



EXHIBITION REVIEW

The Exhibition that Never Was

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(A review of the cancellation episode of the architectural exhibition, that was due to represent the Israel Association of United Architects (IAUA) at the XXI World Congress of the International Union of Architects (UIA) that took place in Berlin from 22 – 26 July 2002).

The exhibition “The Politics of Israeli Architecture: a Civilian Occupation,” by architects (and the curators) Rafi Segal and Eyal Weizman¹ is a landmark in the architectural discourse in Israel. For the first time in decades, the architectural community was forced to regard its professional discipline in political and moral terms rather than in terms of aesthetics, technology and property, and to recognize the fact that lurking behind the “blue line” of the master plan there are other lines: “a green line,” “a purple line” and plenty of red lines.

By all appearances, Weizman and Segal’s project failed. The IAUA, after initiating the exhibition and appointing the curators, withdrew at the last minute. Then, as the nature of their actions dawned on them, the IAUA members were left dumbstruck. Reacting conventionally, they chose to silence the messenger: a sweeping censorship was imposed on the exhibition that was intended to be sent to the congress in Berlin and it was scrapped. Most of the copies of the catalogue were impounded and the curators were accused of being “anti-Israeli” and “doing the work for the Palestinians.” However, the episode, which reverberated internationally, established a fact in the field: separating between “pure” professional discipline and “dirty” politics is once again not possible in Israel.

Parts of the exhibition are displayed in the catalogue/manifesto edited by Segal and Weizman and designed by David Tartakover² – a direct,

¹ Rafi Segal is 35 years old, a graduate of the Faculty of Architecture at the Technion and a teacher in the faculty. He shares a private architectural practice with Eyal Weizman, 32 years old, a graduate of the Architectural Association (AA) in London and a doctoral student at the London Consortium. The exhibition and the catalogue are based on Weizman’s doctoral thesis “The Politics of Verticality: architecture and occupation in the West Bank.”

² David Tartakover is one of the senior graphic designers in Israel, a winner of the Israel Prize for Design in 2002, and, among others, he designed the “Peace Now” logo.

effective design that evokes the role historically played by graphic design in the design of revolutions, before the field became primarily devoted to life style. The catalogue, in the format of a weekly newspaper supplement, is undoubtedly one of the most powerful documents ever placed on the agenda of the architectural community in Israel.

The collection of articles and photographs in the catalogue presents an uncompromisingly critical view of one of the founding principles in the Zionist ethos – the enduring Zionist settlement enterprise – particularly after 1967. The original title of the exhibition was “The Settlement Instinct.”³ Its principal concern was: to review the Zionist settlement enterprise as a whole in a critical-political context (methodically isolated from social or economic aspects); to analyze the spatial relationships between the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the Palestinian towns and villages; to refer to the part played by architecture in the political sphere.

The themes raised were nothing new, certainly not to the ears of the authors and readers of this journal. However, for the first time and long overdue, they were being addressed directly by members of the architectural milieu. The panic this caused undoubtedly attests to thick layers of camouflage and denial being scraped away and raw nerves being exposed. An interesting question, possibly worthy of research, is how the breaching of the walls of denial had been delayed for so long. After all, architects have been involved in managing space all along: beginning with the defensive-offensive settlements known as *homa u-migdal* (Tower-and-Wall) in the thirties, in which the architect Yohanan Ratner was an active partner; through the physical planning of Israel after the state was founded, for which the architect Aryeh Sharon, head of a team of architects and town planners, was responsible; to the Jewish settlements in the West Bank during the last three decades, in which dozens of architects from all shades of the political spectrum have been involved. An instructive and stimulating interview with the architect and town planner Thomas Leitersdorf, who designed the towns of Ma’aleh Adumim and Emanuel in the West Bank, is published in the catalogue and constitutes first-hand evidence of the perception of the architect’s role as executor of instructions.

The architectural community in Israel carries out a vast amount of construction and commissions, but refrains from contemplating their significance. In the virtual absence of open architectural debate in Israel, the various aspects of architectural practice are seldom exposed to criticism. Although one should not deny the humanist aspects of architecture (for instance, Martin Buber’s well-known definition of architecture as the “humanization of space”), it is essentially a field of practice and provision of

³ The title “The Settlement Instinct” is a paraphrase of the article “The Settlement Reflex” written by Professor Oren Yiftachel and published in *Ha’aretz* in 2002. The title was altered at the request of the IAU/A, which considered it too blunt.

a service and not one of reflection and criticism. Architecture is by nature enlisted to political and economic goals; it serves the establishment and/or the capitalist system and complies with state and municipal regulations, without which it cannot obtain building permits. Furthermore, architecture is romantically perceived as a creative profession, and excess contemplation is viewed as a spanner in the works. It is also patently a discipline of “occupation” in the sense of capturing land and space, even if it is intended for virtuous purposes such as providing a roof for the needy. Yet, as the catalogue points out, a black flag flies over the link between architecture and the occupation.

Censorship

The catalogue was intended to accompany the Israeli exhibition at the XXI World Congress of the UIA that took place in Berlin in July 2002. Israel is a regular participant in the UIA congresses, together with professional organizations from around the world. The representative body in the UIA is the Israeli Association of United Architects (IAUA), which initiated the presentation of the exhibition and selected the curators from a number of candidates who were invited to a semi-private competition. Familiar with the milieu in which they were operating, Weizman and Segal submitted a “watered-down” proposal and employed a cautious marketing strategy. Had the IAUA selection panel been more alert it would have immediately discovered the true intentions behind the modest proposal. However, the senses of the architectural community were dulled and the ploy succeeded. The Weizman-Segal proposal was selected and the bombshell was revealed only after it exploded – entitled “A Civilian Occupation,” the cover consisted of a map of the West Bank spread like a stain of bright red blood; the collection included articles and photographs that left no room for blurring or distorting the message.

Among the contributing writers were Professor Oren Yiftahel, Dr. Meron Benvenisti, and the journalist Gideon Levy. Among the photographers were Miki Kratsman and Pavel Wolberg. The people involved were all well known in Israel.⁴ Far more critical positions *vis-a-vis* the situation in Israel have been heard in public in recent years on various platforms, some by these very writers. Much more distressing visual illustrations than those appearing in the catalogue are regularly published in all the media, including the state television channel. There is no doubt that architects had also encountered these, but apparently they had never recognized what it all had to do with

⁴ The writers are among the most severe critics of Israeli politics, and regularly publish their opinions in the media. The photographers have for many years been accompanying journalists reviewing the territories. Their names were included in the initial proposal to the Association.

them and their profession. And when it appeared, they were unable to tolerate the “icon’s” entry into their temple. The gut response from the Association’s chairman, architect Uri Zerubavel, was in his words, “to destroy the catalogue.” No less. Finally, shocked at his response, he said, “I do not burn books” (I only impound them).

One of the chief official rationalizations for the response of other architects was the claim that the Association is a professional, apolitical body and that the material in the catalogue was “not architectural,” hence unfit for being exhibited by a body representing architects. A similar claim by dozens of irate Israeli architects was made against a “political” article published a few months earlier in the popular British architectural journal “*Architectural Review*.” The writer, Tom Kay, is a British-Jewish architect who teaches at Bir Zeyt University. In March he was caught in the IDF’s assault on Ramallah, where he lives. He published impressions of his grueling experience in the journal under the title “View from Ramallah.” The predictable Israeli response was not long in coming. The journal’s editor was flooded with letters from architects, not in protest of the brutal assault and its outcome as reported by Kay, but opposing its being reported in an architectural journal. “This is not architecture” they wrote and threatened to cancel their subscriptions. Peter Davey, the journal’s editor, tried to teach the stunned architects an instructive lesson on the issue of the limits of the architectural discipline: “Architecture deals with building space and it is natural that it should also deal with the destruction it suffers.”

It should be pointed out that the IAUA is an autonomous public body that does not represent the State of Israel. Nevertheless, its leadership and a good number of its members assumed a patriotic stance and adopted the quasi-official argument to the effect that the curators were “damaging the image of the Association in Israel and overseas.” The censorship was self-imposed and voluntary. No external pressure was brought to bear. However, as a result, the responsibility for the Association’s “image” was withdrawn from the censors. Segal and Weizman wasted no time in leaking the story to the press and distributing copies of the catalogue, which they had managed to lay their hands on, to anyone who requested them. (They could not be accused of not anticipating this course of events). The international media interviewed them, by exuding a form of missionary subversiveness diluted with childlike joy. Extensive articles about the episode and its heroes were published in the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*, and elsewhere. Surprisingly, the media coverage was “balanced,” reflecting the actual debate that ensued.

Geo-political abduction

Segal, Weizman and Tartakover did an excellent job on the catalogue. A mere glance at the cover, a cursory perusal of the dozens of settlement

plans and the photographs of the security fences and the “way of life” in the territories made everything perfectly clear. Terms such as ‘infrastructures’, ‘land features’ and ‘urban planning’ were released from their constricted professional connotations and opened up to critical analysis. The map of settlements in the West Bank, a combined project of Weizman and the B’Tselem organization, which is presented in the catalogue, did not attract much attention, whether due to its complexity or dulled senses, is not certain. This is, however, a rare document, that for the first time visually reveals the enormous disparity between the built area covered by settlements (1.7% of the area of the West Bank), and the actual boundaries – indicated by the areas intended for building in the future (41.9%). The true significance of Israeli presence in the territories was disclosed. Conclusions that could be drawn – an absence of Palestinian territorial contiguity, hampering development and severe restrictions on freedom of movement – might be clearer to architects than to the politicians, after all, they know how to read maps, and they actually do the planning.

Segal and Weizman present the symbiosis between the management of space and the management of the Israeli-Palestinian national conflict. They analyze the processes of change and adaptation, the building and erasure of the open landscape being the most concrete manifestations. “The unique conditions on the ground dictate the points of friction, and the ground itself becomes the battlefield on which issues of power, control and resistance are played out” (p. 43). The conflict is defined primarily by what is built and where. Planning decisions do not generally stem from economic or ecological considerations, rather from the need to serve strategic or national goals. The article analyzes how government planning made strategic use of the West Bank’s extreme topography to position the settlements on hilltops, viewing the Palestinian settlements from above, and creating “two parallel systems that express themselves in terms of ‘above’ and ‘below’.”

In ‘pure’ real estate terms, the settlements are mainly “closed neighborhoods” (gated communities), or in the Israeli version, “community settlements”, which operate a sifting procedure on a socio-economic, ethnic or national basis. In the West Bank, this form of settlement carries an additional burden, as Segal and Weizman write: “The hilltop environment, isolated, overseeing and hard to reach, lent itself to the development of this newly-conceived form of utopia. The community settlements create cul-de-sac envelopes, closed off from their surroundings ... promoting a mythical communal coherence in a shared formal identity” (ibid.). This is the built layout of claustrophobia, constructed, they say, ironically, mainly by a Palestinian labor force. The human desire to improve quality of life is appropriated for ‘security’ goals; and “the settlers’ search for ancient biblical landscapes is ‘abducted’ from them either wittingly or unwittingly, for the purposes of geo-political strategic goals,” write Segal and Weizman.

Establish a town here

The interview, conducted especially for the catalogue by the architect Eran Tamir with the architect and planner Thomas Leitersdorf, is a thought-provoking encounter with the professional world. The conversation centered on the planning of the towns of Ma'aleh Adumim and (ultra-orthodox, privately-initiated) Emanuel in which he was involved in the seventies.

The most sublime thing at that time, Leitersdorf said, "was that the planning considerations and the political considerations went hand in hand ... to say that an architect has influence on political steps? He doesn't. The story of Judea and Samaria could have been different, but it was not in my hands or in yours."

In the planning of Emanuel, Leitersdorf worked for private entrepreneurs, and in planning Ma'aleh Adumim his counterpart was the chairman of the ministerial committee for settlement affairs at the time and the present Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon. For the planning of Ma'aleh Adumim, he was allocated no more than 120 days until the bulldozers went on site. He describes the planning work and the establishment of the town in dry, technical language, perhaps an indication of his unease.

Leitersdorf goes on to say that, after he was appointed as planner of Ma'aleh Adumim, "I was given map-coordinates and was told to build a town. How big? – the biggest possible." The period during which Ma'aleh Adumim was established, says Leitersdorf, was a period in which the United States put pressure on Israel not to establish new settlements in Judea and Samaria. This was also the time when construction work on the new airports in the Negev Desert had finished, following Israel's withdrawal from Sinai. "The situation was such," said Leitersdorf,

"... that the state of Israel wanted a city. True, there was fear of the Americans, but there was a lot of construction equipment standing idle in the desert. One day someone said the (American) observers had gone, and 15 construction companies with 6 infrastructure companies went up the mountain and in one go erected a city."

The groundwork for "in one go erected a city" was surely laid some 40 years before the establishment of Ma'aleh Adumim, in the "Wall-and-Tower" (*homa u-migdal*) settlements, as architect and theoretician Sharon Rotbard put it brilliantly in his article "Homa Umigdal" in the catalogue. Rotbard analyzes the Wall-and-Tower phenomenon as

"... the metaphor of the Israeli fait-accompli ... it germinated the future characteristics of Israeli architecture and the Israeli city: hasty translation of a political agenda into an act of construction, occupation of territory through settlement and infrastructure, high

priority given to the buildings' security functions. It is the site of all the Israeli oxymorons – "offence through defense," "the camp as a home," "permanent temporality," "house arrest."

In Rotbard's view, Wall-and-Tower is the architectural emblem that determines the spatial and architectural agenda in Israel to this day.

Territorial security considerations have also formed the basis for the physical planning of Israel since the fifties – perhaps the most ambitious planning campaign of its type in the world, as presented by the architect and architectural historian Zvi Efrat in his article, "The Plan", in the catalogue on the Sharon Plan.⁵ The article was originally written in the framework of "The Israeli Project: building and architecture in Israel, 1948-1973," an exhibition that Efrat collected that was on show two years ago at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art – an exhibition which heralded the onset of critical debate within the architectural community on the history of the Zionist settlement enterprise.

Segal's and Weizman's catalogue and their collection proposals are significant outcomes of the "Project Israel" exhibition, but they are not the only ones. A clear majority of the proposals that competed for the Berlin exhibition⁶ looked at architecture in Israel from a critical standpoint. For the first time in years, there was no suggestion to present an array of architectural achievement at a representative exhibition overseas in the usual way, but to relate either directly or indirectly, in a more or less focused way, to the current Israeli situation. Most of the candidates thought it appropriate to mention in the rationale accompanying their proposals, that at a time like this they could not even contemplate dealing primarily with the aesthetic or technological aspects of architecture.

Coincidentally, concurrent with the contest for collecting the exhibition in Berlin, applications were made for collecting the Israeli display in the 8th Biennale of Architecture in Venice that opened in the beginning of September 2002. In contrast to Berlin, the Israeli exhibition at the Biennale officially represents the State of Israel and is displayed in the national pavilion in the Castelo Gardens in Venice under the auspices of and funded by the Culture and Foreign Ministries. However, the proposals for the official exhibition were also distinctly critical, recognizing that it was no longer possible to bury one's head in the sand. The proposal that was chosen,

⁵ The late architect Aryeh Sharon was a graduate of the Bauhaus School, and was appointed by the prime minister at the time, David Ben Gurion, to draw up the master-plan for population dispersal – the physical planning of Israel – which inspired the establishment of dozens of new towns and hundreds of settlements around the country, many of which were "frontier settlements" along the border/ceasefire lines.

⁶ Candidates' proposals for the exhibition in Berlin and for the Biennale in Venice were presented at the "Israeli Pavilion," an exhibition collected by the architect Shelly Cohen and shown in July at the Architects' Association House.

“Borderline Disorder,” a multi-disciplinary display collected by Efrat, undoubtedly warrants a separate discussion.

In brief: as defined by Efrat, the exhibition he collected considers the relationship between form and politics as expressed in all architectural criteria - national planning, urban planning and architectural design. The exhibition presents what is defined in architectural parlance as the “weak form” (the deconstruction of the architectural object, blurring the boundaries between form and background, urban dispersal and sprawl) in the unique Israeli geopolitical context. Like Segal and Weizman, Efrat also adopted the tactic of sweetening the pill and using camouflage tactics to suit the taste of the body that commissioned the exhibition – in this case not an autonomous professional association, but the state.

Thus, for example, Efrat concealed from the commissioning body the fact that the central image in his exhibition was an enlargement of the map of settlements in the West Bank, documented by Weizman in collaboration with B’Tselem. He described the image, which spread over 200 square meters of wall space in the Israeli pavilion in Venice, by using the innocuous term “territorial patchwork” and “cartographic image.” In this way, he managed to anesthetize the guardians of the steering committee, and was chosen as the curator. Normally, the “B’Tselem” map would not have passed the tolerance threshold of the Foreign Ministry, perhaps justifiably. The ministry regards cultural enterprises such as the Biennale in Venice as part of its public relations campaign and, therefore, provides financial support. The Trojan horse that Efrat led into the arena, even if clad in silk, was an exception in the world of Israeli architectural exhibitions.

Foreign labor

Even in its “dietetic” version, Efrat’s exhibition is revolutionary in the context of Israeli architectural exhibitions, both in Israel and overseas. In exhibitions of this sort, the displays generally consist of representative works by leading architects, conceptual projects, winning entries in planning competitions and such. In this context, the Israeli exhibition displayed at the 7th Biennale in Venice that took place in 2000 is interesting. The overall title of the Biennale⁷ was “Less Aesthetics, more Ethics,” which undoubtedly induced an expansion of the discipline’s boundaries. However, the curator of the Israeli pavilion on that occasion, the architect Hillel Schocken, deliberately chose, as he explains, to remain within the existing boundaries.

⁷ The Biennale for Architecture in Venice was divided into two parts: the international exhibition, for which a curator on behalf of the biennale was responsible, and national exhibits in the national pavilions on the Biennale site in the Castello Gardens, for which curators chosen by each country were responsible.

He put the exhibition together in the atmosphere of hope which followed the Oslo agreements and explained his choice in the exhibition catalogue, in which he wrote, "The Arab-Israeli conflict, that has been central to our life in Israel for the past century, now, at last, seems to be reaching a peaceful conclusion. Its impact on urbanism, however interesting, can await an academic discussion at a later date, which will allow a better and more objective perspective." The exhibition, entitled "Anonymous Intimacy," in fact displayed some conceptual projects, dealing with the future of cities as the curator views the issue.

Another platform on which Israeli architecture has been exhibited recently is the journal "Casas," published in Argentina in a dual-language edition – English and Spanish. The March 2002 edition of the journal, edited by the guest editor from Israel, the architect David Guggenheim, is devoted entirely to residential building in Israel. Incidentally, specific reference to "Israel" was deleted from the issue's title and replaced with the term "Mediterranean." This was for internal Argentinean political reasons and because the works presented in it were chosen, says Guggenheim, according to their Mediterranean features. "Mediterranean" is considered to be an easier term to digest not only in Argentina, but in Israel as well. Many people regard it as more enticing than "Middle Eastern," which carries overtones of strife and conflict. In his article, Guggenheim deals extensively with the unique attributes of the local vernacular and "*genius loci*," but not once does he mention the fact that the buildings he is referring to are Palestinian. For example, a photograph of a stone-clad terraced building in the Manchat residential complex in Jerusalem appears on the cover of the journal, but nowhere does it reveal that this prosperous Israeli suburb was once the Palestinian village of Malcha.

In this context, the story published some months ago in *Ha'aretz* of the Israeli exhibition that took place last March at the 25th Biennale for Art in Sao Paulo, Brazil is ironic. The Israeli curator of the exhibition, Tali Tamir, chose to present a piece by the artist Gal Weinstein entitled "Roof" – a sloping roof covered with red tiles – which she viewed as criticism of the Israeli real estate dream and of the breach between Israeli architecture and its Mediterranean environment. According to her, she did not intend to present a political exhibition. However, it seems that not everything can be controlled. To Tamir's chagrin, a Palestinian artist (with Israeli citizenship) by the name of Saliman Mansur, who also participated in the exhibition, put the tiled roof into a political context: no longer as a critique of the bourgeois dream, but as a symbol of the building in the settlements; compelling evidence of aggression and occupation. Mansur's statement reverberated around Sao Paulo. It would seem that any further interpretation is superfluous.

Epilogue

In order that the area allocated to the IAU in the Congress Hall in Berlin would not remain empty, at the last minute, the chairman of the IAU packed and sent an archive exhibition called "Space 2001" to represent Israel at the international conference. It is a conventional exhibition that includes a collection of architectural projects taken from here and there – plenty of metal-and-glass, as well as so-called hi-tech and more architectural muscle. Ironically, the exhibition's curator, the architect Shlomo Shafrir, is a resident of the Elkana settlement in the West Bank.

The IAU also cancelled the debate it promised to hold about the "affair," as well as the issue of architecture and politics in general, after the Berlin congress was over. Everything became quiet again.