drawers labeled *Town*, for example, contain several models of a town-to-be, Ashdod, all of which were presented at an international contest for the planning of the new town. The models show possible alternative shapes for the town. From the perspective of time the shapes do not appear that different. They present the message they carry: Ashdod was born in the designer's room, on his table (as were other development towns, like those the shapes of which can be found under *Amora*). The town's pattern and order, up to the minutest of details, grew out of professional and administrative choice. This is indicative of *The Project's* attitude as a whole.

The project's main "sins" are located at the lowest level of the exhibition, while *Welfare* and other matters of leisure are located at the upper level. *Amora* represents the "sin" of discrimination towards Mizrakhi (African & Asian) immigrants by sending them to small, peripheral towns. Models of new and fresh development towns and pictures of small houses "lost in the desert" are displayed side by side. *Vernacular* shows houses that were deserted by the local Arab population, most of which were soon filled by immigrants, the needs of their former inhabitants totally ignored.

According to Yiftachel & Meir (1998), settlement processes in European-led settler societies aim to reach three main goals: first, to aid nation-building projects by providing essential spiritual and physical values; second, to aid the European group in dominating the land resources of indigenous people; third, to distance later immigrants from the center of authority and economical wealth. Though *The Israeli Project* appears to be very well tuned towards those three goals, the exhibition does not place the last two at the center of the scene. Instead, the term "Fordism" (Harvey, 1989) crosses one's mind: the building operation, especially during the first time period, resembles a mass production line which produces units, houses and towns. As any other manufacturing process, this too was implemented by a small group of visionaries, professionals and decision-makers, who maintained a clear separation between themselves, holding the knowledge and the power and the common people, needing nothing but to follow instructions. All the participants, professional as well as newcomers, naturally accepted the vision itself (of a western-Ashkenazi Jewish state). Visitors are free to decide whether the resulting sectional wealth was only a side effect, an innocent outcome, or whether it was an intentional part of the scheme.

The involvement of an administrative/clerking touch is everywhere. Since the public administration was the main initiator of construction, governmental officials were striving for utilization of planning and building. Thus, it is not at all surprising to find papers on "The influence of rooms' height

over construction utility" (calculation of the national compendium as a result of lowering 10 cm of ceiling height).

Under the term *Type*, for another example, one finds several variations on "the block", which is a residential building. Type numbers 247, k-51, 64 and 4214 are actually quite similar, except for a few negligible details; but then – nothing is negligible in *The Project*. Were the blocks designed by the great architects/visionaries of the time, or was it the office workers? It is becoming harder and harder to tell. Amongst the documents one can find a letter, dated 1950, signed by the head of the housing division in the Ministry of Labor, proudly announcing the above types as the product of the technical department. Later on, those standardized types were built in the new towns of the southern Negev region, and the northern Galilee, as well as in the new neighborhoods of Tel Aviv and Haifa. And thus it proceeds, on and on, in the same way: each building element planned up to the smallest detail (as were shading elements, stairways and many other elements); official documents standardized a variety of construction segments and instructed their implementation (as presented under *Standard* and *Detail*). Under *Concrete* one finds a detailed file on the professional level, which today is very rarely used.

Can megalomaniac-building machinery, for example the toothed wheels which are so beautifully illustrated in the exhibition, attain its goals? Can a state fully plan its people's identity and engineer its social spaces and urban environments? *The Israeli Project* was unique because of its dimension and volume, however the approach was widespread. The visionaries of the time truly believed they could impose spatial order using a top-down bureaucracy, keeping an eye on each and every detail. Rational-comprehensive tools, like those implemented in the project, were heavily criticized a few decades later: the structuralist-Marxist approach criticized the inevitable control that politics and capital had over the centralized planning systems (Harvey 1985, 1989); post-modernists challenged the modernist hegemony of logic, justice and morality and condemned the attempt to rationalize reality as false and irrelevant (Soja, 1989; Cooke, 1990; Goodchild, 1990). Studies from the field of chaos and self-organization claimed that open, very complex, systems, through which material and information flow (such as the human environment) are never predictable or governable (Portugali, 1994, 1999).

The Israeli Project proves all those claims to be true: the great architects of the time willingly manned the national mission and unconditionally served the official administration. They allowed their creative work to be engineered, thus lending a hand in the creation of "urban deserts", of "placeless" towns with empty fabrics. They closed their eyes to the country's existing treasures and then they avoided seeing the people, the human beings, that comprised the dull crowd they were working for. Thus, they failed in serving both the country and its people. They caused irreversible harm to the natural and built environments and ignored the merciless injustice brought upon generations of immigrants. The gaps between European-settlers and Mizrachi-immigrants waited a decade before

painfully erupting, revealing the discrete intense face of Israeli society. Even the beautiful straight line was brutally broken, forming the Israeli city as an ugly aggregate of unspecified boxes.

The humble photogenic houses in the photos gradually change, in the visitor's eye, into social traps manufactured by the mass production conveyor belt. The seeds of evil are implanted within the connection between architecture and administration, as well as between architecture and politics. Even the notion of equity rising out of the corresponding houses and apartments does not seem real: the exhibition first exposes it as a simplifying tool used for the quick production of the new space. Then, it causes one to think about the way people were perceived – as nameless tools sacrificed for the national mission. The duplication of living quarters and towns was in the hands of anonymous national-agents.

Architects and planners were definitely among the privileged few who worked hand in hand with civil service. Their plans enabled the occupation of land by Jewish immigrants, thus allowing fulfillment of the new Israeli nationality. Within cities as well as in the periphery, people were assigned to live in the pre-planned neighborhoods (in Hebrew "*shchunot*"). Could the planners have known that the most significant result of their plans would be the creation of the Israeli masses? The message the exhibition relays is that they did not care. The absence of people in the photos on the walls implies the ignorance. One of the most shocking pieces in the exhibit is a series of seven telegrams, all written and sent on the same day in the early 1950s. The correspondence begins at 7:00 AM with a report from the Ministry of Immigration office at Haifa port to the Ministry of Housing office in Jerusalem. "A boat just arriving at the port carries 30 families more than the number of families reported to be arriving," says the first telegram. "What should be done with these people?" Where should we send them?" The immediate answer is a list of places: "Please send five families to Tiberias, another five to Nazareth" etc. "The five families that we sent to Tiberias refuse to get off the bus," says the following telegram, "What should we do?" "Take them to Nazareth," answers the clerk from the Ministry of Housing. "We are in Nazareth and they would not get off the bus," says another telegram, two hours later. "Take them to Kiryat Shmona. If they do not get off the bus over there, call for the police". Notions of discipline and obedience to the project were shared both by politicians, planners and administrators. Was anyone able to see the people more than as national-agents of the occupation plan?

Out in the open, walking in the streets of Tel Aviv, one begins to wonder. The robust, almost naïve, bonds connecting modernist planning and architecture to politics are easily exposed, clearly illustrated. No less clear is the fact that they are not merely subject matter for a retrospective exhibition that deals with the past. How do they work today? What shape will they have in the next exhibition, the one that tells the story of an advanced, and most likely more sophisticated, chapter of *The Project*?

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