

Processes of urban design preservation and renewal in Tel-Aviv; HaBima Square

Based on my MA thesis at the Unit of Culture Research, Tel Aviv University (Silbiger, 2012)

Urban planning and restoration have at their basis a need to allocate resources to those who build and design. The process of allotting resources is fundamentally of a social nature, combining individual intentions with communal aspirations. The theoretical framework utilized by urban sociologists to describe this process is eclectic and vastly interdisciplinary. Some sociologists of the city draw a connection between urban development and economic forces. Others call upon cultural ties based on interpersonal relationships and the multifaceted fabric that these relationships engender (also but not limited to socio-economic elements) as key points to understanding the urban makeup. The latter school of thought believes that the physical construction of the city bears testament to the beliefs and ambitions of diverse communities within the city who join forces to create the urban landscape. Such conceptualization of the forces operating within the city sees cultural symbols as a collective ideal made possible by a localization process that symbols undergo in order to make them emblematic of a given city. These symbols become hallmarks of the city, generating a local culture and forms of symbolizing it. The present paper will examine the cultural occurrences that have taken place in the case of HaBima Square from this latter multi-systemic approach, as defined by Even-Zohar (2004).

This work shall center on the concept of urban preservation as applied to the city of Tel-Aviv through the model of the 'White City'. It will focus on the perspectives and achievements of the architects behind the idea of the White City whose main scope of activity took place in the years that predated the municipality's concern with urban preservation, long before this matter became an intrinsic aspect of popular discourse. HaBima Square is used in this paper as a case study of the White City movement. An urban space located on the northern tip of Rothschild Boulevard, HaBima Square is a cultural hub folding into it five physical representations: HaBima Theater – Israel's national theatre house; the Fredric R. Mann Culture Center – home of the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra, Jacob's Garden – a green enclave acting as a physical continuation of the Culture Center and 'trapped' between the Center and the Theatre; the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion for Contemporary Art – an annex of the Tel-Aviv Museum of Art; and the square itself (referred to as the Band Square/ HaBima Square) – formerly a parking expanse and now a public pavilion atop a multi-leveled underground parking facility.

Geographically and as a matter of unofficial zoning HaBima Square is located amid the 'White City', in the 'Historic Heart' of Tel-Aviv's urban landscape. The term 'White City' refers both to a physical-geographic location within the city confines and to a prominent architectural style of the 1930s.

HaBima Square, 2004:



The historic roots of preservation and urban restoration as we know it today may be found in the first half of the 18th century and the then-common cultural practice of the *Grand Tour*, in which English Gentlemen were introduced to classical cities around the world as part of their inauguration into bourgeois society. A sense of recognition harvested in the young Englishmen towards the 'universal value' of classical elements led to a sense of responsibility felt by the young tourists to repair and restore such world treasures. With the goal of returning antiquated artifacts to their former glory, a culture of restoration was fast born. Playing a central role in the tourist industry since the 1920s it has become a prime characteristic of urban planning, an indispensable component of the 'urban product', and has earned legions of scholars who have transformed it into a discipline equipped with scholars, periodicals, conventions, scholarships and awards.

In addition to the development of the practice of urban preservation proper, much research has been conducted in the field of communal memory and the policies of urban production that it engenders. Most of these studies fall under the discipline of Memory Studies which investigates the heritage industry and its effects on urban tourism and the politics of preservation. The majority of research conducted in this field points to personal agendas and individual desires which ultimately get executed in public spaces under the guise of communal benefit and civil service (Rose-Redwood & Alderman & Azaryahu, 2008; Azaryahu & Foote, 2007).

As late as 1984 Israel's dominant approach to urban preservation focused on archeological concerns relating to eras predating the establishment of the state. This approach, most likely, had to do with Israel being a relatively young state but one which nevertheless held on to a rich historic heritage in the form of pre-state settlements. The public concern with architectural preservation was thus born in response to an ongoing process of destruction of these historic sites; the demolition of buildings tens and hundreds of years old (whether intentionally or through processes of natural erosion), most notably the demolition of the Herzliya Hebrew Gymnasium in 1959 which acted as a catalyst to the establishment of the Society for Preservation of Israel Heritage Sites (SPIHS) sponsored by the Educational Committee of the Knesset and the Israeli Society for Nature Protection in 1984.

Alongside the establishment of SPIHS, 1984 also gave way to the exhibition "White City: International style Architecture in Israel – the Tale of a Time" curated by the Historian Michael Levin for the Tel-Aviv Museum (Metzger-Szmuk, 1994). The exhibition prompted widespread public interest in the International style, giving rise to a plethora of documentation and research efforts to uncover such style in Israel. This widespread interest came to a crescendo with UNESCO's declaration of the White City an international heritage site in 2003 under the title "White City of Tel-Aviv—the Modern Movement".

From Tel-Aviv Municipality website:



The White City's establishment as a historic landmark gave rise to the study of this movement from several perspectives: (1) economic (2) nationalist, emphasizing the relationship between the White City and the Zionist ethos (Rothberg, 2005; Nitzan-Shiftan, 1996), (3) through the prism of municipal governance (Alfasi & Fabian, 2009; Alfasi & Fabian, 2008) and cultural geography which views the city as an ecosystem comprised of countless, interconnected, forces operating within it.

The 'White City' is thus a term coined to describe buildings constructed in the International style during the 1930s and 40s. These structures were mostly found in Central Tel-Aviv and what is known as the city's Old North (Metzger-Szmuk, 1994), constructed by and under the auspices of a small group of architects originating from the Yishuv movement who in 1932 founded their own society of Tel-Aviv planners. These architects were vastly educated in Europe bringing with them the prominent architectural styles of the continent; namely Bauhaus, the architectural spirit of Le Corbusier, Mendelsohn and others. In Israel the group adjusted the European conventions to form the 'International style', making of it a uniquely representative feature of these parts. The International style incorporated into its architectural language elements of the Modernist movement, local influences and constraints such as the weather, planning and building laws of the time and the technology then available in Israel (Nitzan-Shifman, 2005: 203, 211; Efrat, 2004: 57; Metzger-Szmuk, 1994: 25).

The term 'White City' was borrowed from the 1984 exhibition by the same name, displaying the modern architectural style of Tel-Aviv. The exhibition was accompanied by a paper written by its curator, Michael Levin, in which he refers to the lyrics of a song by poet Naomi Shemer: "out of the foams of waves and clouds, I made me a white town" (Rothberg, 2005: 21, 33). Alongside Levin's exhibition, friend and co-member in the newly-formed group, Dani Karavan, was working on a plan for the construction of a monument in commemoration of the first builders of the city of Tel-Aviv, which was to be named the "White Square" (1977-1988). The combination of the exhibition titled "White City" and the monument titled "White Square" raised public awareness to the modern architectural landscape that was taking over Tel-Aviv (Alfasi & Fabian, 2008: 496).

Following the exhibition and the erection of Karavan's monument, Levin and Karavan proceeded to request of the Tel-Aviv Municipality to preserve Tel-Aviv's White City architecture. When the municipality refused, the pair turned to the Tel-Aviv Foundation offering that the municipality purchase several buildings constructed by the White City movement for the purpose of preserving them as models of the International style. During that time, architect Nitza Metzger-Szmuk had begun working at the Tel-Aviv Foundation. Exceeding her job requirements, Metzger-Szmuk conducted a one year survey of the International style buildings located in central Tel-Aviv. Following her survey, she was brought in as an advisor to the Municipality's Engineering Department (Alfasi & Fabian, 2008: 496). At her new place of employment, Metzger-Szmuk founded the 'Preservation Team' which she headed between 1991 and 2002 (Alfasi & Fabian, 2008: 498-501; Zandberg for Ha'artezt, 5.6.2002). During her time in office Metzger-Szmuk fulfilled the requests of the 'White City architects', documenting and preserving buildings of the 1930s and 40s and placing them firmly on the city's newly formed preservation map (Rothberg, 2005 : 26). Taking her task of preserving the White City a step further, Metzger-Szmuk proceeded to assemble the first draft of the White City proposal to be sent to UNESCO. Pressuring the Mayor into complying with the proposal, Metzger-Szmuk's draft was only finally approved by the Municipal Engineer under duress from Metzger-Szmuk and her college-friends of the White City movement.

Together Levin, Karavan and Metzger-Szmuk worked in front and behind the scenes to promote the preservation of the White City both administratively and culturally. Their efforts yielded fruit in 2003 with UNESCO's declaration of the White City an international heritage site.

UNESCO's incorporation of Tel-Aviv into its pantheon of historic cities catapulted the term 'White City' to cultural, economic, social and political acclaim.

In 2007 the Tel-Aviv Municipality's preservation plan was approved. The plan's approval on the heels of UNESCO's incorporation of the city made it abundantly clear that urban preservation was a necessity in Tel-Aviv and ensured the White City's place in the architectural canon, confirming that it this style was not a fad or a transitory fashion. The following paper will claim that Nitza Metzger-Szmuk is undoubtedly a cultural trendsetter and a history maker in the case of the White City. Her description as a leading figure in the White City movement is posed against the position held by Alfasi and Fabian who abstained from heralding Metzger-Szmuk an *Ideal Developer* in the discourse of the White City (Alfasi & Fabian, 2008).

In the time since its creation, the term White City has undergone a canonization process (Sela-Shefi, 2009) evidenced in several contemporary events, amongst them the launch of the *White Night* tradition; a cultural event held annually in honor of UNESCO's incorporation of the White City. Like *White Night*, the branding of new buildings springing up around Tel-Avis as 'Bauhaus Styled', and the ongoing publication of research on the subject of the White City, all suggest that with the White City's acceptance as a heritage site by the local and international communities, Tel-Aviv received what McCracken termed *Patina* (McCracken, 1990). Thanks to these processes, Tel-Aviv was endowed with a new quality: that of a historic city, a city with a 'historic center', a glory it had not able to claim before. With the White City's rise to canonic status, the architects who created the International style and those who brought the city its *patina* were fast hailed its doorkeepers and rigorous watchdogs.

Example of Canonization and imitation processes:



Bauhaus Miniature: 58 Yehuda HaLevi St.



\$45.00

Glazed earthenware (ceramic) model after the building on 58 Yehuda HaLevi St., Tel Aviv. Scale 1:270.

ADD TO CART



The ongoing plans taking place between 2005-2011 to renovate the five cultural houses of HaBima Square were markedly different in their approach to the renovation project, with no single aesthetic or style applied to all five. In this non-uniform manner, HaBima Theater was renovated by the architect Ram Karmi, while the Fredric R. Mann Culture Center was intended to receive the treatment approved by the municipal committee but which was revoked by authorities contending the renovation of the center. The municipality presented a second proposal, this one smaller in scope, which likewise encountered contention from the same group, but was finally approved by court order. The renovation of HaBima Square and its cultural halls was met by the public with varied responses documented by the press who detailed the pros and cons of the renovation plans and their effect on the surrounding urban landscape, blog posts and extensive internet activity including electronic petitions, photo

documentation of the renovation process and finally the curation of a multi-participant exhibition on the subject. While it is understandable that changes made to one of the city's most central locations and cultural destinations will generate public interest, the diversity of reactions and their singular, non-inclusive, nature, focusing not on the square as a single entity but rather on each of its constructs separately, was odd considering the close proximity between the buildings. At times comments were made to the effect of the square as a whole, however even in such cases the inclusive outlook was used merely to make a point about one of the structures and not about the square as a unified space. Public controversy surrounding HaBima Square centered around 6 principal issues: (1) the absence of a general discourse relating to the square, its past and its present (2) the markedly different discourses assigned to the Cultural Center and HaBima Theater respectively (3) the contending persons who regulate and empower these discourses (4) public response to the term 'White City' as a cultural precedent and a confirmation of some historic past (5) varying levels of social activism against and in favor of the five components of the square (6) a new and altogether different debate concerning the renovation plans and their execution.

HaBima Theater (1935) and The Culture Center (1959):



HaBima Theater and The Culture Center (2004):



As key figures in the discourse of HaBima Square, this work has named the following: (1) Esther Zandberg (2) Tamar Tuchler (3) Ram Karmi (4) Nitza Metzger-Szmuk (5) Michael

Piron (6) Dani Karavan. Separately and jointly these figures approached the Tel-Aviv Municipality and therein the Department of Buildings, Preservation and Development with their plans.

HaBima Square had undergone various changes since the construction of HaBima Theater on its grounds in 1935. With the erection of the Fredric R. Mann Culture Center in 1957, a unification process came underway to liken HaBima Theater to the style of the new Center. In the 1910s, when the first plans for the construction of HaBima Theater were being made, the square and its surrounding buildings were not conceived of as a unified entity, with emphasis rather placed on the preservation of individual structures. The 1950s effort to relate the buildings to one another can only be explained as the result of shift in aesthetic values that veered towards the sum of the parts; the square in its entirety. In the 1960s, a unification plan was implemented by Dov Karmi and Yaakov Rechter with the White City aesthetic serving as its model, however no such attempt was made again when around the year 2000 talks of renovating the Square came underway again. This time rather than concern with the consistency of the Square and its convergence with the urban fabric that surrounds it, emphasis was placed on the preservation of a single element. The 21st century discussion surrounding the Square yielded three prominent points:

1. Rejection of the preliminary 'HaBima Square Plan' and request of a second, far smaller, renovation plan.
2. General lack of interest in renovating the HaBima Theater itself.
3. Lack of visualization of the square and its adjacent halls as an integrated space.

These three points are paramount to the understanding of how such particular mindset bred the 21 century model of HaBima Square.

HaBima Theater and the Culture Center (2012):



In the writing I was continuously plagued by the suspicion that the architects responsible both for the White City model and HaBima Square itself were motivated more by aesthetic considerations rather than historic concerns. This is not a commonplace suspicion, as architects of preservation are usually driven by historic considerations. Indeed, much of the literature documenting the White City movement claims a link between this style and the Zionist Ethos (Nitzan-Shiftan 2005: 203, Rothberg 2005: 314). Nevertheless, both Rothberg and Nitzan-Shiftan note that the qualities which finally lead to the widespread embrace of the White City are aesthetic-architectural ones rather than nostalgic-historical ones (Rothberg 2005: 64).

In this paper I lay claim to the aesthetic values rather than nostalgic-historical one that have been the driving force behind the renovation-reconstruction of HaBima Square. To that effect, I offer that had the architects of the White City movement been concerned with historic value, they would have likely fought to preserve the HaBima Theater with the same vigor with which they fought to preserve the Mann Culture Center's original structure. The discrepancy between their approach to the two buildings is even less comprehensible if we recall that HaBima Theater was originally built in the 1930s (the golden age of the 'White City') while the Mann Culture Center was only founded in the 1960s, several years after Israel had been announced an independent state.

HaBima Theater was designed in the Classical style representative of Oscar Kaufman's work and similar in aesthetic to the many theaters he designed throughout Europe. The Fredric R. Mann Culture Center, conversely, was designed in a Modernist style which some believe is more closely linked to the White City aesthetic. The claim put forth in this work (concerning the privileged status of aesthetic values over historical ones in the case of HaBima Square) rests on statements made by the leaders and enforcers of the White City: Nitza Metzger-Szmuk, Dani Karavan, Tamar Tuchler, Ram Karmi and Esther Zandberg, who attributed aesthetic-architectural qualities to both styles and buildings but refrain from attributing historic value to HaBima's original structure.

Another assumed reason for the lack of interest expressed by proponents of the White City movement towards HaBima's original style has to do with its architect. Oscar Kaufman was not among the group of architects who formed the society of Tel-Aviv planners in the 1930s and was not active in the White City movement. The relationship between the lack of historical value given to his work and his relationship with the architects of the White City who

dominated Tel-Aviv's architectural scene at the time is fascinating and ought to be investigated in greater depth.

Two chief conclusions inform my research thus far:

1. Nitza Metzger-Szmuk's impact and influence on the solidification of the White City model in Tel-Aviv. Her pivotal role in UNESCO's declaration of the White City a heritage site has been abbreviated from Alfasi and Fabian's research, wherein they abstained from terming her role in the White City discourse that of an *Ideal Developer*. (Alfasi & Fabian, 2008).
2. The desire to make of the White City a heritage site is founded on a recognition of the architectural-stylistic value of urban structures and not on nostalgic-historic values. As a case study, HaBima Square merely clarifies such value system by way of a blatant favoritism of one historic building over another based on aesthetic preference. Indeed, the debate surrounding HaBima Square has been fueled by the conceptual mindset of the White City. As such, the structures found eligible and worthy of preservation rest on aesthetic qualities aligned with the White City model and on these very qualities too buildings that don't comply with the style are deemed unworthy of preservation.

This paper has outlined the historic progression of the term 'White City' from the time of its conception to its becoming a central point of contention amid the Tel-Aviv municipality.

HaBima Square is used here as a case in point with which to exemplify the application of a style onto a site and then too the addition of that site to the style's repertoire. The paper follows the processes of change, preservation and renewal as they are applied to HaBima Square at different points in history and exemplify how the ideas of certain individuals or groups get mobilized into actual, physical, execution in the public domain.

Bibliography:

Alfasi, Nurit, and Fabian, Roy. 2008. "IDEOLOGICAL DEVELOPERS AND THE FORMATION OF LOCAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY: THE CASE OF INNER-CITY PRESERVATION IN TEL AVIV." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 30 (5):489.

Alfasi, Nurit, and Fabian, Roy. 2009. "Preserving Urban Heritage: From Old Jaffa to Modern Tel-Aviv." *Israel Studies* 14 (3):137-181.

Azaryahu, M., and K. Foote. 2008. "Historical Space as Narrative Medium: On the Configuration of Spatial Narratives of Time at Historical Sites." *GeoJournal* 73 (3):179.

Borer, Michael Ian. 2006. "The Location of Culture: The Urban Culturalist Perspective." *City & Community* 5 (2):173.

Dunlap, Riley E. and Michelson, William and Stalker, Glenn. 2002. "Environmental Sociology: An Introduction" Pp. 1-32 in *Handbook of Environmental Sociology*, edited by Dunlap, Riley E. and Michelson. Greenwood Press, 2002.

Even-Zohar, Itamar. 1990. "Polysystem Studies." *Poetics Today* 11 (1).

Even-Zohar, Itamar. 1997. "Factors and Dependencies in Culture: A Revised Outline for Polysystem Culture Research." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 24 (1):15.

Even-Zohar, Itamar. 2004. "Factors and Dependencies in Culture." *Papers in Culture Research*.

Even-Zohar, Itamar. 2005. "Idea-Makers, Culture Entrepreneurs, Makers of Life Image, and The Prospects of Success." *Papers in Culture Research*.

Even-Zohar, Itamar. 2005. "The Making of Culture Repertoire and the Role of Transfer." *Papers in Culture Research*.

McCracken, G.D. 1990. "Ever Dearer in our Thoughts :Patina and the Representation of Status before and After the Eighteenth Century." Pp. 31-43 in *New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*, edited by Anonymous . Bloomington, Ind. : Indiana University Press, 1990.

Nitzan-Shiftan, Alona. 1996. "Contested Zionism -- Alternative Modernism: Erich Mendelsohn and the Tel Aviv Chug in Mandate Palestine." *Architectural History* 39:147-180

Rose-redwood, R., D. Alderman, and M. Azaryahu. 2008. "Collective Memory and the Politics of Urban Space: An Introduction." *GeoJournal* 73 (3):161.

Sela-Sheffy, Rakefet 2009. "Struggles over the Canon: Culture Preservation and Culture Transformation." In *Canon and Holy Scriptures*, ed. Yaacov Shavit. Tel-Aviv University: The Chaim Rosenberg School Of Jewish Studies [=Te'uda research series xxiii], pp. 17-46; English abstract: XIX-XX. (Hebrew).

Archives:

National Photo Collection, State of Israel.

The Jewish National Fund archive.