

ISRAEL

The White City of Tel Aviv

On the basis of an excellent town plan, the White City of Tel Aviv was ideated and built in the 1930s and 1940s by a group of young and very active architects. It reflects on a high level and in an exceptional density the main ideas of modernism, such as simplicity and minimalism in materials. Influenced by the Zionist movement, it referred mainly to the ideas of a new society: secular, free and aware of social responsibility. It also stood for a new search for purity in both thought and design. The architects, organised in a proper circle (Hahug), also influenced the town planning process. Later on, they tried to spread their ideas in the new towns in Israel. Thus, Tel Aviv became a sort of local model for modernism.

The new White City

The principles for town planning were developed in the mid 1920s by Sir Patrick Geddes, who had been invited by Mayor Meir Dizengoff. They were finally approved in 1938. The plan provides a sort of Garden City. Around the central square (Dizengoff Square) four types of green boulevards were planned: main arteries with through-going traffic and commercial activities, broad streets for inner connections, longer and broader residential streets, and short and narrow residential streets. Although relatively small, the lots were big enough to allow the erection of detached buildings, clearly defined in their position in relation to the streets and to neighbours. The result was a very homogeneous pattern of white cubes in a green environment with a differentiated grid of local public infrastructure.

The town was built very quickly: between 1931 and 1948 some 3770 buildings were erected in the Modern Style. They form an astonishing homogenised architectural ensemble, although the town planning regulations prescribed no architectural style. A certain common basis of architectural expression was given by the fact that most of the young architects had been trained in Western Europe in an ambiance of the rising Modern Movement. For example, Smuel Miestechkin and Shlomo Bernstein studied at the Bauhaus in Germany, Sam Barkai and Shlomo Bernstein worked in the atelier of Le Corbusier in Paris, Joseph Neufeld and Carl Rubin worked with Erich Mendelsohn in Berlin, a large group of young architects came from the schools in Gent and Brussels, and others were influenced by Giuseppe Terragni. Most of these Jewish architects left Europe after the Nazi regime took power.

The architecture designed for Central Europe was largely adapted to the special local climate conditions. For instance, big glass surfaces could not be used in this hot and sunny country. The buildings were divided into several blocks in order to create shade and long balconies with multiple interesting details provide shelter from the sun and enable a breeze to pass through. Some features as inner patios or natural ventilation under and inside the buildings were adopted from Oriental building traditions. On the whole, all these elements varied depending on the individual architect.

Preservation

The preservation of the White City is managed by special regulations of the City of Tel Aviv. Only relatively few International Style



Frishman Street, original building losing its architectural value after heightening (photo: B. Furrer)



Building on Dizengoff Square, state in 2008 (photo: B. Furrer)

buildings are formally listed for preservation. The Conservation Plan and its regulation code are restricted to the preservation of street and side facades and the rehabilitation of rear facades (building envelope), furthermore to the preservation of stairwells and of especially important interior spaces. An important document is the "Instructions for Care and Conservation of Listed Buildings" of the Town Planning and Construction Department (version 2001). It shows a deep understanding for the preservation of architectural monuments in general and of monuments from the 20th century in particular. It is an excellent basis for the conservation work to be undertaken by owners, planners, developers and the public.

The White City of Tel Aviv was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2003 as "an outstanding architectural ensemble of the Modern Movement in a new cultural context." Based on that inscription the difficult questions concerning the important Centre for Culture, the Mann Auditorium, seem to be on the way towards a good result.



Building on Dizengoff Square, beginning of demolition work on the courtyard side (photo: B. Furrer)



Building on Dizengoff Square, what it will look like



New building close to the boundary of the White City (photo taken from the terrace of Cinema Esther, Dizengoff Square)

Heritage at risk

The dangers for the White City of Tel Aviv are multiple. An attentive observer of the built reality as it can be studied today will come to the following conclusions: Obviously, the risks are mainly due to development pressure from property owners and to the fact that the City's authorities willingly comply. Building activities on Modern Movement buildings undertaken in the last years show a series of changes that are compatible with the special value of cultural heritage.

It is evident that specialists and concerned public officers are aware of the specific values of the White City. Excellent documentation work is done and theoretical preservation standards are well defined. Practical restoration work is generally carried out in an

accurate way with historical materials. But it seems that the forces for preservation are too weak when it comes to economic pressure. Three main problems are noticeable: One major problem is the possibility to heighten the existing historic buildings, which can be observed throughout the city. While in many cases these measures were carried out in the years before 2003, the process seems to go on and a heightening with two extra storeys is generally accepted, apart from some exceptions made for listed buildings. One of the important features of any building, but especially of modern buildings is the main proportion of the cube. Therefore, heightening a building will change it in a substantial way. Furthermore, the proportion of the public space is being strongly altered. The problem does not lie in the question of how to design the heightening of buildings; the solutions may be better or worse. The ongoing process of adding further storeys contradicts the principles of preserving architectural values and is therefore not acceptable within an ensemble of international value.

Another danger is the tendency to concentrate mainly on the outside aspect of the historical buildings, the shell. It needs to be pointed out that this is the built reality and not the understanding of official preservation and its policy. However, every building is an entity consisting of interior spaces with their details, the inner building structure and the outside appearance. If a historical building is reduced to its facades, robbed of its inner structure, heightened with additional floors, it loses its value as a historical witness of the time of its original construction. This applies not only to Gothic or baroque buildings but also without any deontological difference to buildings of the 20th Century.

The current handling of the commercial building on Dizengoff Square, next to the famous Cinema Esther (some years ago converted into a hotel, but in its original parts a good example for restoration), shows into what direction the conservation reality in Tel Aviv is going. The building was out of use for several years. Now the modification work has started: most of the inner structure is demolished, the facades remain only towards the outside. The plans show how new foundations are to be laid in order to build substructures beyond and two supplementary storeys with replica facades and an attic above. What remains is merely a partial shell that will hide an entirely new building.

It is not a question of the building being listed or not (the list is very restricted, in any case). The problem is that the whole ensemble is affected by such department, that the proportions of the building itself and of the public space are debased, that the city becomes a mere facade. If this were to become the normal procedure in the White City its value as a historical site would rapidly shrink.

Finally, one can notice that in the immediate surroundings of the protected area huge new buildings are under construction. Generally speaking, the existing buffer zone seems to be very restricted. Buildings out of scale essentially harm the impression of the White City that has – or in many cases had – a restricted number of storeys. The new urban scale introduced with those new buildings reduces the real scale of the existing town. A new “massif” begins to rise between the White City and the sea front. The effect is similar to the originally planned highrise buildings in Cologne, where the urban planning was ultimately changed in order to protect the scale of the central components of the city on the other side of the Rhine.

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Century Heritage (ISC20C)