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The White City of Tel-Aviv

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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; the preservation zone 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 Sir 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 and protected and given new life. 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 the particulars 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, and 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 harsh life of the pioneer and the soldier expected from every responsible member of Israeli society in order to build the national identity and fortify its physical embodiment in the state. Thus the 'café' life of Tel-Aviv was looked down and frowned upon, the poets, musicians, writers, actors and journalists which made it a cauldron of the growth of modern Hebrew Culture were often seen, and to some degree perceived themselves with some shame, as a luxury, or "parasites" who did not have the force of will and character to fulfill the ideals of agricultural settlement. The 'petit bourgeois' that worked commerce, services and industry, and gave economic life to the whole country were considered weaklings who preferred clinging to their old urban habits of life in the Diaspora, rather than change into productive members of society. In many ways 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. The very normality which it aspires to and professes, its lay culture, its pluralism, its hedonistic abandon, its self image as the "city that never sleeps", all in the context of a country still at war, belie that bias. Naturally, the physical structure, the embodiment of this aberration and weakness, of this petit-bourgeois existence was not considered worth conserving, and was to be done away with and replaced. It has been the work of

the many people who furthered the cause of conservation in Israel to convince their colleagues, their peers in the various planning commissions, and the politicians who guide these commissions, of the value that lay hidden beneath the crumbling plaster of the buildings.

Only in the 1990's has the reality that Israel is an urban country come through to the planners. A reality still not completely comprehended by politicians and the general public. Tel-Aviv is in the process of becoming a model for good modern urbanism and architecture (together with some other examples from Haifa, Jerusalem and the early colonies now transformed into cities), and as such it is rather unique in the whole world. Helping this transformation in Israeli consciousness is the international recognition that the urbanism and architecture of Tel-Aviv are among 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). Certainly this has been contested, by those who cannot attribute any positive aspects to Jewish nationalism. The interesting aspect is that 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 achievements. Nor is it free from irony that this achievement is due in grand part to a Scot (Sir Patrick Geddes), and to the transformation of his plan for a garden city-village by 'petit bourgeois' local adaptations of architectural ideas elaborated in Europe.

Conservation in Tel-Aviv – Jaffa, as the city is called since its re-unification, 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. This effort was consonant with similar projects of renovation and rebuilding of old city centers in Europe after the war.

The Old City was seen as a special quarter, under the management of a municipal company, and mainly as a tourist attraction. The second conservation plan in Tel-Aviv was the re-planning of Neve Tzedek (approved in 1981-82). This area, which initially was an upper class neighborhood of Jaffa, has deteriorated with the years and was slated for demolition and redevelopment along modernist lines. The inability to carry out those plans, the low and picturesque buildings, along with its location near the central financial district has attracted first artists and designers and later other professionals and the middle class into the area, and those began to campaign for its conservation.

The second conservation plan in Tel-Aviv was the "Lev Tel-Aviv" (Heart of Tel-Aviv) plan (approved in the early 1990's). This was conceived from the start 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 in the center of Tel-Aviv, by improving public space and services. The first experiments in creating a list of buildings worthy of conservation, including categories of different levels of preservation needed date from these two plans. The White City declaration area includes the area of both of these plans, and extends it northwards to about half of the area included in the Geddes plan. It

completes the list of protected buildings, and simplifies their categorization and preservation rules. It institutes a mechanism for transfer of development rights for those buildings which necessitate complete preservation without additions. It is also accompanied by heavy investments of the municipality in the renovation of the Boulevards and upgrading of streets and infrastructure.

However, the advancement of conservation plans is only half the story of conservation in Tel-Aviv. 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 turns from preservation of buildings to the conservation of whole urban textures. More attention is paid to making conservation part of general policy of urban renovation, and the upgrading of real-estate values in the city (Amit-Cohen, 2005).

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 (LeVine, 1998, Rothbard, 2005). 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 growing Arab neighborhoods of Jaffa, and the southern working class neighborhoods of the commercial center of Tel-Aviv, and that it typified colonial architecture in other areas of the world at that time (Rothbard, 2005).

While these objections have their merits, the force 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 issues 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 also a result of a fortuitous historical moment. Zionism – the Jewish National Movement aspired to create an

autonomous space for Jews in Israel. This is its essence, as it is the essence of all national movements. The foundation of Tel-Aviv as a Jewish neighborhood, with the intention of becoming the first modern "Hebrew City" was one of the early expressions of this will. The methods used to acquire land for expansion were not different than those used by expanding cities in the late 19th century and early 20th century throughout the world, and were also a response to the real needs caused by waves of immigration. The Arabs in Palestine were opposed to Jewish immigration and settlement in general, and not to the expansion of Tel-Aviv in particular, although the changes that this expansion wrought in their daily life were certainly a factor in consolidating this opposition.

Historical circumstance brought together the Zionist wish for the creation of autonomous space, with novel means of accomplishing it. The "revolutionary" aspect of the Zionist movement made it receptive to the unique opportunity for a plan by Patrick Geddes, one of the most original thinkers in the field of planning in the 20th century. The force of new ideas in architecture brought with professionals educated in the most advanced academies of Europe, suited a national movement searching for a unique cultural expression, different from classical European styles, as well as the local vernacular. Finally, the lack of central power or economic force, the need to rely on the traditional urban (bourgeois) culture of property owners, and the real pressures of growing population and lack of land, avoided the de-urbanizing 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. These conditions were not replicated elsewhere, in Israel or other countries of the world, even if a similar architectural style was used. It is this particular contribution that is well worth conserving for future generations, irrespective of changing political or economical context.