

## **Working Paper**

### **Zeev Rechter's Architecture**

#### **Immigration and Wandering of Modern Architectural Ideas and Aesthetics from Europe to Palestine-Israel**

*A case study by Barak Ravitz*

##### **1. The “International Style” / The “Bauhaus style”**

The “International Style” and “Brutalism” were young Israel’s architectural foundations. Jewish Architects, educated in Europe fled to Palestine before and during the Second World War and the Holocaust, carrying with them fresh modernist planning and aesthetic principles. In the small Mediterranean territory, struggling to define itself amongst many struggles, these severe rules and definitions often had to be adapted to the new habitat. Based upon these relatively avantgarde theories, an infrastructure for a nation was constructed - residences and neighborhoods, government institutions, education facilities and cultural establishments, museums, and exhibitions spaces among them. It seems as if the aesthetic ethos and the spirit of modernism were embraced as the unofficial language of the newly founded State of Israel (Peleg, 2003).

The “International Style” is often labeled “Bauhaus” in Israel. This common nickname originates from the influential and short-lived school, which was founded in Weimar, Germany, in 1919 and moved to Dessau six years later, only to be shut down by the Nazi regime by 1933. This style, found at the core of Modern Architecture during the first half of the 20th century was indeed influenced by the Bauhaus, culminating in the works and writings of the first batch of international renowned architects, primarily Walter Gropius, the school’s founder; Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, a prominent teacher; and Le Corbusier, the self-taught French-Swiss master. The term “Bauhaus style” subsumes generic terms such as International Style, Functionalism, Constructivism and New Objectivity. With regard to Mandatory Palestine and Tel Aviv as the center of Jewish construction activity, the “Bauhaus style” is known as a differentiated and multi-faceted image of Modernism

in the Yishuv and as Ita Heinze-Greenberg has presented a development that has completely uncoupled itself from the historical institution (Schüler, 2019).

The term "international style" was first coined by architects Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, in a book published in 1932 following an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. However, the characteristics of the style could clearly be seen in a preceding exhibition - the 1927 Werkbund exposition at Weissenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart, directed by Mies van der Rohe. (Hitchcock & Johnson, 1966). The founders of the style and their successors drew an architectural ideal based on functionality and minimalism, abstraction, and geometry. They sought to combine the technological spirit of their new age with social utopias. For those who fulfil the style, the pure and clear form should reign alongside advanced technology utilizing "strong" materials - iron, concrete, glass. In doing so, the international style opposes ornamentation, which was perceived as an excess, onerous to the structure which is pure. These concepts follow in the footsteps of Adolf Loos' earlier ideas, as formulated in his groundbreaking essay "Ornament and Crime", in which Loos criticized the excessive use of ornamentation. Being the most dominant architectural style of modernist utopia, the "International Style" suited what immigrant architects envisioned as a living embodiment of it - Zionism. Rationalism, formal and material simplicity, and restraint befell the socialist and secular values of the movement which aspired to be a country.

Indeed, the "International style" has had a distinct expression on the new country's landscape. It influenced construction in Jerusalem and Haifa, but mostly left its mark on Tel Aviv of the 1930s and 1940s. Its design and aesthetic values were brought to Palestine by Jewish architects who studied at the Bauhaus school as well as those who studied with or worked with prominent followers and practitioners such as Le Corbusier, Erich Mendelson, Hannes Meyer and Mies van der Rohe. These architects came to Palestine against the backdrop of the dwindling horizon for Jews in Europe (Levin, M, 1984).

As clearly "imported goods", I examine the act of a nation state embracing foreign visual character - the ideas and aesthetic language brought along by the architects who immigrated to Palestine, acting as "agents" of European (foreign) cultural heritage (Nitzan-Shiftan and Stieber, 2018). My research focus on the architect Zeev Rechter.

## **2. Architect Zeev Rechter (1898 - 1960)**

Architect Zeev Rechter (1898, Ukraine - 1960, Israel) is the focal point of my study and mainly two of his buildings as case study: one in Tel Aviv and the other in Italy, Europe.

### **Beit Engel (The Engel House), Rothschild Boulevard 84, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1933**

The residential edifice called Beit Engel (The Engel House), built on Rothschild Boulevard in 1933, is a clear example of the international style in Tel Aviv. This is the first building designed by the architect Zeev Rechter upon his return from Paris, after a significant encounter with the work of Le Corbusier, who by then already defined the "five points in Architecture". The effect of this is evident first and foremost in the raising of the building on pillars (the first to do so in then Palestine). The horizontal windows also preserve the formula. So is the white plaster that covers construction blocks and concrete. This simple and inexpensive technology is suitable for the thriftiness and reduction living in the Land of Israel demanded at the time. The three-dimensional treatment of the walls, which is possible with concrete construction, and the brisse-soleil (literally sun breakers) - also influenced by Le Corbusier - suited sun-drenched Tel Aviv.

### **The Israeli pavilion in the Biennale Gardens of Venice, Italy, 1952**

Breaking away from the first Hebrew City, the case study I intend to depict does not rest on Israeli soil. I will concentrate on another building that Rechter designed some twenty years later - The Israeli pavilion in the Biennale Gardens of Venice, Italy, built in 1952 and commissioned by the government of Israeli. It, too, is a structure covered with plaster and whitewashed, while some of it stands on pillars. However, the Israeli Pavilion is interesting due to its representative nature. Inside it should be an empty stage, allowing maximal flexibility for temporary exhibitions. Outside it is supposed to be a present, a representation of its state (Robinson, 2014). Interestingly enough, the young State of Israel has chosen to construct a building of this style, an envoy of the light and bright White City, and not of Jerusalem, famous for its mandatory heavy-handed masonry.

I will highlight the transfer and adaptations that took place following the shift in the climatic, economic, and geopolitical conditions from Central Europe to Palestine and later Israel in its first decades. The "import and export mechanisms" of cultural transfer can arise different questions

from different points of view, based on the presupposition that it was not only the architects who were involved with the processes of cultural Ideas transmission and of architectural transfer, but also the users and recipients; clients and building contractors.

- The architects emigrating from Europe were faced with the question of how to make use of their Heritage knowledge and skills in their new homeland.
- The architects working in Palestine were confronted with the question of how the Bauhaus experience could advance their work in their homeland.
- The clients tried to understand the potentials of the imported expertise for their architecture and planning tasks (Schüler, 2019).

### **3. The research questions are:**

In this context of societal, economic, geopolitical, and cultural conditions in which Bauhaus concepts and architectural aesthetics were received I will ask:

- what was fully adopted from the modernist ideals?
- what was left aside and what underwent alterations on its way to Israel?
- What meanings were attributed to the imported architectural forms?
- Which social groups recognized themselves in it, and what ideological reference points did the new architecture offer?

Concerning the Israeli pavilion my further research questions will be

- Whether there are characteristics unique to Rechter?
- Whether the pavilion's qualities, are expressing a local -Mediterranean - Israeli version of the international style?

### **4. Methodology**

In order to trace the ways in which Rechter applied the principles of international style, and to visually depict the wanderings of ideas, manifested in the language of forms, materials and design principles, I intend to conduct a genealogical visual research on the two case study.

- **Theoretical frame:** An academic reading for analyzing historic dimension of Transcultural Dimension of the International Style. An academic reading for analyzing the Bauhaus architectural style and the international style in Tel Aviv. An academic reading for analyzing Rechter's Architecture
- **Archival research:** Analyzing archival materials (visual and textual documents)

Rechter Center for Architecture:

<https://www.reca-tlv.com>

The Liebling House (WCC - The White City Center), Tel Aviv:

<https://www.whitecitycenter.org>

The White City Center Archive

<https://www.whitecitycenter.org/the-white-city-center-archive>

## 5. Theoretical framework and Key concepts

### •The "International Style"/ The "Bauhaus style"

(Levin, 1984; Hitchcock & Johnson, 1966; Schüler, 2019).

Crinson, M. 2017. What Is Europe? ABE Journal (November)

### •Tel Aviv the white City- German- Israeli Shared Heritage Aspects in architecture

(Restaurierungsberatung, Lindlar and Kornelius, 2015; Peleg, 2003; Levin, 1984; Nitzan-Shiftan, 2009; Nitzan-Shiftan and Stieber, 2018 <https://www.whitecitycenter.org>)

### •Zeev Rechter -The agent of cultural transfer

(Robinson, 2014; <https://www.reca-tlv.com>)

## 6. References

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Robinson, J. (2014). Folkloric Modernism – Venice's Giardini della Biennale and the Geopolitics of Architecture. *Open Arts Journal*, 1 (2)

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[\\_Venice's Giardini della Biennale and the Geopolitics of Architecture](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273266116_Folkloric_Modernism_-_Venice's_Giardini_della_Biennale_and_the_Geopolitics_of_Architecture)

Schüler, R. (2019). Forms, Ideals, and Methods. Bauhaus Transfers to Mandatory Palestine. *International Journal of Architectural Theory*. 24(39), pp. 11-33.

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