WHITE CITY
BLACK CITY

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WHITE CITY BLACK CITY

Architecture and War in Tel Aviv and Jaffa

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Contents

Part I

WHITE CITY

They told me that the city is white. Do you see white? I don't see any white.
French architect Jean Nouvel standing on a Tel Aviv rooftop,
looking at Tel Aviv for the first time in his life. November 1995

If you will it, this shall not be a legend.
Theodor Herzl, *Altneuland*, 1902

Opposite: Cover of the exhibition catalogue, *Dwelling on the Dunes*, curated by Nitza Szmuk. Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Helena Rubinstein Pavilion for Contemporary Art, 2004. Source: Tel Aviv Museum of Art

In July 2003, UNESCO's World Heritage commission recommended inscribing the 'White City' of Tel Aviv in the organization's list of World Heritage Sites. The official text[1] supporting this endorsement argued that

> *The White City of Tel Aviv is a synthesis of outstanding significance of the various trends of the Modern Movement in architecture and town planning in the early part of the 20th century. Such influences were adapted to the cultural and climatic conditions of the place, as well as being integrated with local traditions.*

Almost a year later, in the spring of 2004, the UNESCO declaration was celebrated in Tel Aviv with a series of events, exhibitions, ceremonies and conferences. This was a culmination of a twenty-year historiographic campaign. The implications of this historiography go far beyond the architectural history of the Modern Movement or its (dis)integration with local traditions, and are rooted in the political history of the Middle East and the State of Israel. This history of Tel Aviv, presented for a moment as an architectural history, can be seen as a part of a wider process in which the physical shaping of Tel Aviv and its political and cultural construction are intertwined, and play a decisive role in the construction of the case, the alibi and the apologetics of the Jewish settlement across the country.

In that sense, exploring the story of this architectural history of Tel Aviv not only reveals some of the true political colours of both modernist and Israeli architecture, but also demonstrates how history can alter the geography.

'Tel Avivians walk around with their heads up … And now the whole world knows why!' advertising campaign for the UNESCO announcement celebrations. *Haaretz*

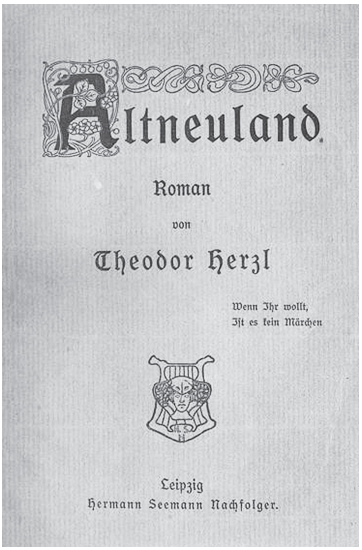
President Moshe Katsav congratulates Tel Aviv in the ceremony commending its declaration by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. Fredric R. Mann Auditorium (Heichal Hatarbut), Tel Aviv, June 2004. Photograph: Nadav Harel

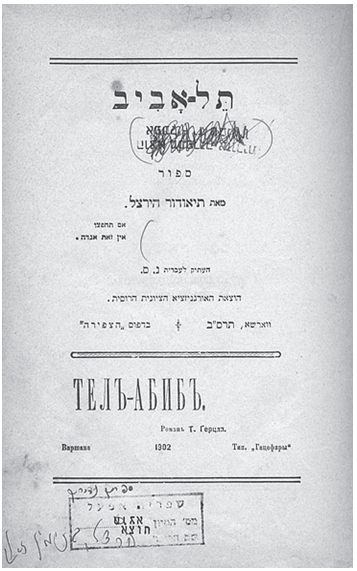
Book of Paper, Book of Stone

Cities and histories are constructed in a similar manner – always by the victor, always for the victor, and always according to the victors' record.

As with any given history, a city neither greets everyone equally nor satisfies everyone's desires. To physically alter a city and to write history takes a great deal of power, and power too is never distributed equally. Both the physical and cultural space of a city is always subject for challenge and struggle. It is likely that those who control the physical space often control the cultural space, and they are never those who have lost the battle over history. Those who have the power to shape the physical space to suit their needs can easily shape it to suit their values and narrative – not only to obtain for their values and narratives a hegemonic stature, but also in accordance with them, to reshape the city. We may formulate this simple state of things in the following paradoxical rule: a city is always a realization of the stories that it tells about itself.

One of the most common means of realizing the stories a city tells about itself is through conservation, and in its reverse, through demolition. Accordingly, whatever is done, not done or undone in the physical body of a city is also a form of historiographic deed because the decision to demolish an old building or to conserve an existing one defines what is fated to be forgotten and what is worthy of remembrance. A city may decide to highlight certain parts of its story deemed worthy of a particular mark by adding a commemorating plaque, erecting a monument, arranging a walking axis, by conservation, restoration or even the reconstruction of a particular building; it can also decide to turn the page, to send in the bulldozers and simply to





First a book, then a city. Theodor Herzl, *Altneuland*, the first edition, 1902, in German and 1904 in Hebrew.

forget. The relationship between the history of the city and its geography is a direct and necessary one – the geography of a city will always tend to conserve the stories to be remembered and to erase the stories to be forgotten.

Since the process of the physical building of a city is unavoidably interwoven with the processes of its cultural construction, control over the cultural construct of the city may be proven even more effective and profound than any other political governance or programme. Unlike other forms of authority, cultural hegemony is not only ubiquitous but hidden: it is defined by the unthinkable, suggested by the obvious, cloaked behind the *common sense* of the rulers and their subjects, and relayed through stories, legends and fables; the cultural construct of a city composes what we tend to designate and identify as 'normality'.

However, this normality may be challenged: a city can change merely by being seen or looked at differently, only because its story is told differently. Therefore, victors or vanquished, whoever wants to change a city must first change its story.

Writers and Builders

Born in the pages of a novel, Tel Aviv may be the only city in the world named after a book. Theodor Herzl's visionary novel *Altneuland* ('old-new country') was first published by Herman Seeman in Leipzig in 1902. The novel depicted an imaginary Eretz Israel/Palestine established according to Herzl's previous publication *Der Judenstaat* ('The Jewish State') (1896), in which he had detailed a total, utopian programme of a European liberal Jewish settlement in Palestine. The Hebrew translation appeared in Warsaw two years later under the title *Tel Aviv*, borrowed by the translator Nahum Sokolov from the book of Ezekiel (3: 15). It may not be a coincidence that Tel Aviv was at first a book and only later, a city[2] – after all, Zionism's two main goals were the revival of the Hebrew language and the building of the land of Israel. In that respect, Tel Aviv, a full-size realization of Herzl's oxymoron,[3] stands as living proof that books can erect buildings and establish cities.

To understand this transformation from paper to stone, it is necessary to start with the victors' architectural narrative of the 'White City', the urban legend served up whenever Tel Aviv speaks about itself. Occasionally it is delivered with a preface detailing the construction of Neve Tzedek, the first Hebrew neighbourhood *inside* Jaffa (the one-time Arab capital of Palestine which borders Tel Aviv but which now falls under its municipal jurisdiction). Sometimes an explanation of Ahuzat Bayit, Tel Aviv's first neighbourhood built *outside* Jaffa, is also added. But the standard blurb thereafter, the legend all inhabitants of the city should know, runs as follows:

> *In the 1920s, in a small town, in the Weimar social-democratic republic named Dessau, there was an architectural school called the Bauhaus. An avant-garde, international atmosphere dominated its teachings and its students. Among its alumni there were many German Jews and sons of Jewish pioneers from Palestine. The Bauhaus philosophy and International Style it advocated was built on the premise that it was possible to sculpt a better and more just world. In 1933, Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany and shut down the academy. Its teachers and students were forced to disperse in all directions. The Jews among them fled to 'Little Tel Aviv', 'a small city with few people',[4] filled with 'eclectic' architecture, where they revived the Bauhaus style and built themselves a White City.*

The 'White City' exhibition

The theme of a White City in Tel Aviv had already appeared prior to the International Style's arrival to Tel Aviv in early Hebrew novels such as Aharon Kabak's *The Riddle of the Land* (1915), Aaron Reuveni's *Last Ships* (1923) and Yaacov Pichmann's *Tel Aviv* (1927).[5] However, as an architectural narrative, this White City legend started to spread only when it received its official, 'scientific' and historical stamp of approval in the summer of 1984, with the exhibition entitled *White City* and curated by the architectural historian Michael Levin at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.[6] In the context of Israeli culture, it was nothing short of a revelation. The exhibition succeeded in highlighting a coherent ensemble of high-quality modern architectural sites across Tel Aviv and championed a number of the architects who had been active in the area during the 1930s. These included, among others, Erich Mendelsohn, Richard Kauffmann, Dov Karmi, Karl Rubin, Zeev Rechter, Aryeh Sharon, Shmuel Mestechkin and Sam Barkai.

But the *White City* exhibition was much more than your average architectural exposition; it was the first concerted attempt to construct a history – *the* history – of Israeli architecture. Within this historiography, the White City of Tel Aviv and its composition were established as an inaugural point zero – the moment when Israeli architecture began. By default then, the *White City* exhibition itself became a defining moment in this story and today arguably stands as a, if not *the* central reference point for any debate on Israeli architecture.

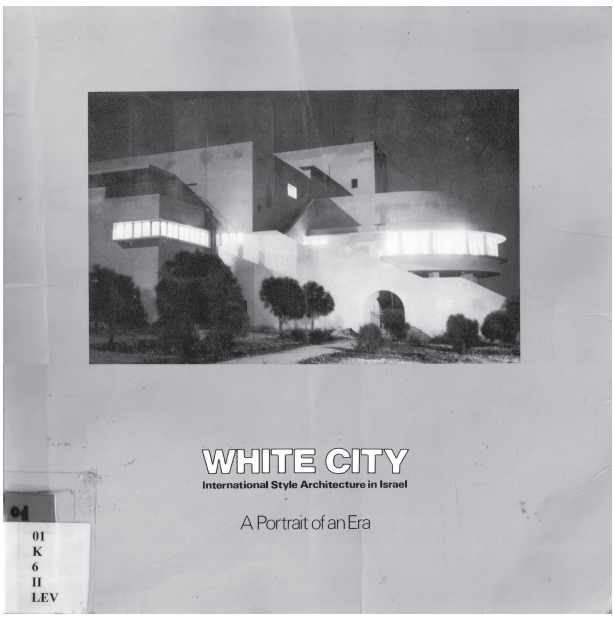
It was a reflexive moment: the first time that Israeli architecture had spoken of itself and to itself – the first time it had demarcated its own 'history' and understood itself as history. The relevance of this instance, especially in light of the reigning historicist tendency within architectural circles since the 1960s, should not be disregarded. But the particularity of this moment in Israel was that while European architects harked back to the medieval city, to the renaissance and the baroque, or to vernacular and local traditions, the Israeli gaze towards the past rested on the very recent past, fixating on what would otherwise be classified as the most modernist moment in architecture.

In other words, the singularity of postmodernism in Israeli architecture lies not in its historicist gaze backwards but in the distinctive rebound which occurred as soon as it reached its modernist progressive moment naturally defined by it willingness to look forwards. If in Italy the postmodern architects longed for the baroque city or neo-classical architecture (which was longing for another past), Israeli postmodernism yearned for European

modernism. Perhaps the best demonstration of this paradox is evident in the fact that the architect Shmuel Mestechkin, one of the few graduates of the Bauhaus school to make it to Israel, argued that no building deserves conservation, Bauhaus or otherwise.

Twenty years following the *White City* exhibition, it is impossible not to recognize Michael Levin's achievement. He succeeded not only in bringing the International Style architecture onto the Tel Avivian and Israeli architectural agendas, but also, as it turned out, promoted it on a global platform as well. Armed with only a small exhibition space and a thin catalogue with a short, modest text, Levin succeeded in doing what no Israeli curator had done before him. The *White City* exhibition went beyond profoundly influencing the work of architects or the taste of designers; much more significantly, it changed the way Tel Avivians looked at their own city, the way they introduced it to outsiders, and the way they have sought to shape it ever since. Unsurprisingly then, this mental transformation has had sweeping cultural, economical, social and political consequences.

Cover of the exhibition catalogue, *White City: The International Style Architecture in Israel, A Portrait of an Era*, curated by Michael Levin. Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1984.



The Invention of Normality

In the aftermath of the *White City* exhibition, things advanced almost by themselves, and it is likely that even Levin himself could not have foreseen what was going to happen. The story soon deviated from the cultural and academic circles, and made its way from the museum into the newspaper. Sparking immediate interest, popular architectural critic Esther Zandberg begun to dedicate a special place to Tel Aviv's own 'local International Style' of architecture in her regular *Environment* column, which had been appearing since the mid-1980s – first in *Ha'Ir*, a local, weekly Tel Avivian magazine, and later in *Haaretz*, the national daily. Under the title *White Box*, Zandberg published a series of articles in which she presented International Style buildings in Tel Aviv, explaining to the Tel Avivians how to look at them, why they are beautiful, what could be learnt from them, and why they should be preserved.

As the only architectural critic writing regularly in the Israeli daily press during this period, Zandberg had a unique role in promoting the values of International Style architecture to the larger public. Despite her familiarity with the history of architecture, she did not write as an 'architectural historian' so much as a chronicler. In this sense, her writing touched the present reality and was deliberately civilian, even 'feminine', in its analysis. Given the garish display of power being exercised by forces of business and state over organization of the country's environment during the 1980s imposing upon Tel Aviv a long series of megalomaniac, hallucinatory projects, there was perhaps no other alternative *but* to adopt such a sceptical, utilitarian stance and to confront great architectural visions with small, practical, pedestrian or household questions.

Intrinsically then, Zandberg portrayed the local International Style architecture as neither part of a great historical movement nor a revolutionary aesthetic, but primarily as a useful model for everyday city life, as a vehicle to promote values such as usability, economy, modesty, cleanliness, logic and common sense. Tel Aviv had only just begun to digest Israel's post-1967 war testosterone-pumped architecture and its huge megastructures, like the Atarim Piazza, the Dizengoff Center and the New Central Bus Station. With the corporate offensive of the 1990s already emerging, such 'effeminate' values were certainly needed.

Zandberg helped set the moral ground for the transformation of the White City narrative from being an academic chapter in an architectural journal into an integral part of the city's urban agenda. Her *White Box* expressed first and foremost the priority of a civilian and human scale and of traditional values of urbanity and domesticity. This humble standard of a

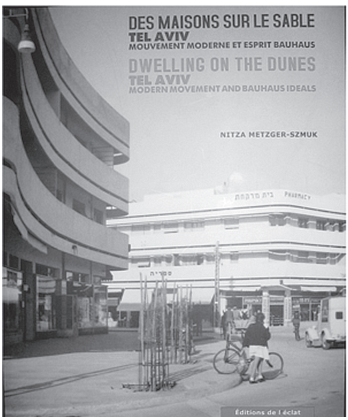
Tel Avivian house and a Tel Avivian street became the mark of a new liberal, ecological, civilian agenda that put the citizen up top as the first priority. Soon these civilian and domestic values of the White City became an integral part of the consensus and a factor not to be ignored. The traditional urbanism of Tel Aviv, which had been set in the 1930s and was based on streets and small apartment buildings, became Tel Aviv's default option, the logical and reasonable state of things not to be altered unless some credible and convincing explanation could be provided otherwise. Zandberg's conception of the White City became an effective tool for any civilian campaign against wild real estate initiatives. If it retained any ideological or utopian aspect, it was mainly expressed as a striving for normality and banality, as a longing for a Tel Avivian world where one could find a street, a grocery shop, a backyard or a staircase. In the context of the aggressive urbanism that governed the city throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the (re)birth of the White City in the 1980s could be regarded as the (re)invention of a Tel Avivian normality.

Conservation

With the onset of the 1990s, a new figure appeared in this story. The architect Nitza Szmuk, who turned the conservation of International Style buildings in Tel Aviv into her life's work, would become one of the most influential characters in solidifying the White City's story in the written and built reality.

Born in Tel Aviv, Szmuk returned in 1990 after studying and working in Italy, where she had specialized in conservation architecture. Soon after her arrival she was appointed the first chief conservation architect in the municipality of Tel Aviv. At this position, and over the course of the next decade, she initiated an ambitious project: Szmuk located, identified and classified buildings constructed in the 1930s, in order to set a list of buildings that were to be conserved. She drafted a conservation plan of Tel Aviv, in which she had defined the perimeter of the White City. She prepared and submitted the city's conservation plan (2650b), prescribed conservation regulations and technical specifications, and inspected projects and derogations.

But she did not stop there. She also extended her professional and administrative activity to engaging in the public and cultural spheres, adopting the role of Chief Spokesperson for the conservation of the local International Style architecture in Tel Aviv. She published her research in newspaper articles and a book,[7] led guided tours, and lectured in both public and professional forums. In the summer of 1994 she organized the 'Bauhaus



Nitza Metzger-Szmuk, *Dwelling on the Dunes*, English–French edition (Paris: Éditions de l'Eclat, 2004).

Book cover for Nitza Szmuk, *Houses from the Sand: International Style Architecture in Tel Aviv*. (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Development Fund and Ministry of Defense Publications, 1994).

Nitza Szmuk, *Bauhaus Tel Aviv: Plan of Conservation Sites in Tel Aviv*, photographs: Yitzhak Kelter. Bureau of Architects and Engineers in Israel, with the aid of the Tel Aviv Municipality Engineering Administration. Early 1990s (n.d.).