

Why did Zionist architects choose the International Style (a.k.a. Bauhaus) for the state in the making? Parallel lines formed by the balconies of the Esther Cinema (today's Cinema Hotel), completed on Tel Aviv's Zamenhoff Street in 1939

Photo: Robinbagon

BUILDING ZION THE BAUHAUS WAY

How did the International Style, associated primarily with the Bauhaus school, become the signature look of Zionist construction? || Tamar Hayardeni

Creating a state isn't easy. For one thing, it requires a clear understanding of the country's distinctive identity, image, and character. What will make this new member of the family of nations unique? The Zionist movement, committed to building a home for Jews in a hostile Middle East, struggled mightily with such issues. The question of architecture, though ostensibly minor, was not insignificant among the many dilemmas facing the visionaries of the state in the making. What should the homes and institutions of the new country look like?

Why, you might ask, does a nation even need its own architectural style? Why should everything look the same? Perhaps a people as diverse and dispersed as the Jews would be better off with an eclectic architecture drawing on our many countries and continents of origin. Yet no one challenged the young European architects who insisted Zionism adopt a single architectural approach. A nation ingathered from a two-thousand-year

exile, they claimed, desperately needed a visual expression of the values binding it together – in its schools, offices, houses, and even hotels.

Hebrew National

Tel Aviv, then the largest Jewish center in the country, soon became a Zionist architects' playground. The first attempts at a distinctively Jewish look began before World War I, when many of the city's first homes and boarding houses were built in the eclectic Land of Israel style. Incorporating classical, Moorish, and even Art Deco elements, this architecture gained instant popularity among the Zionist immigrants by blending Western values – creativity, industry, exactitude, discipline, and cleanliness – with an Oriental emphasis on family and community, the land, and local heritage. Many examples of this early building style are still scattered throughout Tel Aviv's older neighborhoods, particularly Nahalat Binyamin Street and Allenby and Rothschild Boulevards.

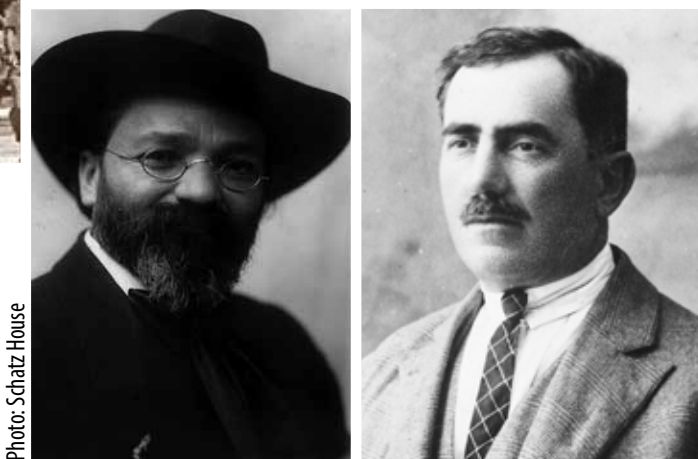
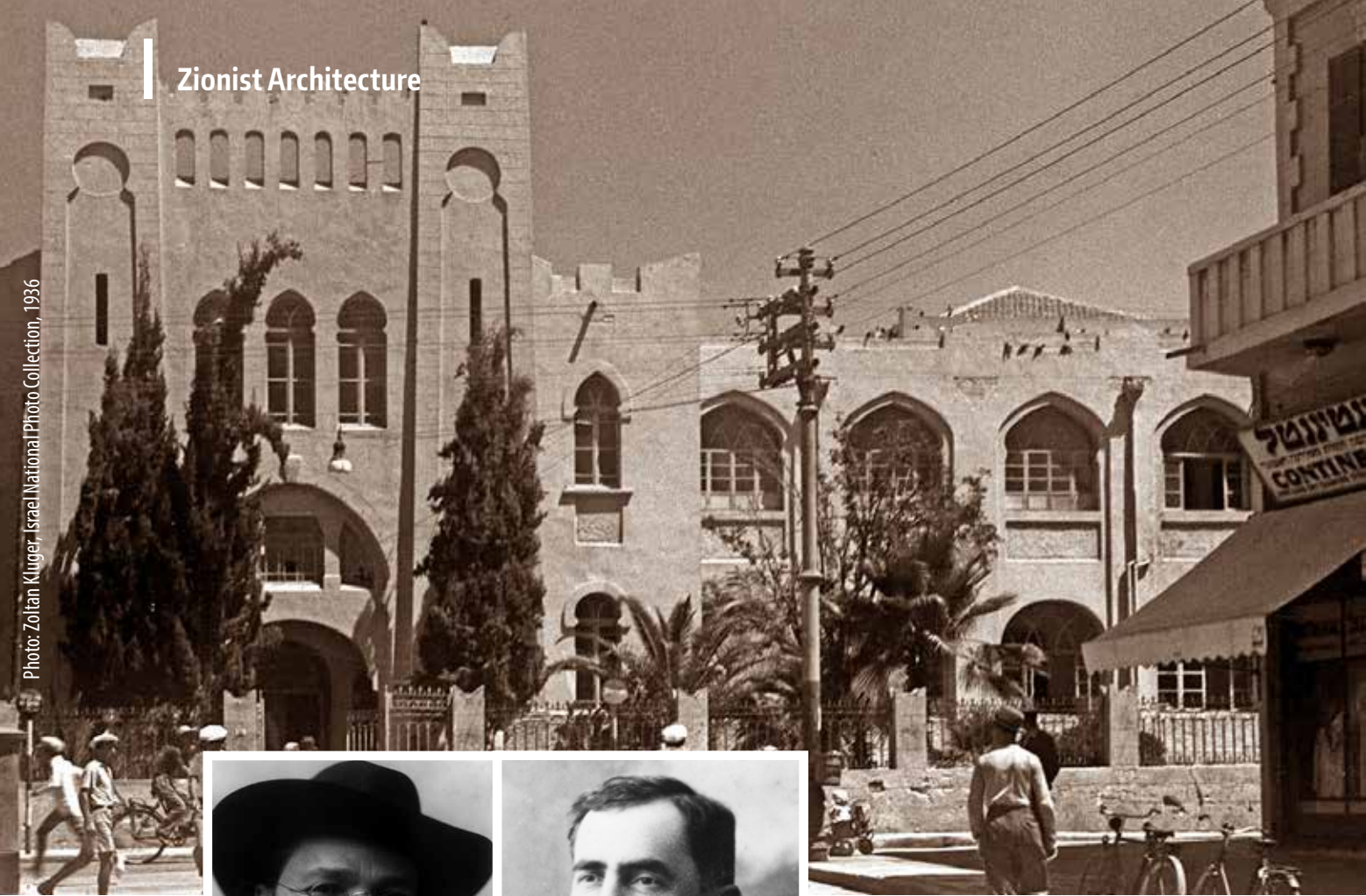


Photo: Schatz House

Tel Aviv's Herzliya High School was one of the finest examples of the eclectic Land of Israel style. The school and its planners, Boris Schatz and Joseph Barsky

Most of these landmarks, lovingly restored, were the work of two architects: Alexander Levy and Yehuda Magidovitch. Levy is to be credited with – among other structures – the pagoda on Montefiore Street, while Magidovitch, later Tel Aviv's first municipal engineer, is best known for his numerous buildings on Nahalat Binyamin. A map of them all is part of a commemorative display on the street, now a pedestrian zone.

Most impressive was the iconic Herzliya High School building, dominating the intersection of Tel Aviv's two main thoroughfares. Designed in 1909 by Joseph Barsky and the founding director of the Bezalel School of Arts

and Crafts (as it was then known), Boris Schatz, this architectural jewel was torn down in 1959 to make way for Tel Aviv's first and ugliest skyscraper, the Shalom Meir Tower. The outline of the original structure has become the emblem of the Council for Conservation of Heritage Sites in Israel.

In 1925, Barsky built downtown Jerusalem's Bikur Holim Hospital in the same style, which thankfully can still be appreciated at this historic site.

Alexander Baerwald was another extremely talented Land of Israel stylist. Aside from mapping out Bat Yam, he designed many flagship structures in his native Haifa, including the historic Technion building. Another of his works, similarly dominated by Oriental arches, is the Hebrew Reali School, which boasts an impressive dome. The eclectic style was so identified with the Zionist movement that Scottish architect Patrick Gidds incorporated Oriental and even Canaanite elements into the National Library he designed on Mount Scopus in 1929.



Photo: Elad Cohanin



Photo: Avraham Soskin

Before World War I, many of Tel Aviv's homes and hotels were built in the Land of Israel style, blending East and West

West Is Best

In the 1920s, Mandate Palestine began deteriorating politically, with the rift between Jews and Arabs widening particularly after the Arab riots of 1929, with their many Jewish casualties. This antagonism increased pressure to develop a Jewish national architecture that owed nothing to Oriental and Ottoman styles. Jewish architects looked to Europe for a design both interesting and suited to the hot Middle East.

After World War I, Europe – especially Germany – was in the throes of far-reaching changes. The continent sought

a new path, a way out of the moral, economic, and nationalist depression left by the horrific battles and millions of dead. This break with the past led to the modernist New Architecture, a clean slate disconnected from tradition and local styles and all about progress.

Germany's Bauhaus school epitomized this trend, characterized by smooth, white structures emphasizing geometric forms and rounded facades. Ornamentation went out the window as traditional, tiled roofs were flattened and buildings were made of geometric blocks with large areas of glass. Asymmetry,

Classical, Art Deco, and Oriental elements typify Yehuda Magidovitch's work. The architect and two of his Tel Aviv works: the beachfront Casino Galei Aviv Café, 1922, and the Nordau Hotel



Photo retouching and color: Tamar Hayardeni



Photo: Eduard Elkan, Bitmuna



Photo: Danny Gershoni

Alexander Baerwald brought the Land of Israel style to Haifa in his design for the original Technion building, today the Israel National Museum of Science, Technology, and Space (Madatech). Baerwald and his Technion, and an electric transformer station he designed for Jaffa

simplicity, and functionality were the order of the day, and the materials of choice were concrete, steel, and plaster. These cheap, adaptable, and readily available alternatives to the standard brick and wood enabled anyone and everyone to build fast.

German pensioners were shocked by the square, white monstrosities springing up everywhere, but the younger generation adored the fresh, clean, modern look. Spreading like wildfire through Europe, the new style quickly reached the United States as well. Soon it was a global movement deserving of its title – the International Style. Often, though, it was simply called Bauhaus, after the school of architecture that had spawned it.

With the Nazis' rise to power in 1933, Jews began leaving Germany, including many Bauhaus students and faculty. Other European architectural schools lost their Jews as well. Those who made their way to Mandate Palestine brought the International Style with them, pitching it as precisely the non-Orientalist architecture the Zionists had been looking for. Young, free, and rootless, innovative yet inexpensive, it fit the movement's pioneer spirit perfectly.

Bauhaus reflected Theodor Herzl's intuition that the Jewish homeland should

The rift dividing Jews and Arabs after the Arab riots of 1929 increased pressure to develop a specifically Jewish architecture

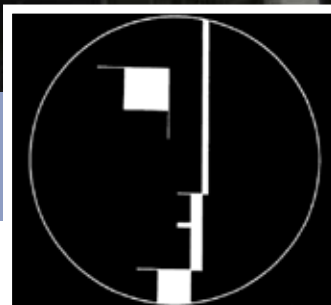
be built from scratch, incorporating every technological development to achieve an ultramodern state. Its clean aesthetic made the new country look Western rather than Eastern. Taken to an extreme, it demonstrated that secular Hebrew society in the land of Israel was turning its back on tradition in pursuit of modern Jewish nationalism.

Clean Lines

The International Style's straight lines, rounded edges, and use of white plaster devoid of any ornamentation where grime could hide were also an expression of health and hygiene. Almost all the spas and health resorts built in 1930s Europe adhered to the movement's guidelines. This sterility particularly appealed to the mostly European pioneers building Mandate Palestine, who were disgusted by the rampant filth and disease of the Middle East. Amos Oz vividly described this mentality:

My grandmother Shlomit arrived in Jerusalem straight from Vilna one hot summer's day in 1933, took one startled look at the sweaty markets, the colorful stalls, the swarming side streets full of the cries of hawkers, the braying of donkeys, the bleating of goats, the squawks of pullets hung up with their legs tied together, and blood dripping from the necks of slaughtered chickens, she saw the shoulders and arms of Middle Eastern men [...] and immediately pronounced her final verdict: "The Levant is full of germs." (Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* [Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004], p. 31)

This attitude is reflected in much of the research on British Mandate Palestine, especially in "We Are Here to Bring the West: Hygiene Education and Culture Building in the



The Bauhaus logo and two examples of the International Style: Polsky House, on Ramat Gan's Shapira Street, and the historic building that once housed Haaretz's printing press, on Mazeh Street, Tel Aviv

Photo: Sambach



Find the difference. Jerusalem's German Hospital, built in the late 19th century, and Petah Tikva's Beilinson Hospital, designed in the International Style

Hygiene was a struggle in the primitive Middle East. Jerusalem milk-delivery donkey sponsored by the Tipat Halav mother and baby clinics, turn of the 20th century
Courtesy of the Central Zionist Archives



Jewish Society of Mandate Palestine,” by Dafna Hirsch (*International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41, no. 4 [November 2009]). Describing the work of the country's first Zionist doctors, notably Albert Ticho and Arye Boehm, Hirsch points out the Zionist movement's enormous investment in hygiene in the land of Israel, including the Hadassah Women's Organization's establishment of the first countrywide network of mother and baby clinics. For the Zionist institutions, these efforts were essential to Westernizing the Middle East and creating a healthy environment for a modern Jewish state.

Yet another reason for Bauhaus' popularity in Mandate Palestine, more



Young, free, and rootless, innovative yet inexpensive, the International Style suited the Zionist movement's pioneer spirit perfectly

practical than ideological, was that its use of advanced materials and technology made construction much cheaper. Buildings were simple and functional, without a penny wasted on ornamentation and other such indulgences that gave character to traditional structures. The International school turned its back on the wealth and ego underlying flamboyant architecture. Bauhaus was thus a perfect fit for Zionist socialism, which promoted frugality and eschewed anything and everything bourgeois.

There were even calls to abandon the graceful, eclectic Magidovitch buildings and adopt the International Style wholesale as the official Zionist architecture. One such voice was that of Jozeph Frank, a Viennese Jewish architect who emigrated to Sweden but was nevertheless extremely active in Zionist causes. Frank competed unsuccessfully to design Israel's national institutions, stating that

"it would be undesirable to see the style of the mosques imitated again and again." Instead of drawing on the past and on the vernacular, Frank suggested, a true local style for Palestine should

have an international orientation and be a manifestation of "the modern International Style." (Daniella Ohad Smith, "Hotel Design in British Mandate Palestine: Modernism and the Zionist Vision," *Journal of Israeli History* 29, no. 1 [2010], p. 108)

Local Touches

Another fervent advocate of Bauhaus was architect Eugen Ratner, a member of the Labor Party who held senior posts in the Hagana militia and later in the Israeli army. Ratner arrived in Mandate Palestine from Russia during the 1920s, and within a few years his obvious talent had won him numerous enviable planning jobs in Haifa: Bet Ha-poalim (Workers' House), a social and cultural center for the working class; the town's amphitheater; and a new wing for the Anglo-Palestine Bank branch. In 1928, he stunned the local architectural community by taking first place in a competition to design the Jewish national institutions in Jerusalem, beating out established colleagues.

Ratner deemed the International Style (or the Innovative Style, as he called it) no

Tel Aviv boasts the world's highest concentration of International Style buildings. Characteristically Bauhaus white plaster and verandas overlooking Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Square, 1940s



Eugen Ratner and the National Institutions Building he designed on Jerusalem's King George Street

more fad but rather a tool for inculcating the values of modernism – freedom, innovation, and the breakdown of norms. Because he also viewed progressive, secular Zionism and the socialist labor movement as expressions of modernism, he naturally designed Zionist public spaces in the Bauhaus mode. These included Jerusalem's National Institutions Building, housing the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization.

In a series of articles explaining why the Zionist movement needed a standardized architecture, Ratner proclaimed the International Style the only choice. A groundbreaking essay he published in 1935 claimed that Zionism's lack of a unifying architectural concept was causing chaos, effectively preventing the formulation of a broad national agenda. When asked how an "international" style could possibly express a distinctive national character, Ratner recommended that this aesthetic be adapted to the local climate, ensuring a unique result:

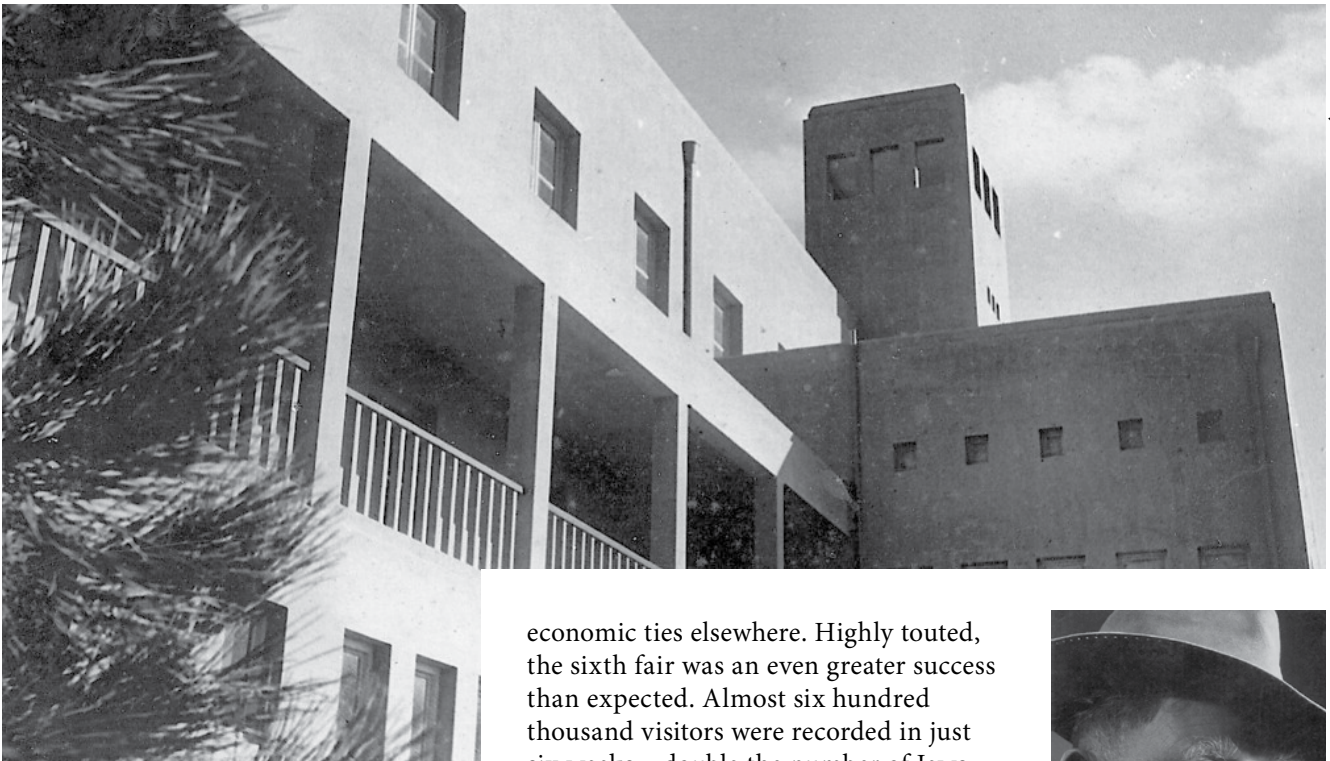
Climactic conditions, lifestyle, and economic considerations – and, above all, the unknown factors – [...] will make the Jewish Innovative Style in the Land of Israel different from the Innovative Style in France or China. (Eugen Ratner, "Toward the Original Style," in *Palestine Construction Annual 1934–35* [Mishar Ve-ta'asiya], p. 36)

How could the blatantly Western International Style reflect the diversity of the Jewish people? Bauhaus buildings' bright whiteness radiated rejection of the East

Ratner's influence, like that of other local Internationalist architects – Leopold Krakauer, Erich Mendelsohn, Richard Kauffmann, Zeev Rechter, Aryeh Elhanani, and Joseph Neufeld, to name a few – ensured the new style's adoption practically across the board.

Within a few years, hundreds of houses and institutions had been built in the International Style throughout Jewish Mandate Palestine. The Zionist establishment embraced the new architectural language, and by the time the state was declared in 1948, over four thousand white-plastered Bauhaus-style homes glimmered in the Tel Aviv sun, all completed under the watchful eye of municipal engineer Yaakov Ben Sira. His diligent efforts turned Tel Aviv into the world's highest concentration of Bauhaus buildings, resulting in UNESCO's 2003 designation of the metropolis' White City area as a World Heritage Site.

As noted, Haifa and Jerusalem too had their fair share of structures built in the



new Zionist style. As the Jewish Agency complex was going up in the capital, the Mandate authorities built an International Style town center along King George Street and Jaffa Road. In keeping with the Rehavia residential neighborhood nearby, Jerusalem's commercial district has a local twist to its Bauhaus exteriors: "Jerusalem stone" facing, as municipally mandated. Ratner's vision of local adaptations' spawning unique mutations of the modernist style was thus realized, giving the International Style a Jerusalemite look and flavor. The Eden Hotel – built by Ratner himself on Jerusalem's Histadrut Street – is a perfect example, with its triple-arched facade done in local white limestone.

The Levant Fair

The International Style peaked in Mandate Palestine with the unforgettable sixth Levant Fair, held on Tel Aviv's Yarkon riverbank in 1934.

Founded in 1923 by the Mishar Ve-ta'asiya (Trade and Industry) company, this international exhibition aimed to help companies in the Middle East (especially Mandate Palestine) develop

economic ties elsewhere. Highly touted, the sixth fair was an even greater success than expected. Almost six hundred thousand visitors were recorded in just six weeks – double the number of Jews then resident in the entire country.

Thirty nations displayed their wares in seventy-four purpose-built stone hangars, some of them massive, constructed for the occasion by various Zionist architects. Every wing was designed in the International Style. As Ratner had predicted, the classic Bauhaus lines had to be tweaked to fit the event's location. Structures were aligned with wind directions for optimal natural ventilation by Tel Aviv's sea breezes and angled to avoid direct sunlight in the heat of the day. Each building included creative shading solutions for windows and other glass panels; Richard Kauffmann, for example, recessed the doors and windows of his Land of Israel Produce Palace to keep them in shadow. Other architects designed window cornices to jut out over the glass panes and placed walls and shutters at odd angles to achieve similar effects.

This tribute to the International Style also confirmed its dominance of Jewish architecture in Mandate Palestine – with a decidedly local twist. Nevertheless, it's ironic that an exhibition dedicated to the Levant was designed in exclusively Western style. Willy Waltsh, the fair's



Bauhaus' simplicity and preference for cheap, mass-produced, modern building materials facilitated swift construction on a large economic scale. Architect Arieh Sharon and his addition to Haifa's Hebrew Reali School, 1937



The International Style was supposed to promote labor and function as an ideal in the Holy Land's Jewish neighborhoods and villages. The Land of Israel Produce Palace, designed by Richard Kauffmann for the 1934 Levant Fair, with Aryeh Elhanani's *Hebrew Laborer* in the foreground

Far from reflecting Middle Eastern culture, the Levant Fair celebrated the Westernization of the region. Poster for the fair



chief engineer, later proudly described the campus, which went up in a mere eight months:

The Fair was to provide a picture of modern Jewish architecture and it was our aim to invite a number of architects to draw up plans for individual buildings and constructions and then to work these plans into a corporate whole. Thus we managed to create something which is as rich in variety as is the composition of the Jewish people, and yet shows a unity of architectural line, a unity of purpose. (Willi Weltsch, "The Eight Months Wonder – The Architecture of the Fair," *The Palestine Post*, April 26, 1934, p. 18)

Oriental Backlash

Only many years later, particularly after the Eurocentric Labor Party lost its stranglehold on Israeli politics in the 1970s, did the narrow paternalism of comments such as these raise eyebrows. The irony was mind-blowing; how could the blatantly Western International Style reflect the diversity of the Jewish people? Gradually, the establishment was criticized for letting the International Style dominate the public square. Though



intended to distance and distinguish Israel from its hostile Arab neighbors, this aesthetic decision betrayed the Zionist leadership's blindness to the Oriental culture of North African and Mesopotamian Jewry.

Architect Sharon Rothbard's book *White City, Black City* (2005 [Hebrew]), on the development of Tel Aviv, discussed how alien the International Style buildings were to the local landscape, particularly in contrast to nearby Jaffa, whose Ottoman-era center had a "native" air. Their bright whiteness, transplanted from a dominant, white, Western culture, radiated rejection of the East.

The title of Dafna Hirsch's "We Are Here to Bring the West" similarly reflects the paternalistic, even racist attitudes of senior Israeli government medical staff, who used standards of cleanliness and hygiene to establish their own superiority over both Arabs and Oriental Jews.

A New Jewish Home

Bauhaus served for many years as the epitome of modern, secular, Zionist architecture, with its Western orientation and efforts to create a Jewish society valuing European innovation and moral, political, and religious freedom. The adoption of such an alien architectural style is viewed today as an attempt to overshadow the Jewish homeland's awkward location in the microbe-

infested Middle East, which required a complete overhaul to make it a suitable dwelling place for the new Jews returning to their ancestral home.

The International Style reigned supreme in Israel's cities for decades. The Brutalist public buildings erected in the 1950s and '60s took a different tack, expressing strength through exposed concrete. But they too – like the public housing blocs built around the same time, arranged in rows like railway carriages – were influenced by Soviet architecture, which was in many ways the product of Bauhaus architects' work in Stalin's USSR. (See "Designing a New Jew," pp. 28–39.)

Only in the late 1970s did Israeli society's rapidly diversifying culture begin demanding more variety in its public spaces, leading to a decline in Bauhaus' popularity. What's left of the white, curving vistas of the developing Zionist movement tell a tale of ideology and hegemony but, above all, of a search for an architectural language capable of reviving the Jewish people. ▣

Every structure included in the exhibition was pure Bauhaus. Galina Café, designed by Genia Averbuch, Elsa Gidoni, and Shlomo Ginsburg, circa 1930

Photo retouching and color: Tamar Hayardeni



Tamar Hayardeni

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