

DREAM AND REALITY

MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN PALESTINE: 1930-1939

Amir PELEG

INTRODUCTION

The debate is certainly over the story of yesterday, but it is directed to the degree of relevance of the past to what is happening in the present, as well as its implications on what will happen here in the future.¹

During the 1930s, one of the largest existing concentrations of Modern architecture was built in Palestine.² A combination of economic, social, cultural and ideological factors brought an architecture that was considered revolutionary in 1920s Europe, to be, a decade later in Palestine, the mainstream of local architecture. Whilst in Europe Modern architecture encountered difficulties and was characterized by relatively isolated projects, in Palestine it received an opportunity to assume a major role in shaping the face of the young Jewish society in its 'old-new' land.³ Modern architecture which in its countries of origin was a product of local culture, arrived in Palestine as a finished product.

El texto es un extracto de la tesina presentada en octubre de 2002 en el Master «Historia, Arte, Arquitectura, Ciudad» del Departamento de Composició Arquitectònica, UPC.
Tutor: Jordi Oliveras.

- 1 Eyal Naveh and Esther Yogeve, *Histories, Towards a dialogue with the Israeli past*, (Tel-Aviv 2002), p. 15. All translations from Hebrew in this thesis are my own, with references to the original texts.
- 2 Palestine was the formal name of the territory under British Mandate from 1918–1948. The Jewish settlers called it 'Eretz-Israel' (Land of Israel).
- 3 *Altneuland* is the name of Theodor Herzl's utopian novel published in 1902, where he describes his vision of the future Jewish life in Palestine.
- 4 This exhibition, whose curator was Michel Levin, had two catalogues: *White City, International Style Architecture in Israel, A portrait of an era* (Tel-Aviv 1984) and *White City, International Style Architecture in Israel*, Judith Turner: Photographs (Tel-Aviv 1984).
- 5 Alona Nitzan-Shiftan, 'Contested Zionism–Alternative Modernism: Erich Mendelsohn and the Tel Aviv Chug in Mandate Palestine', *Architectural History*, 39, 1996, pp. 147–180.
- 6 Irmel Kamp–Bandau, *Tel Aviv Modern Architecture 1930–1939*, (Berlin 1994), and Nitza-Metzger Szmuk, *Batim min ha'hol* (Tel-Aviv 1994).
- 7 Aba Elhanani, *Ha'Mavak le'atsmaut shel ha'adrihalut ha'yisraelit ba'mea ha-esrim*, (Israel 1998).
- 8 'Zionist ethos' refers to the ideals and values of the socialist Zionists who formed the leadership of the Jewish settlement at the time. These ideas included the negation of the past and the construction of a 'new Jew' and put an emphasis on the rural sector and the value of settling the land.
- 9 Bruno Zevi in the introduction of Arie Sharon, *Kibbutz+Bauhaus* (Tel-Aviv 1972), p. 6.
- 10 Nitzan-Shiftan, *Contested Zionism*, p. 147.
- 11 Among others can be mentioned: Alona Nitzan-Shiftan, 'Contested Zionism–Alternative Modernism: Erich Mendelsohn and the Tel Aviv Chug in Mandate Palestine', *Architectural History*, 39, 1996, pp. 147–180; Daniel Monk 'Autonomy agreements: Zionism, Modernism and the myth of a 'bauhaus' vernacular', *AA files* 28, 1994, pp. 94–99; Zvi Efrat's exhibition 'The Israeli project' in Tel-Aviv museum in 2001 which dealt with the architecture of the first years after the establishment of the state.
- 12 The thesis does not deal with the Modern architecture of the British Mandate, that in spite of having formal relations with the architecture of the Jewish settlement, comes from the British perception of Palestine, and thus is not relevant.

In its transition, it lost many of its original meanings and at the same time acquired others. An analysis of the cultural significance of this architecture, like any other architecture situated outside of its original context, requires therefore the use of different, context specific factors.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

For many years Modern architecture in Palestine did not receive a great deal of historiographic reference. It finally gained wide public recognition, with the 'White City' exhibition, held in Tel-Aviv museum in 1984⁴ which has been described as an Israeli equivalent of the 'International Style' exhibition in New-York in 1932.⁵ The exhibition directed the attention towards the large concentration of Modern architecture existing in Israel and tried to characterize it, but as Alona Nitzan-Shiftan notes, historical distance (like geographical distance in 1932) enabled people to view this architecture as a formal style, with little consideration for the social and historical values it represents. This approach can be explained by the primacy of the exhibition and the focus of its curators on the definition and differentiation of the phenomena. Their desire to gain recognition of the phenomena and its importance resulted in grouping of all of what was formally considered Modern architecture under the same roof, and is evident in the emphasis they made on the direct contacts of the architecture in Palestine with the first Modern masters in Europe. These tendencies continued to characterize the 'International Style' conference held in 1994 in Tel-Aviv, and the publications that accompanied it.⁶ These still dealt primarily with the definition of the phenomena and its formal categorization, but started to contain some reference to architecture in its wider context.

Another feature of architectural historiography in Israel is its integration into the Zionist narrative and the national historiography. In fact, at the present, books with indicative titles like 'The Struggle for Independence of Israeli Architecture in the 20th Century' are still being published in Israel. One of the reasons for these links is the nature of the Zionist ethos⁸ in which the act of making is given more importance than the esthetic appearance, an attitude that has its roots in Judaism. For long periods of time, the importance of architecture in Israel was, before anything else, in the act itself, in the 'building of the land'. Bruno Zevi wrote that in Israel «a building, before being good or bad, was wonderful just because it was there».⁹ In fact, the first person to receive an honorary doctorate title from the Faculty of Architecture of the 'Technion' was not an architect but Israel's first prime minister David Ben-Gurion—'The architect of the state'. In this context, the Modern architecture of the 1930s is repeatedly displayed as part of the Zionist narrative and as an expression of its ethos. Alternatively, historians like Nitzan-Shiftan, claim that while during the 1920s and 1930s Zionism and Modernism were still plural movements still debating their eventual forms, «both were ultimately reduced to a type of official story, which rendered them indispensable to the myth of statehood.»¹⁰

MULTIPLE NARRATIVES

Parallel to the prevailing attitudes, the 1990s saw the appearance of different historiographic approaches which critically examined the relations between architecture and Zionism, and in place of the formal analysis put an emphasis on the social and ideological background of architecture in order to understand its significance and its relevance for today.¹¹



Camels walking along Ha'yarkon st. in Tel-Aviv during the 30s

This thesis continues these directions, trying to place Modern architecture within the complex reality of 1930s Palestine and to understand its relations to it. In place of focusing on the formal aspects of the buildings, the thesis deals with the factors that stood behind these characters, the way in which they reflected the plural character of the Jewish society in Palestine, and the different meanings that result from the transition of Modern architecture to Palestine.¹²

Many of these aspects are still relevant to architecture in Israel today, that after seventy years is still faced with many similar issues.



Engel house, Tel-Aviv, 1933. Architect: Ze'ev Rechter

13 Among the written on this subject can be mentioned: Edmundo O'Gorman, *La invención de América*, (Mexico 1958); Roberto Fernandez, *El laboratorio americano. Arquitectura, Geocultura y Regionalismo*, (Madrid 1998); Marina Waisman, *La estructura histórica del entorno*, (Buenos Aires 1972).

14 Marina Waisman was born in 1920 in Buenos Aires. From 1948–1971 she was a professor at the Universidad Nacional de Cordoba, Argentina. In 1972 she published her book *La estructura histórica del entorno* and assumed the direction of *Summarios*, a publication dealing with the critical analysis of architecture. Among others, she wrote: *El interior de la historia, historiografía arquitectónica para uso latinoamericano* (1993), and *La arquitectura descentrada* (1995). She died in 1997.

15 Marina Waisman, «La tipología como instrumento de análisis histórico», *Summa* n° 86/87, 1985, pp. 2–15.

16 Ita Heinze-Greenberg, 'Immigration and culture shock: on the question of architectural identity in 'Altneuland'', in *Tel Aviv Modern Architecture 1930–1939*, (Berlin 1994), pp.36–39.

17 Gideon Ofrat, *One Hundred Years of Art in Israel*, (Westview Press) p.58.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Marina Waisman, *La tipología*

20 Helmut Shriffler, 'Architektur ist Botschaft', *Der Architekt* 12/1990, p. 569. Noted in Irmel Kamp-Bandau, 'Tel-Aviv, Modern architecture in the middle east', in *Tel Aviv Modern Architecture 1930–1939*, (Berlin 1994), p 32–35.

ARCHITECTURE OUTSIDE OF ITS ORIGINAL CONTEXT

PARAMETERS FOR ANALYSIS

The difficulty in analysing of architecture outside of its original context is typical of many places in the world that are influenced by western culture, but are far from the centers where it was created and for which the parameters for its analysis were developed. In Latin America, inconvenience with western historiography and its parameters, brought historians to deal with the issue of defining the relevant parameters for the analysis of local culture, differentiating them from those used in Europe.¹³

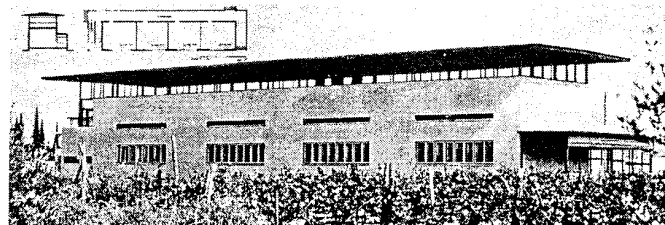
Among those who have dealt with this issue Argentinean architect Marina Waisman, who dealt extensively with the definition of parameters for the historiography of architecture in Latin America and published books and articles on this matter stands out.¹⁴ In one of these articles, «The typology as a tool for historical analysis»,¹⁵ Waisman shows how analysis of Latin American architecture in the context of the original European works, and by the criteria developed for them, always made them seem of second grade. She rejects basic European criteria like the division into periods according to stylistic typologies, and claims that they are irrelevant for local architecture «as they are not original creations of our culture, they are not essential elements for understanding our architecture».

Alternatively, Waisman claims that the analysis of these projects in relation to their environment and to their specific context will necessarily bring different and more precise criteria that will enable their evaluation and emphasizes in her work the analysis of the relationships between the objects and their environment rather than their naming and categorization. She suggests creating a system that takes into account the factors that characterize the project, like its formal,

structural and functional typologies, and its relationship with the environment and examination of these in relation to a series of factors that influenced the production of the project, like the planning process, the construction process, architectural theories, social needs and others. This type of analysis, claims Waisman, enclosed within itself the cultural significance of a given object. She argues that a projection of this analysis method on Latin American architecture, enables the examination of its uneven development, the possible gap between architecture and local technology and the different problems that it has in comparison to European architecture, and that require taking into account factors that possibly are irrelevant for the latter.

DETACHMENT

Modern Architecture was part of what the architects «had brought with them from western Europe in their suitcases» writes Ita Heinze-Greenberg «but strictly speaking, the buildings designed by these young architects in Tel-Aviv and all over the country were not the result of years of effort to find a new architecture appropriate to the country and its inhabitants, but a direct application of what they had studied in Europe».¹⁶ At first look, Modern architecture in Palestine seems very similar to its origins in Europe, but in this case, looks can be deceiving. In Palestine, like in other places that were not part of the cultural centers of that period, formal language arrived often detached from the ideology that was originally behind it. Gideon Ofrat wrote about 1920s artists in Palestine that «most artists merely seized upon the styles of leading French painters, without thinking about the ideological implications of each style».¹⁷ In many cases the local ideology behind the formal vocabulary was different from the original. Ofrat describes the art scene of the 'third aliyah' as



School, Kibbutz Degania, 1930. Architect: Richard Kauffmann

«the spirit of Russian avant-garde with the yearning for the updated French formalism».¹⁸

The distinction between forms and concepts is not always clear. At times, architects did believe in an ideology similar to the original, and at times they used the same rhetoric but which had a different meaning in the local context. When an architect in Palestine spoke about 'functionalism' or 'the machine', their meaning or significance was not necessarily identical to their interpretation in Germany or France. The possible detachment between formal language and ideology is a central factor in reading Modern architecture in Palestine.

The detachment between form and ideology is evident in Marina Waisman's application of Aldo Rossi's urban theories to the reality of Latin American cities. Rossi's theories, based on the prototype of the European city that developed around a few monuments is not relevant to Latin America where the cities grew out of a primary rigid scheme. Waisman claims that architecture in Latin America does not 'build the city' as defined by Rossi, but builds the image of the city.¹⁹ Helmut Shriffler continues this line of thought and points to the tendency of architecture outside its original context to expressiveness owing to its nature as a message conveyor.²⁰ In 1930s' Palestine the image and the message were basic components of an architecture which was for many a statement about the character of the society they wanted to build.



Rubinsky house, Tel-Aviv, 1936. Architect: Lucien Korongold,

ANACHRONISM

The lack of ideological overlapping was joined, in the case of Modern architecture in Palestine, by a lack of overlapping in time. Julius Posener wrote that «like many political theories of the period it still seems 'progressive' to them (the Jews) at the point where it is in fact becoming historical».²¹ While Europe in the 1930s experienced a gradual move away from the white programmatic modernism in search of new forms and materials and an organic emphasis, these development were hardly felt in Palestine. Nerdinger wrote that «architects in Palestine built in the 1930s like their great European models in the 1920s, while the models themselves had for a long time been building quite differently».²²

SECOND CLASS

These two factors, the ideological detachment and the anachronism, in addition to the completely different context, cast doubts upon the value of the formal analysis of Modern architecture in Palestine in the context of its European origins of the 20s. In spite of this, this type of analysis is common in architectural historiography in Israel. The Catalog of the 'White City' exhibition characterizes Modern architecture in Palestine as such: «The three principal elements of International style in Israel are the column, the roof and the curve. Additional important characteristics are the formal elements derived from the machine esthetics and the use of new materials».²³ In other places it is common to find the five principles of Le-Corbusier recited as a formal base of Modern architecture in Palestine, usually criticizing the fact that they were not applied rigorously, in place of examining if they were at all relevant to the local context.²⁴ This type of analysis will always result in

21 Julius Posener, 'Traditionales und modernes bauen in Palastina', in *Das Werk*, Zurich 1938, issue 9, p. 264.

22 Winifred Nerdinger, 'Architecture of Hope'.

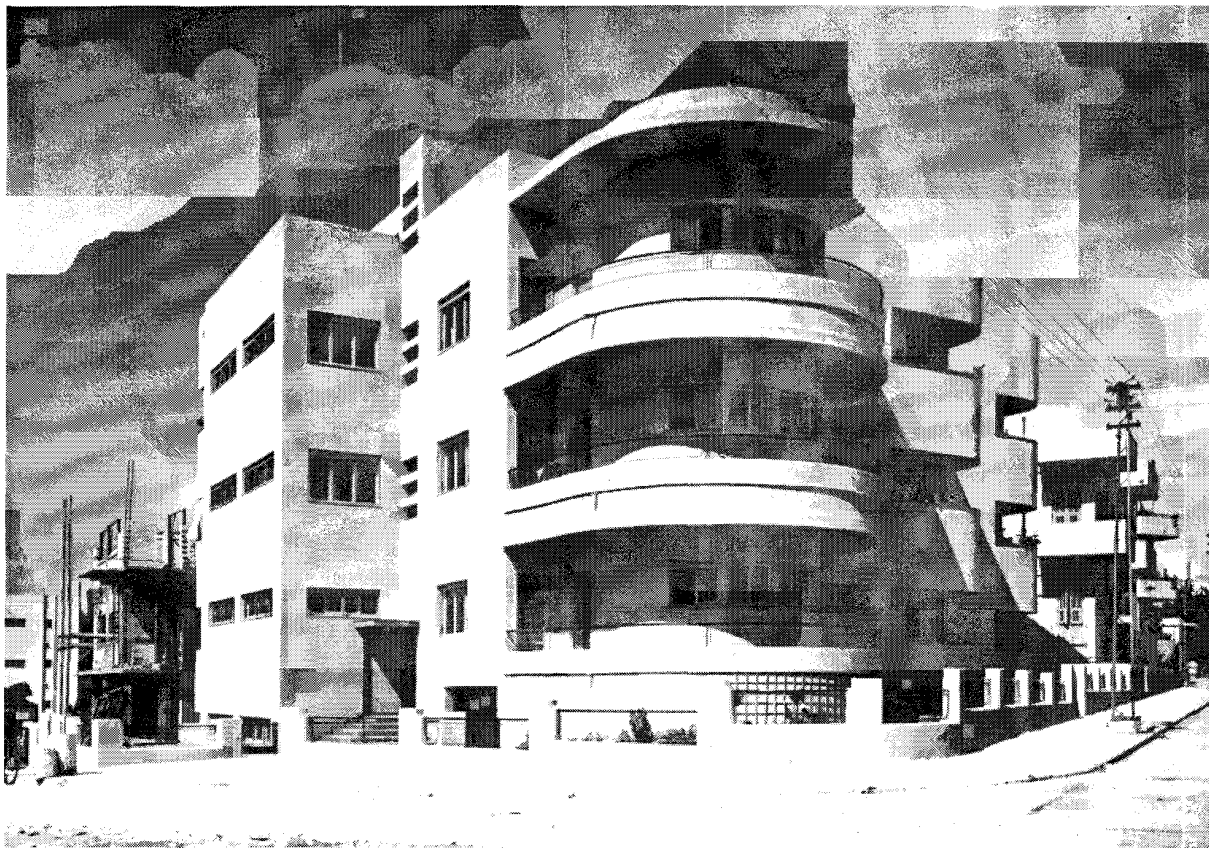
23 *White City, International Style Architecture in Israel, A portrait of an era* – text by Michael Levin (Tel-Aviv 1984), p. 10.

24 An example of this sort of criticism can be found in Sarah Williams's review of the 'White city' exhibition in New-York, where she claims that the Modern architecture in Palestine 'persistently deflected Hitchcock and Johnson's dictum to conceive of architecture as 'volume rather than mass''. Sarah Williams, 'International Style in Israel: From Europe's dreams to the pragmatism of Palestine', *Architectural Record*, January 1985.

25 *White City*, p. 10.

26 Marina Waisman, 'La tipologia...' p. 6

27. *Ibid.*, p. 12.



Mirenburg house, Tel-Aviv, 1935. Architect: Pinhas Hütt

conclusions such as «only a few of these buildings reached the level of the exemplary structures erected several years earlier in Europe»,²⁵ and local architecture will always be considered as Marina Waisman calls it 'citizens of second class'²⁶

STARTING POINT

Analyzing churches in South America, Marina Waisman illustrates how the basic typology that arrived from Europe received a different and specific treatment in each context. The language evolved in these places

independent of the typology and became the main means of expression of the local cultures. The original typology, from a spatial concept with a value in itself in the origin country, became a neutral instrument upon which local content was molded.²⁷

In Modern architecture, the distinction between type and language is not always very clear, but in the spirit of Waisman's analysis, it is possible to take the formal influence and the fact that the architecture does not 'innovate', as a given fact and not as a judgment. From this point it is possible to try and clarify the evolution of the local version of Modern architecture and the cultural significance that can be ascribed to it.



Katz house, Tel-Aviv, 1935. Architect: Sam Barkai

THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN PALESTINE

«The human being is unthinkable outside of culture. Culture is a human product but at the same time the human being is the product of his culture»²⁸

Marina Waisman

Any object that is a product of a certain culture, once isolated from that culture, loses his original significance and is assigned others. This phenomena stands out in the transition of Modern architecture to Palestine. The complex and dynamic reality of Palestine in the 1930s, where Arabs and Jews lived under British rule, each side with its own and often contradictory aspirations, supplies many narratives for the interpretation of Modern architecture in the local context. Hereby follow some of these multiple narratives.

NATIONAL OR INTERNATIONAL

In the national context, the arrival of Modern architecture in Palestine was accompanied by two parallel processes. In the first, the Modern 'international' architecture, was ascribed national associations, following its transition from Europe to Palestine. In the second, the same 'internationality' of this architecture served as a counterpoint against searches for a national style that occupied architects before the 1930s. While one process lead from the international to the national, the other lead in the opposite direction.

While the term 'International architecture', created by Hitchcock and Johnson in 1932, was based mainly on formal definitions, in 1920s Europe 'Internationalism' was identified with a fighting socialist cause, that formed a counterpoint to nationalism and imperialism. Based on this background, the 'International architecture'

- 28 Marina Waisman, 'La tipología como instrumento de análisis histórico', *Summa* n° 86/87, Febr/Marzo, 1985, pp. 2-15.
- 29 Winifered Nerdinger, 'Architecture of Hope Modern Architecture in Tel Aviv', in *Tel Aviv Modern Architecture 1930-1939*, (Berlin 1994) p. 8.
- 30 Karin Kirsch, *The Weissenhofsiedlung Experimental Housing Built for the Deutscher Werkbund, Stuttgart 1927*, (Stuttgart 1993. p 64. Quoted in Alona Nitzan-Shiftan, 'Contested Zionism-Alternative Modernism: Erich Mendelsohn and the Tel Aviv Chug in Mandate Palestine', *Architectural History*, 39, 1996, pp. 147-180.
- 31 Succoth is a Jewish festival where they build ephemeral structures commemorating the 40 years of wandering in the desert. Julius Posener, 'Traditionales und modernes bauen in Palastina', in *Das Werk*, Zurich 1938, issue 9, p. 264.
- 32 Silvina Sosnovsky, 'Yohanan Ratner, the architect', *Yohanan Ratner, the man, the architect and his work* (Haifa 1992).
- 33 *Ibid.*

exhibition that Gropius organized in 1923 could be identified, at least subliminally, as a political statement. For nationalists and racists 'international' meant 'un-German', socialists were called 'comrades with no fatherland', and the formal language of international architecture was regarded as 'architectural Bolshevism'. The association of not having a fatherland immediately stuck to the Jews, and international architecture became 'Jewish architecture'. Ultimately, International, Jewish and Bolshevik were synonyms for the Nazis.²⁹ After their rise to power in 1933, the Nazis were quick to fight Modern architecture declaring that «It is the national interest of all patriot Germans to stop these cosmopolitan experiments».³⁰ The Modern architecture exhibition in Weisenhoff was presented in a photomontage as a primitive Arab village with camels in the streets, mocking the technological pretensions of its organizers. Absurdly, these national associations the Nazis gave to Modern architecture and the links they provided to the Jews and Semitic world, only served to strengthen the latter's identification with it.

When Modern architecture arrived in Palestine it already had many national associations. For the immigrants, 'international' meant western and was a factor that distinguished them from the orient in which they arrived. Julius Posener, explained:

In Germany, architecture with flats roofs, strip windows, cantilever slabs, stairwell slits, corner windows, and 'dynamic' cornices has been called 'succoth architecture' and attempts have been made to see its origins in our oriental blood. It is true that it seems alien and European here. But it is also true that Jewish architects and the Jewish public have stuck to such architecture... The 'Modern style' superseded the 'shtetl' of the east, and also attempts at national architecture that were made before the war.³¹

The same term took a different path in the architectural scene. In the twenty years preceding the arrival of Modern Architecture, many architects tried to define a national style for the Jewish construction in Palestine. They looked for a moment in the past which they could hold on to, and found it in the oriental architecture that resembled for them the place Jewish architecture would have reached if the Jews were not expelled from the land of Israel. These attempts were usually a mixture of oriental elements like arches and domes with a European historicist approach.

In the 1930s, the architects' attitude towards the national aspect of architecture changed. Yohanan Ratner, a prominent figure in the architectural scene of the 1930s, defined this change: «The conscious attempt to create a national architecture by copying local models or even attempts to adapt their principles have all failed».³² When he represented Palestine in 1935 in a congress dealing with «The current development of national architectures», Ratner claimed that

Architects' aspiration for a Modern International architecture was presented as giving up the idea of national architecture, and as a treason of the fatherland... We want to prove that it is possible to reach a new national architecture. We believe that after several years, climatic influences, social structure, social and technical possibilities, will bring to a development of a new national or regional architecture.³³

Thus, Ratner proposed replacing the conscious searches for a national style, by an objective architecture, neutral in terms of nationality, that will form the base from which, with time, an architecture that could be called national would stem.



Tel-Aviv's Rothschild Boulevard in 1936

34 Erich Mendelsohn, 'The Problem of a New Architecture', lecture in the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst*, Berlin 1919. Quoted in Nitzan Shifftan, 'Contested Zionism', p.163.

35 Gilbert Herbert, 'Bauhaus architecture in the land of Israel: Is the concept of a Modern, architect-designed vernacular a contradiction in terms?', *Architectura: Journal of the history of architecture*, 1995.

36 *Ibid.*

37 Daniel Monk 'Autonomy agreements: Zionism, Modernism and the myth of a 'bauhaus' vernacular', *AA files* 28, 1994, pp. 94-99

38 Mark Wigely, 'Architecture After Philosophy, Le Corbusier and the Emperor's New Paint', in *Philosophy and Architecture - Journal of philosophy and the Visual Arts* (New York 1990).

39 *Ibid.* p. 85.

A different approach to this issue was expressed by Erich Mendelsohn. While still in Germany, he claimed that 'internationalism' was a «nationless anaesthetization of a decaying world»,³⁴ and that international architecture reduces architecture's connection to a specific place and culture. Alternatively, he suggested the 'supra-national' model, which while still believing in national entities defined by borders, emphasized the importance of the organic cultural expression of each nation. Mendelsohn believed that the return of the Jewish people to Palestine should be accompanied by the development of a new idiom, which he saw as an expression of the cultural value of the Jewish return to the fatherland rather than an expression of a new national entity.

VERNACULAR OR COLONIALIST

Ratner's approach, which saw rationalism as the base for the development of a national architecture, is echoed in the writings of Gilbert Herbert, who named the Modern architecture in Palestine—'Bauhaus vernacular'.³⁵ In order to explain the built in contradiction in this term, Herbert uses the term 'Modern vernacular' Nicholas Pevsner used for describing South African architecture in the 1950s. Pevsner amplified the term 'vernacular' and applied it metaphorically rather than literally. For him vernacular was «architecture with a wide social base, an expression of a way of building that had become universally accepted, and was unselfconsciously adopted». Gilbert finds this definition adequate for Modern architecture in Palestine. To further strengthen his argument, he adds that for the immigrant architects, Modern architecture was not imported but natural, part of the cultural heritage that they had brought with them, and that Modern architecture in Palestine was not revolutionary as in Europe but was accepted widely and was a 'popular expression of national will'. Gilbert repeats Ratner's rejection of the self-conscious search for a national style and his belief that it will come naturally with commitment to elements like simplicity, economic values, and climatic adaptation. He concludes that when the state of Israel was established in 1948, this process had started to come into effect: «There was a natural symbiosis of people, land and architecture: in other words, a true vernacular had emerged».³⁶

A different attitude and criticism of the term 'Bauhaus vernacular', is expressed by Daniel Monk in his article «Autonomy agreements: Zionism, Modernism, and the myth of 'Bauhaus vernacular'».³⁷ In this article, Monk presents what he calls 'the dichotomy between silence and semiotics in the presentation of Modern architecture in Israel'. According to Monk, this dichotomy is typical of Ratner's approach, by which the archi-



Worker's Estate VII, Tel-Aviv, 1936. Architects: Joseph Neufeld, Israel Dicker, Arie Sharon and Carl Rubin

ecture that evolves from objective principles like 'climatic influence' is perceived simultaneously as semiotically neutral and as vernacular and possessing symbolic characters. In the same way that Mark Wigley claims the white color of Modern architecture was not neutral but a negation of anything that was not white,³⁸ Monk maintains that the apparent neutrality of Modern architecture in Palestine conceals within it the negation of anything that is not Modern, and especially the east. Consequently, its definition as vernacular, ignores those who lived in the country when the Jews arrived there. According to Monk, the term 'Bauhaus vernacular' is based on negation of the east and therefore presents the evolution of the vernacular as a shedding, or separation of oriental elements from the body of architecture. The international neutral architecture that arrived in Palestine functioned according to Monk as a colonial agent and as such became what Wigley called 'active erasure mechanism'.³⁹

These two narratives, the first from a Jewish, ethnocentric point of view, which sees Modern architecture as a genuine vernacular expression, and the second, more distanced and critical, which understands the return of the Jews to Palestine in its wider context, analysing what the first definition omits, are contradictory but also complement each other to form a comprehensive portrayal of Modern architecture in Palestine.



Poster for the Levant Fair (Tel-Aviv, 1936) with the flying camel symbol in its center

THE EAST

Many Jewish immigrants, who arrived in Palestine in the 1920s, were fascinated by its landscape and Arab inhabitants. This attraction is expressed in the representation of these themes in art from the period where subjects like fellahin, shepherds, and camels were typical motifs. The idyll ended towards the end of the 1930s. The massive arrival of Jews in Palestine aroused the fears and national sentiments of the Palestinian Arabs, and resulted in tension and the incidents in 1929 and between 1936 and 1939. The attitude of the 'Yishuv' had changed. For many Jews, the Arab took the place of the hostile gentile they had known from Europe.

This change in attitude was also expressed in architecture. The 'clean and simple' Modern architecture formed, as mentioned, a standpoint in relation to the orient and to the previous searches for a national style based on oriental forms. The orient became a synonym of ornamentation, legitimizing this negation. Posener wrote:

First of all, one is not keen on the eastern appearance anymore. In any case, we renounced giving an eastern image by domes and arcades. This reaction was necessary and also suited the real demands of the Jewish taste.⁴⁰

The Jews needed to 'de-orientalize' Palestine. The attraction towards the orient of the 1920s turned into the pursuit of the natural factors of the place. On this background, among others, it is possible to understand the architects' occupation with the issue of climate. Some architects wanted to learn from the traditional Arab house and its climatic adaptation but this was accompanied by the negation of Arab culture and life style and with attempts to neutralize the east by including it in a

40 Julius Posener, 'One family houses in Eretz-Israel', *Habinyan* 2, November 1937, pp. 1-3.

41 Gilbert Herbert, 'Bauhaus architecture in the land of Israel'.

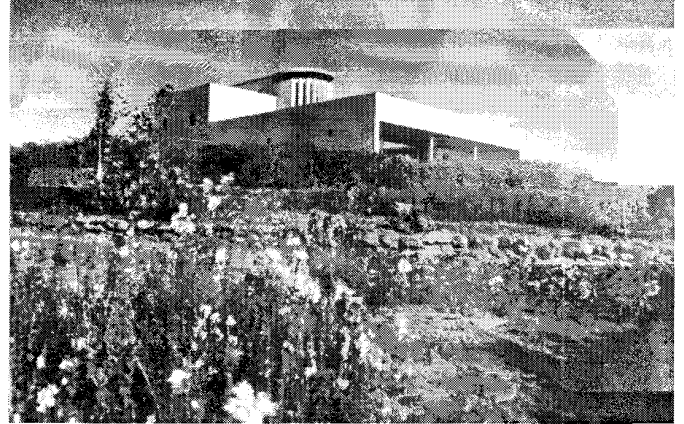
42 Alexander Berwald, 'Neue Bauten in Palästina'. Quoted in Ita Heinze-Greenberg, 'Immigration and culture shock: on the question of architectural identity in 'Altneuland'', *Tel Aviv Modern Architecture 1930-1939*, (Berlin 1994), pp.36-39.

43 Nitzan-Shiftan, 'Contested Zionism', p.158.

wider Mediterranean context and by that neutralize it. In spite of all this, referring to formal similarities, there are those who claim that «despite the rejection of regionalism, however, there is a strange affinity between the forms of the international style, as here adopted, and the indigenous architecture of the Middle East».⁴¹ In such, they reaffirm the formal similarity that architect Alexander Bervald expressed by in 1926 declaring that «many modern architects in Europe that feel alienated and strange there, would seem familiar here and surely would not stand out».⁴²

A different attitude was again expressed by Mendelsohn, whose aspirations for a Semitic commonwealth in Palestine were different and far from the ideas of the majority of the Jewish population. Mendelsohn searched for a synthesis between east and west and did not find it humiliating to learn from the Arab fellah. The results of the studies of oriental forms and layouts are evident in his buildings.

Modern architecture reflected for many the western, European character they wished to give the new Jewish society in Palestine, a character whose mere definition suggests the negation of the orient, where they chose to settle. Alona Nitzan-Shiftan claims that this attitude «typified the 'Yishuv's' insecure possession of the land and culture of Palestine».⁴³ For many of the immigrants arriving in the 'old-new' land, the western character was not a matter of choice, but a genuine part of their personal identity, that they maintained in front of the new and alien environment. On the national level, the Zionist leadership looked to create a new collective identity that was based on rational principles, apparently neutral but clearly western. This identity negated the east in the broad sense, both that of the Arab world and that of the thousands of Jewish immigrants that arrived there from oriental countries with the establishment of the state.



Weizmann house, Rehovot, 1934–36. Architect: Erich Mendelsohn

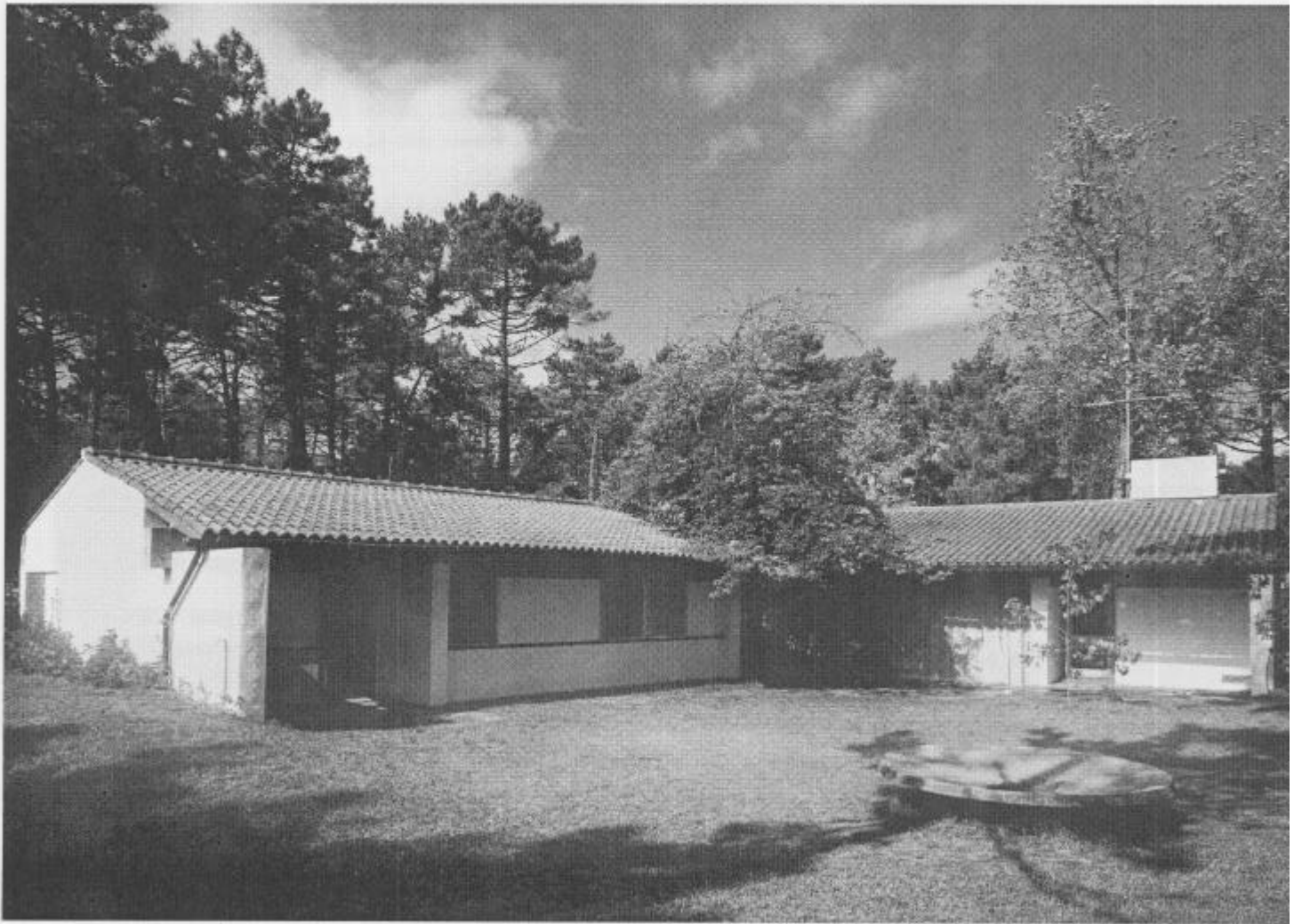


Citrus house, Tel-Aviv, 1935. Architect: Carl Rubin

Photos 1–7,12 taken from Nitza Metzger–Szmuk, *Batim Min Ha'hol*, (Tel-Aviv 1994).



A photograph of a building with a tiled roof, possibly a house or a small structure, with a tiled roof. The image is very light and lacks detail.



A photograph of a building with a tiled roof, possibly a house or a small structure, with a tiled roof. The image is very light and lacks detail.