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The White city of Tel Aviv

Yodan Rofé

In July 2003 the 'White City of Tel Aviv' was designated by Unesco a world heritage site. The designation is based on the following five characteristics of the area: the White City contains the largest concentration in the world of early International style buildings; the preservation zone is noted for the size, coherence and homogeneous nature of its urban pattern; it is located in the core of the Tel Aviv metropolitan area, a center of urban activity, and is exposed to the eyes of thousands of residents and daily visitors, in contrast to International style areas in other countries, which are usually situated in the city's periphery; the White city is a showcase of many stylistic variations reflecting all the trends in Early European modernism in the beginning of the 20th century; the area uniquely demonstrates a synergetic confluence of a high quality urban plan designed by Patrick Geddes and good modern architecture, both still preserving many of their authentic features. The declaration is the culmination of more than 20 years of effort by the planning department of the city of Tel Aviv and the conservation movement in Israel to transform an area, and buildings, that in the 1970's were still considered run-down relics to be erased and renewed, into a cultural asset to be conserved, protected and renewed. At the core of this transformation lies the crisis of central values of Israeli society, and its national identity. Values that from the mid 1970's begin their transformation from what one might call a revolutionary modern mode, to a post-modern, complex, and more conservative mode. This has been pointed out by several critiques of the conservation

movement and in particular of the area to be designated, and its conservation plan. Moreover, the whole effort must also be seen, as was the very planning and building of Tel Aviv, as part of the changes in global planning and architectural culture, the rise of the conservation movement in Europe and the US, coupled as it is elsewhere with the increasing globalization of the economy, and the forces that it brings to bear on cities that become part of its network of flows. Tel Aviv was never central in Zionist ideology and practice. In many ways it was always seen, and is still somewhat perceived, as an aberration, a bubble of escape from the ideal of the pioneer and soldier expected from every responsible member of Israeli society. Thus the 'café' life of Tel Aviv was frowned upon. The poets, musicians, writers, actors and journalists which made it a cauldron of modern Hebrew culture were seen, and often perceived themselves with some shame, as a luxury, or as 'parasites', lacking the force of character to fulfill the ideals of agricultural settlement. The 'petit bourgeois' that developed commerce, services and industry, and gave economic life to the whole country were deemed weaklings clinging to their old urban habits of life in the Diaspora. The residue of this prejudice with regard to urban life in general, and particularly confronting Tel Aviv still exists in Israeli society and in the self-image of Tel Avivians. Naturally, the physical structure, the embodiment of this aberration, this petit-bourgeois existence, was not considered worth conserving, and was to be done away with and replaced. The fact is that Tel Aviv, with its economic and cultural power, its friendly streets

and calm atmosphere, juxtaposed with its frenetic and innovative economic and cultural activity, is the powerhouse that built and moved the economy of preindependence Jewish community in Palestine and the state of Israel (after 1948), and that has insured its continued existence. Even for Israelis themselves, it is difficult to acknowledge that this step-daughter, this Cinderella serving all the other achievements of the Zionist movement and the state that it built, is really the princess of its accomplishments. Nor is it free from irony that this success is due in grand part to a Scot (Patrick Geddes), and to the transformation of his plan for a garden city-village by local, 'petit bourgeois' adaptations of architectural ideas elaborated in Europe. The international recognition of the urbanism and architecture of Tel Aviv as one of the original contributions of the Zionist movement to world culture (together with the resurrection of Hebrew as a living language, and the literature and popular music that accompanied it) helped to bring about the necessary transformation in Israeli consciousness. Certainly this has been contested, by those who find it difficult to attribute any positive aspects to Jewish nationalism. Conservation in the joined city of Tel Aviv-Jaffa started in Jaffa. The remnants of the old city of Jaffa, heavily damaged by the British during the repression of the 1936 Arab revolt, and inhabited after 1948 mainly by poor immigrants, were renovated as an 'artist's quarter' in the early 1960's, in an effort consonant with similar projects of renovation and rebuilding of historic city centers in Europe after the war. The first conservation plan in Tel Aviv was the replanning of Neve Tzedek (approved in

1981-82). This area, slated for demolition and redevelopment along modernist lines attracted first artists and designers and later other professionals and the middle class into the area, who campaigned for its conservation. Today this neighborhood is almost completely gentrified, again a pattern followed by many inner city neighborhoods in Europe and the US. The next conservation plan was the 'Lev Tel Aviv' (Heart of Tel Aviv) plan (approved in the early 1990's). This was conceived as a plan intended to combine architectural preservation with urban renovation. It included efforts to vacate apartment buildings of offices, and attract young families to relocate into the center of Tel Aviv, by improving public space and services. The first experiments in creating a list of buildings worthy of conservation, date from these latter two plans. The White city declaration area includes the area of both of them, and extends it northwards to about half of the area included in the Geddes plan. It completes the list of protected buildings, and simplifies the categorization and preservation rules. It institutes a mechanism for the transfer of development rights for those buildings which necessitate complete preservation without additions. It was also accompanied by heavy investments of the municipality in the renovation of the boulevards and upgrading of streets and infrastructure. However, the advancement of these plans is only half the story of conservation in Tel Aviv. Just as important was the cultural process of rediscovery of the architecture and urban qualities of the older neighborhoods of Tel Aviv. This was accomplished by a series of exhibitions, books and conferences discussing

these values and calling for their conservation. It also reflects the growing sophistication of the conservation movement in the world and in Israel. The emphasis in conservation shifts from the preservation of buildings to the conservation of whole urban textures, and more attention is paid to making conservation part of a general policy of urban renovation, and the upgrading of real-estate values in the city. Selling the idea of conservation to local politicians, business people and property owners, many of which are small-time owners who inherited these properties from the original owners is not an easy task. The proponents of conservation reinforced their arguments in favor of conservation with the importance of the center of Tel Aviv to the development of Jewish national identity, and the history of modern settlement in Israel. The White city of Tel Aviv was also relatively free, from connotations of the land dispute with palestinians, as most of its land was uncultivated sand dunes previously. The myth of the 'White city that was born from the sands' was employed to make its conservation dear to ordinary citizens and politicians. This myth was contested on two fronts. One was the 'exposition' of the tactics used by the Jewish Agency and the city elite to obtain land for further development from Arab owners and villages. The other objection was to point out that modern style architecture was not confined to the center of Tel Aviv, but also influenced the architecture of the Arab neighborhoods of Jaffa, and the southern working class neighborhoods of Tel Aviv. It was also not unique to Palestine, but typified colonial architecture in other areas of the world at that

time. While these objections have their merits, the brunt of their argument is against the use of the international recognition of Tel Aviv as a legitimization of Zionism, Israel and the existing economic and cultural elites in Israel. This criticism is made in the context of current disputes over land and colonization in the occupied territories of the West Bank (and Gaza, previous to the Israeli withdrawal), the ongoing conflict over land with the Arab minority in Israel, and the internal conflicts over economic and cultural hegemony between jews of european (ashkenazi) and non-european (sephardi) descent. However, by seeing the achievement of Tel Aviv mainly within these contexts, the critics fail to see it for what it really is: an original cultural achievement. Like many cultural achievements, it was a result of a fortuitous historical moment. Historical circumstance brought together the 'revolutionary' aspect of the Zionist movement and Patrick Geddes, one of the most original thinkers in the field of planning in the 20th century, and made it receptive to his plan. New ideas in architecture suited a national movement searching for a unique cultural expression, different from classical European styles, as well as from the local vernacular. Finally, the lack of a strong central power or economic force, the need to rely on the traditional urban (bourgeois) culture of property owners, and the real pressures of population growth and scarcity of land, avoided the deurbanizing excesses of modern planning ideas thus resulting in the humane fabric of the 'White city', an original kind of city that is a real contribution to the material culture of the world.