Encoding the spatial DNA of Tel Aviv's White City

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Introduction

The *Non stop city* is a slogan given to Tel Aviv by its municipality with the aspiration to create a sense of place and a local identity. Although this slogan does not describe a tangible aspect, the sense of constant movement and change is what describes the *genius loci* of this Mediterranean metropole, a city that is constantly making and remaking itself. Even nowadays, when the heart of the city has been declared as a historic world heritage monument by UNESCO, this part of the city is not resting at all and not freezing its development for the sake of the past, but rather using history as a tangible layer on which new development is growing, like a fertile soil for a new harvest. The old historic layer is actually supplying its roofs for new developments (unthinkable in Germany for intense). Indeed, the city is layering itself and adding floors right on top of historical buildings as a strategy of city development. The urban tissue is hence composed of multiple layers of time and stories, the built environment revealing the insights, hopes and challenges of the people/immigrants that inhabited these places in some moment of time. The architecture serves as a time capsule and reveals the identity and memory of the society which created it with an immense sense of speed and a movement towards change and renewal up to this day.

The term *genius loci* comes from the classical Roman religion. In the contemporary usage, genius loci usually refers to a location's distinctive atmosphere, or a "spirit of the place." In the case of Tel Aviv, the spirit of the space is a combination of both the historic UNESCO world heritage sites on the one hand, and the many newly added layers on the other. The constant battle between freezing and renewing, between conservationists and developers, currently shapes and brands the city, imbuing it with a healthy tension based on its polarities.

Against this background, the research aims to present both the historical development and the current challenges of the White City and, based on this, to find an answer to the question of whether the concept of shared cultural heritage is adequate for describing this transnational architectural heritage. For even though numerous influences of and parallels to modern building in Europe can be identified

through the transfer of European concepts and ideas to the Levant, the White City in Tel Aviv is something singular today. Likewise, the research takes into account the present-day heritage protection perspective of the city of Tel Aviv, which has to address the question of how to deal with a cultural heritage that, mostly in private hands and in a dynamic metropolis, is subject to intensive use. Finally, the research offers a preliminary conclusion of this discussion with regard to the concept of shared cultural heritage. For this, the author draws on her years of research as an art and architectural historian, as well as on her expertise as founder and research director of the *Max Liebling House – White City Center in Tel Aviv*.

The import of German material: The transfer agreement (1933–1938)

From its inauguration, the city of Tel Aviv and the White City in particular was established by immigrants from German speaking countries flocking to its shores with a dream to create for themselves a new life in a better world; their vision was to create a futuristic modern city of tomorrow. They brought with them not only their hopes and dreams, but also shelves full of Goethe and Schiller, the latest bohemian fashion and also the Bauhaus' *Neue Sachlichkeit* (new objectivity), which is relevant to the heritage we are discussing.

The construction techniques were not the only commodity imported from Germany to Mandatory Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s. With the rise of the Nazi regime in 1933 German, Jews were not eager to take their assets in cash out of the country, since a heavy tax was levied on such assets (*Reichsfluchtsteuer*). Furthermore, there was a growing boycott on German goods by the Americans. The Zionist Federation of Germany used this moment as an opportunity to sign an agreement with the Nazis: the Transfer Agreement (1933–1938). It allowed German-Jews to sell property and real estate, with revenues invested in buying goods and building materials. These were then exported from Germany to Palestine, where they were purchased and their worth was returned to those owners who immigrated to the new land. 50,000 German-Jews immigrated thanks to the agreement. The cumulative wealth – amounting to 150 million Reichsmark – was transferred to the country via the Anglo-Palestine Bank and the Tel Aviv-based *Haavara* (Hebrew for transfer) firm. The Nazi regime, in turn, encouraged the emigration of Jews from Germany and secured the export of goods contrary to the anti-Nazi boycott initiated by the American Jewish community (Mußgnug 1993). A lot of these materials, such as tiles, glass windows, handles, fixtures, metal, and concrete were used in the buildings of the modern movement in the White city and all over country.

The tiles of the French-German company *Villeroy & Boch*, which were installed in the former home of the Liebling family and today's White City Center, are also a telling testimony to this trade in goods. The origin of the tiles came to light when,

during the restoration of the building in 2017, some tiles fell off the wall in the stairwell and the company's name stamped on the back became visible (Golan 2019). Likewise, the fittings and handles on the original windows and doors of the residential building came from Germany: lockable door peepholes, block frames, door leaves and nickel-plated handle sets were supplied by *Wehag* (Wilhelm Engstfeld AG) with license from S.A. Loevy, a Jewish company from Berlin. Today, the experience and exhibition at Liebling House deliberately exhibits the tiles as a testimony to a material heritage resulting from the involuntary movement of goods. (Fig. 1) In order to display this fact, the back of the tiles with the V&B logo was printed and inserted in place of the missing tile of the house's staircase (Golan 2019).

All in all, it can be said that this was a controversial episode in the relationship between Israel and Germany, which remained obscure despite the fundamental impact it had on the Jewish settlement in Palestine. Longing for the European lifestyle they associated with their roots, immigrants desired to use their goods to try and maintain their identity, while demonstrating the wish to connect to the latest trends of architectural design.

The first Hebrew city and its architects: The local *Neue Sachlichkeit*

Tel Aviv has no outstanding icons, no recognized stand-alone Bauhaus architectural masterpieces that could by themselves define its style. Rather, what gives the White City an outstanding cultural significance is the fusion of the buildings with their urban context, the historical urban landscape, which extends far beyond the boundaries of the UNESCO zone declared in 2003 and its numerous listed buildings. It is a living, evolving urban tissue that rose from sandy dunes by the sea at the dawn of the 20th century, and continues to develop, and should be read as such. By choosing the International Style (often locally referred to as the Bauhaus Style) as the physical manifestation of this dream, the city strived for a *carte blanche*, for the seemingly blank page in the next chapter in the book telling the history of Jewry amidst the suffering of antisemitism. Argued here is that the outstanding value of the White City reaches far beyond its whitewashed façade, or the regionalist version of modernism found in the over 4000 buildings of the International Style which the city is famous for. The term "International Style" for modern architecture, such as the architecture implemented in Tel Aviv, was created at the MoMA in New York in 1932 by the historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock and the architect Philip Johnson to describe this new modern style, displaying new trends of architecture built of steel, reinforced concrete, and glass (Hitchcock and Johnson 1985). The International Style transformed the skylines of many major cities around the world, and can be connected to the international wish for peace after World War I, where neutral architecture was a

means to describe globalism, removing borders, and abandoning a nationalist way of life.

Although the building style of Tel Aviv is often referred to as the Bauhaus Style, only six architects have actually studied at the Bauhaus school and then built in Tel Aviv; many others were mainly German and European architects who came from other schools and places. One of the original Bauhaus students however was Shmuel Mestechkin (1908–2004), also known for his statement: "A house that has finished its job – should disappear." In her obituary in the *Haaretz* Newspaper, Israeli architecture critic Esther Zandberg praised Mestechkin: "The public esteem he received in his life is much less than the architectural legacy he left. He remained a believing modernist – a socialist and a humble man in every sense" (Zandberg 2004). From conversations with Mestechkin it was possible to learn that he did not give much importance to the conservation of buildings, including his own works. "Old buildings," he said decisively, "should be demolished and new and better buildings should be built instead of them for the common good" (ibid). The construction phase of modernism in the first modern Hebrew city lasted only about six years, from 1931 to 1937. It was the heyday of the International Style and the Bauhaus doctrine. The influence of European interwar architecture and the creation of a new local architectural language led to a polycentric articulation of modernism, reflecting the needs of the society and culture by adjusting the International Style to the local constraints of climatic conditions. The harsh sunlight and the existing building material that could be found locally and easily in the region at that time, for example the silicate crucibles, the basic building brick, laid as a filing of the construction frame.

The most predominant group shaping Tel Aviv were young architects who had left Palestine earlier to train as architects and engineers abroad. They had studied in Germany, France, Belgium, Italy, and Russia in the workshops of the most famous architects of the avant-garde. Arieh Sharon, Shmuel Mestechkin, Shlomo Bernstein, Munio Gitai Weinraub, and Chanan Frenkel studied at the Bauhaus. Josef Neufeld studied in Rome, Bruno Taut in Moscow, Zeev Rechter with Erich Mendelsohn in Berlin, Shmuel Barkai with Le Corbusier in Paris. Dov Karmi, Benjamin Ankstein, Genia Averbuch, as well as many others, studied in Rome, Gent, Venice or Naples, later also in Vienna and Paris. Many of them were to become important architects in the future state of Israel. They were driven by the modernistic ideologies of the current Zeitgeist, and their wish was to cast their beliefs into concrete in the newly established state (Efrat 2018).

The paradigm shift from the eclectic way of building to the modern style happened through this group of young visionaries who created a vibrant "urban think-tank". This circle of architects, called the *Chug* (Hebrew translation of the name of the Berlin architect association *Der Ring*), met in the evenings in the bohemian Tel Aviv Cafe on the beachfront promenade for discussions about the Chug's journal (Claus 2001).

By 1930, modernism was the answer for all built structures. the first modernist building, however, was planned by Erich Mendelsohn as an electric power station already in 1923. Modern architecture was repurposed to fulfill ideological and stylistic criteria to remedy the problems of the Zionist enterprise. As agents of a proactive, pragmatic Zionism, the Chug supported socialist aspects of Theodor Herzl's Political Zionism. While modernism thus got a new push in Palestine, the so called *Neues Bauen* movement in Germany was banned and rejected as "Jewish-Bolshevist", "semitic oriental", as in the case of the Weissenhof Estate in Stuttgart.

In order to influence public opinion, to "educate" the public about the benefits of the modern movement, and to conduct a platform for architectural competitions, the Chug published a magazine called *Habinyan Bamizrach Hakarov* (Hebrew for the Building in the Near East). It promoted innovative ideas such as building on *Piloti* (columns), to allow the breeze to circulate through the streets and to subtly connect the buildings to the street using garden passageways under the buildings. Pedestrians were guided to the lobby of the building through semi-public, shaded green entrances often adorned with fountains, pergolas, benches, and landscape designs. In this way, the Chug succeeded in changing the aesthetics of the *Yishuv*, the community of Zionist Jews that had begun to settle in Palestine since the end of the 19th century. Its modernist language was appropriated by the Zionist movement and became the architectural expression, the manifestation of its desire to create a new national identity. Modernism came to symbolize the birth of the new Hebrew nation (Efrat 2018).

This intimate connection between the ideals of the Chug and the socialist leadership of the city helped institutionalize Modern architecture, which goes a long way to explaining Tel Aviv center's almost homogenous appearance. It did not hurt that the uniform and relatively sober style of Modernism facilitated putting roofs over the heads of hundreds of thousands of refugees flocking to Palestine in the 1930s. Erecting houses with concrete steel frames was less time consuming and far less expensive than the former eclectic style, with its bearing walls and lush ornaments. The solutions and building concepts developed by the architects of the avant-garde in Europe proved suitable for the social needs in Palestine and were therefore willingly adopted.

The main building material, silicate building bricks made of sand and limestone, was easy to produce locally and did not require any special crafting skills. The modern construction method allowed greater wall openings, counter levered balconies, and flexible interior spaces. *Terrazzo* was cast on site with local and imported stones. The plaster was made with the newest imported German building technologies implemented in situ using various techniques. Imitating stone effects by mixing minerals such as lime and white cement with different small stones and grain gradations lent the façades a three dimensional appearance and proved to be resistant against wear and tear.

A German engineer named Emanuel Teiner even came to Palestine to train Jewish construction workers, teaching them how to create various plaster types common in Germany at that time: washing plaster, *Kratzputz*, and stone plaster. The best proof for the strong influence of the German building techniques on the country is that the German names of these techniques are still being used by Israeli workers in Hebrew to the present day, along with other words like *Sockel, Oberkant and Unterkant, Stecker* or *Unterputz*.

Volksbedarf statt Luxusbedarf: A masterplan for the whole country

Although only six architects actually studied at the Bauhaus and later built in Tel Aviv, the influence of this small group on the architectural discourse was immense. An example can be seen in the *Hod* cooperative housing estate on Frishman street, completed in 1935. The influence of Hannes Meyer, the second and lesser known Bauhaus director, can be discerned here, both in the simple and modest design form and in the social structure of the building, where residents were allocated only small apartments but shared huge communal facilities like a large garden in the center of the estate, a common kindergarten, laundry, shops, and a dining hall. In keeping with the socialist worldview of the ruling elite, this communal public space served as an extension of the relatively small living units, with the task of welding the new Hebrew society together into one homogenous whole. This directly corresponded with Meyer's teaching. Meyer was the "socialist" director of the Bauhaus, coining slogans like *Volksbedarf statt Luxusbedarf* (People's needs instead of luxury) and directing his students to focus on social aspects of design as their main agenda.

Meyer's student Arieh Sharon (1900–1984), who held Diploma No. 6 of the Bauhaus, was to become Israel's most dominant Bauhaus architect. Coming to study at the Bauhaus from Kibbutz Gan Shmuel, where he had already worked in planning and construction, one can imagine the immediate connection he managed to form with his master Meyer, trying together to translate socialism's ideals into architectural forms. It can even be argued that the student may have influenced his teacher, for example in the *School of the General Federation of German Trade Unions* (ADGB) in Bernau. The ADGB, a masterpiece recognized as a UNESCO world heritage site in 2017, embodies many formal attributes of space representing direct parallels to Sharon's kibbutz settlement in both form and function. In both, the space was arranged to guide the communal behavior of its inhabitants, ranging from small residential rooms through semi-public spaces of a unit, all the way to the large communal gathering spaces such as the dining hall – all to help shape the identity of the individual as part of the group.

Sharon's most important work, however, was accomplished a decade later, after the heyday of early modernism in Palestine. In 1949, he was commissioned by the

first Prime Minister of Israel David Ben Gurion to lead the national team in charge of the first masterplan for the newly established state of Israel. This plan was published in 1951 under the title *Physical planning in Israel* (Sharon 1976; Dursthoff 2010), determining the location for new towns and laying down the principles of regional planning in order to distribute the large influx of immigrants. It regulated the location of industrial and agriculture zones as well as the general infrastructure system. At the same time, it created national parks and nature reserves. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to state that a Bauhaus student not only designed residential buildings in Tel Aviv, but actually laid out the strategic masterplan for the whole country of Israel, which did not stay only on paper but has actually shaped the country's landscape until the present moment.

In retrospect, Sharon's design has been much criticized. The idea of erecting development towns in the periphery, where they used to house poor immigrants and quickly turned into social hotspots perpetuating the differences between Israel upper and lower classes, was however not Sharon's own invention. Rather, Sharon applied in his masterplan some well-known and accepted planning practices of his time, which were inspired by a model developed by the German geographer and economist Walter Kristaller. After World War II, in which the urban areas (such as in London, Berlin, and Hiroshima) were mostly affected, the population was dispersed in areas not crowded with settlement. In Israel, this idea was also imbued with a security dimension.

In the last decades of his life, Sharon was involved in the city of Ife in Nigeria, which won independence from Britain in 1957. Here, he integrated quotations from the vernacular visual culture of the local tribes, perhaps allowing himself to connect to the postmodern vibe already influencing the architectural spirit of the time.

The 'Israeli style': Garden city plan and outdoor balconies in Tel Aviv

Fleeing from the anti-Semitism and the National Socialist regime in Germany, following the prohibition on Jews to work as architects in 1933, between 1933 and 1934, some 60 architects came to Palestine, among them such illustrious names as Erich Mendelsohn, Adolf Rading, who followed his Jewish wife to Palestine, Julius Posener, Leo Adler, Oskar Kaufmann, and many others. Most of these architects who chose to immigrate to Palestine did not do so because of a deep ideological Zionist conviction, but rather because they found a professional incentive in the underdeveloped country and saw a chance to work there. Many of these architects, who were already established architects in their homeland, were forced by Tel Aviv's municipal city engineer Yaakov Shifman to adopt the International Style. This led to the development of individual forms of modernism and expressive forms of *Sachlichkeit*, twisting concepts such as "form follows function" (Louis Sullivan's principle of design associated

with late 19th and early 20th century architecture and industrial design) to "function follows form", and sometimes even violating the principle stating that "ornament" equates to "crime" (Loos 1908), as in the common phrase used to describe modern architecture.

The development of Israel's local style was never a simple copy of European knowhow. Rather, it represents the evolution of a unique local language within the functional doctrine of modernism, reflecting the needs of a nation in the process of being born. Its clear architectural language reflects both the values of the Zionist movement on the one hand, and the objective needs of construction of a new state absorbing more than a million immigrants constantly flocking to the country on the other. All the while, it also took the climatic and geographic conditions of the land into consideration.

Perhaps the most predominant feature of the local adaptation is the relation of the buildings to the street, resulting from the modernist building imposed on the Garden City plan. The buildings are singular detached monoliths on their respective plots, allowing the growing of vegetation on all four sides, leaving space for the realization of the Garden City plan. The buildings stand in constant dialogue with their surroundings, creating perpetual social interactions of their occupants and passers-by. The raised *Pilotis* houses (an idea adopted from Le Corbusier) offer a gradual passage from the public sphere through lush gardens and their semi-public domain, while creating pleasant micro climatic conditions in hot summer days.

The various types of balconies are another dominant feature of Tel Aviv's urban fabric, although the element of the balcony is purely functional. One could argue that in the case of Tel Aviv, it also serves as a decorative element, letting the local buildings appear completely different from modernist edifices in central Europe, with their small or "introverted" balconies in the rear façade. In Israel, the balcony quickly served a third, social function. Tel Aviv's inhabitants interacted from their balconies, creating a vibrant street atmosphere by connecting the dwellers to the passers-by on the street, and the balconies served as the main means of communication between neighbors. Usually acting as an outdoor extension to the living room, the balconies are shaded and aired. The only vertical window element, the so called *Thermometer* window, was often used, and also contributed to the street dialogue, as it lit up the stairway with natural light during the day, but lit up the street at night.

Conservatism 2.0: The local conservation 2650B'

In 2003, Tel Aviv was declared a UNESCO world heritage site due to its outstanding cultural significance within the various trends of the Modern Movement in architecture and town planning in the early part of the 20th century. It is considered the largest urban concentration of the early International Style (UNESCO 2003). All in

all, 3,700 International Style buildings stand in Tel Aviv, 1,000 of which were selected for preservation. 190 buildings are under a high level of protection. (UNESCO 2003).

The UNESCO declaration also led to the implantation of a Conservation Plan created in order to rehabilitate the built fabric of the city. The starting point for the plan's creation was the need of the city to grow while keeping in mind the desire to conserve its historical heart. As most of the city's buildings are privately owned, the conservation regulations are designed to enable residents to afford the relatively high price of the conservation process. By granting additional building rights on the rooftops of listed buildings, revenues from the additional areas cover the cost of renovation. Together with UNESCO in 2003, a system of "building transfer right" (TDR) was authorized, permitting, to secure the conservation of the historical building (altogether 190 buildings).

In practice, building rights can add up to three floors, depending on criteria specific to each site. In addition to the obligations of the owners to renovate the building according to strict conservation regulations, they are also obliged to reinforce it against earthquakes and add a shelter room. As Tel Aviv is located on the African-Syrian rift, it could face massive earthquakes that threaten to destroy many of its buildings. The granting of additional construction rights is conditioned on the reinforcement of existing structures, preparing, and protecting them from this danger. Another reason for the reinforcement is the constant threat of missile attacks. To protect civilians, each individual apartment receives an additional reinforced shelter room preferably added in the form of a shaft in the back of the building that cannot be seen from the front. The two predominant conservation challenges are: natural disasters, and ways to promote positive heritage mentalities. Some conservation purists are surely raising their eyebrows at this "topping up" process of the Tel Aviv apartment buildings, yet the Tel Aviv municipality is bravely resisting enormous pressure from real estate giants by relegating high rises to areas outside the listed zones. It is paying a high price for trying to conserve its historical center. Investors are suing the municipality for over 2 billion US-Dollars in compensation for real estate value loss, arguing that the approval of the conservation plan resulted in an immense loss of the property's value.

When planning the building additions, the task of the architect is anything but easy. He or she has to keep in mind that modernist architecture attached immense importance to the proportions of buildings. Some of the buildings get up to three more floors, sometimes doubling their height. If the addition is built in the same style as the original building, the delicate horizontal proportions are in danger of being lost. Imitating the original style would also make it impossible to distinguish between the original building and its new addition. On the other hand, if all new additions are created in a different architectural style, this novel "upper city" would soon dominate and overwhelm the historical buildings on the lower floors. Since every building in Tel Aviv has its unique character, the original proportions of the

building, as well as its particular position on the plot, must be carefully analyzed before understanding its essence – this is key to designing its extension.

Tel Aviv needs to respond to the needs of modern-day Israel, which has the fastest growing population in the OECD. While there are numerous problems with the new urban masterplan, it does provide the carefully calibrated answers to today's pressures and necessities. Israel is a very young country, still fighting for its very survival. To many, preserving its heritage, especially that of modernism (which not necessarily everyone finds aesthetically pleasing), seems like a luxury, especially in light of the existential threats facing the state. Nonetheless, the conservation plan upholds the unique ideas of the Scottish planner and anthropologist Sir Patrick Geddes (1854–1934) on urbanism and the proportions of the modern city, while allowing for renewal and new development. The heart of the city does not have the privilege of becoming a museum of architecture, but has to continue to serve as the living tissue of Israel's most important metropolis, which keeps on growing and adapting to the needs of contemporary society.

Since the approval of the local municipal conservation plan 2650B' in 2008, which followed the UNESCO nomination of the White City as a World Heritage site, an immense wave of conservation of historic buildings has swept the city. This usually includes the construction of a new layer in the form of up to three floors on top of the historic buildings, as permitted by the conservation plan. After this first intense wave of what the municipality itself refers to as "city regeneration", the time has come to critically reflect upon the construction mass resulting from the conservation plan. This should be done both in a tangible sense – assessing the built mass added to the historic city aesthetically and examining its effect on the city's skyline, and in the sense of the intangible social structure of the city – assessing the plan's influence on the acceleration of gentrification processes and the change of the community character.

The aesthetic result of building additions on top of modernist buildings, which can add up to 2.5 stories on top of the original 3, is sometimes very confusing, as by nature the vernacular modernist buildings were planned to suit local social and climatic conditions. They were proportioned mainly by the refined distribution of the building's mass on the plot in order to best perform climatically, while reducing unnecessary building elements to serve the ideology of "Less is more" which the modernist style is constructed upon. Perhaps the most dominant element of the local Levantine buildings are the long strips of balconies sometimes acting as a second skin or an exterior envelope in order to adjust the heat resulting from direct sun penetration from the exterior facade. The resulting horizontal emphasis created by the prolonged external balconies influences the general appearance of the city.

What is then the result when a carefully proportioned horizontal building is prolonged vertically? Not forgetting also the original garden city plan which the city was constructed on, which originally carefully calculated the amount of light that can en-

ter the street considering the width of the city and its relation to the height of the buildings. What happens then when this balance is replanned both in terms of a particular building and in terms of its broader influence on the urban tissue at large? The Spatial attributes of the city as a living space and its built fabric often reflect on the physical monument alone. In the process of conserving the building and the many details of refurbishment during the years and readaptation to the living standards of our century, no doubt one can dedicate endless resources on to making the most perfect building (subjectively of course in the eyes of the architect involved in the process of refurbishment). While the current global agenda is urging planners to address these matters in a much broader perspective, the city is first and foremost the sum of all of its individual elements.

It might be that the urban environment, including its built mass, should be analyzed according to the pattern of the natural selection that species exert on one another, rather than according to the standard top-down processes of municipal decision making regarding plans, which then produce capital-driven blockchains of stakeholders, investors, banks, architects, and the tenant. The latter oftentimes comes from a different socio-economic group and is not necessarily part of the existing community. Conservation efforts, therefore, should prioritize inclusion, taking into consideration the community living in the buildings and their intangible impact on the built heritage, in order to tell an accurate and comprehensive story and to remain relevant.

Another rather positive impact that the local conservation plan 2650B' has had on the city, by conserving the great mass of the original building fabric, is linked to the international debate around Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In the Anthropocene Epoch we are facing, conservation must be made sustainable. Existing buildings are inherently "greener" when compared to demolishing old buildings and constructing new ones, as green as they might be. The impact of demolishing an old building by tearing it down, trashing the debris, clearing the site, crafting new materials, and putting up a replacement from scratch is worse than simply retrofitting an existing building. It was also proven that the historic fabric of a city creates economically vital, socially equitable, and strong, resilient neighborhoods, as the affiliation of the community to its urban landscape is an anchor point of social identity. The case of the White City of Tel Aviv as a lively urban tissue represents a modern approach to conservation, balancing between, on the one hand, the need to develop and adapt, and on the other, respecting the values of the city's outstanding historical significance and using it as a leverage.

German-Israeli cooperation: The Liebling-House – White City Center

In 2015, in cooperation with the federal German government, the city of Tel Aviv-Yafo created the White City Center, to implement the historic urban landscape approach.[1] This holistic approach is the local answer to the management plan of the declared UNESCO heritage site of Tel Aviv, viewing the ensemble as connected to all layers of the city, while taking into account the socio-economic aspects of the growing metropolis. The center is situated in the Max-Liebling-House, a listed typical modernist residential building in the heart of the city, built by Architect Dov Karmi in 1936 for Max and Tony Liebling (Federal Institute for Research 2015). The center that opened in 2019 is a one stop shop for all aspects connected to the heritage of the UNESCO declared heritage zone. (Fig. 2) It houses an information space for visitors with a small cafe and shop, a community garden, a research hub, a space for workshops, a residency program, and a space for changing contemporary exhibitions dealing with aspects of conservation within a wider range. Even during its renovation, the Max-Liebling-House, the future White City Center, became the site for a live performance, a showcase and a lab, exposing the layers of the building, its conservation process and traditional craftsmanship to the public, with the aim of promoting a better understanding of the values of modernist architecture. The Liebling-House was open during the whole time of renovation and invited the public to visit its rooms in a series of lectures, tours, and art shows that offered a new perspective. Each month offered a public program which was devoted to the different sections of the house. In this context, a real time *Bauhütte* (German for working site) put into effect a professional exchange in the field of conservation. As a special proof of the validity of a transnational heritage, the 2018 project *Open for Renovation* brought together craftsmen from both Israel and Germany to work together on the building site and perform a best practice, using knowledge from Germany by bringing traditional masters of crafts with their apprentices to work on site together with Israeli workers. The encounter made it clear that the exchange went both ways, as Tel Aviv has plenty of original untouched traditional modernistic material to work on, which oftentimes is not so accessible in Germany (Sto Foundation 2019).

An important element of the White City Center for visitors today is the permanent exhibition on the ground floor of the building. It leads chronologically through the history of the White City, also hinting at the site's former use as a residential building and discussing the future of cultural heritage. This floor also houses a coffee shop and a workshop for children. On the first floor, the front four-room apartment serves as a research lab in the original room layout.

1 The German government is supporting the city of Tel Aviv-Yafo and the White City Center with a total of 2.8 million euros until 2025 (Brandes 2015).

Fig. 1: Villeroy & Boch tile in the restored staircase of the Liebling Haus in Tel Aviv (Copyright: Yael Schmidt/Liebling Haus – White City Center Tel Aviv)

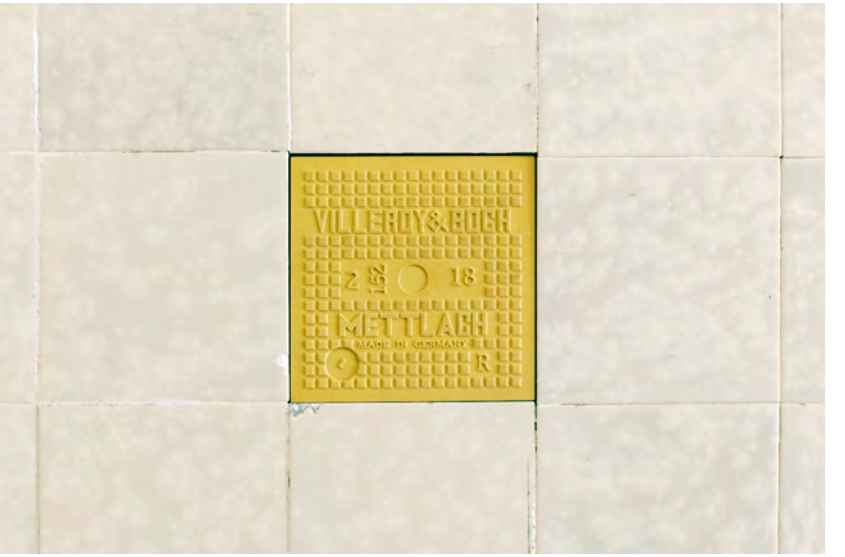

Fig. 2: Contact point for world heritage: The White City Center in the restored Liebling Haus (Copyright: Yael Schmidt/Liebling Haus – White City Center Tel Aviv)

On the second floor the space is used for a residency and a gallery space for contemporary art projects related to the city; this floor is also a showcase for the original room layout where some original remans can be viewed. A kitchen based on a European model was preserved. A second, original Frankfurt kitchen from the collection of the *Ernst May Society* in Frankfurt on the Main reached the White City Center in 2021 as a gift, as part of the 40-year partnership between the two cities (Janovic' 2021).

Three years after its opening, the center has become a focal point for the urban scene of culture enthusiasts in Tel Aviv. They use the café, imbued with the atmosphere of the Liebling-House, as a place to hang out and a modern workplace. The café also cultivates intangible heritage: it offers *Strudel* baked according to the recipe from the preserved house cookbook of the Scheuer family, who once lived here (Schönwetter 2019).

Shared heritage? Some preliminary conclusions

The heart of Tel Aviv's city was in fact built mainly by German speaking immigrants fleeing Europe, using German knowhow, and implementing German building material. One can hence obviously argue that the heritage is a shared German Israeli one. Moreover, like in many other cities of modern times, where this kind of "new objectivity" as an architectural style was colonial, here as well it was built prior to the establishment of the state of Israel, and can even be considered British in a sense. One example of British influence among many is the garden city plan designed by Sir Patrick Geddes, on which the historic city's masterplan is based.

However, one could also argue the opposite, separating the local tradition from the immigrants' cultural influences. In building a new home for themselves in the Levant, choosing the *Neue Sachlichkeit* as a style helped the immigrants differentiate themselves from the common traditional vernacular Arab building style on the one hand, and from the traditional German *Heimat Style* common in their homeland on the other. The Bauhaus Style among other progressive modern art doctrines was considered in Germany *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) and was banned by the Nazi regime on the grounds that such art was an "insult to German feeling", un-German, Jewish, or Communist in nature. Hence, the Jewish migrants fleeing the Nazi regime could easily connect to this modernistic world view, and use it in order to differentiate themselves from the German *Heimat* according to the *Zeitgeist* of this time.

Although many of the migrants without a doubt felt more connected to their German identity than to their Jewish roots, the harsh reality demanded a eurocentric Zionist hegemony and the invention of a "New Jew" (as described by Theodor Herzl in his novel *Altneuland* of 1902) inhabiting a new land and wishing to create a new

utopic Zionist reality also through a different built environment contributing to the formation of a new self-identity.

Moreover, the local Bauhaus Style cannot be referred to as purely German, as it adapted itself to the local and cultural conditions of the Levant, adapting to the surroundings of a different socio-geographic setting, and was also influenced by many other modern architects and modern styles from all over the world (for example the Dynamic Functionalism of Erich Mendelsohn or Le Corbusier's definition of modernism, to name just a few). Professionally one should refer to the style as the International Style, it represents an evolution of the modernist building language, creating a unique vernacular, functional doctrine of modernism that reflects the needs of a nation in the process of being born.

Heritage is unfortunately oftentimes caught between multiple interests of stakeholders. Sometimes it serves as a political tool in the hands of the government in order to narrate the nationalist agendas and implement them in the construction of the collective memories of the past. Here in Tel Aviv it is the tale of a group of migrants brutally torn away from their roots and deprived of their human rights. The story has a happy ending which is the creation of a vibrant metropole, worldly renowned for its quality of life. If the heritage is a shared one, what is the narrative from the German perspective? Is it the survival of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or perhaps the seeds of exalted ethical codes and the exploration of the liberal spirit which the Bauhaus school stood for – creating a better world for humanity through the implementation of mass production, and combining aesthetics with functional design – which have managed to flourish against all odds? Or is it an attempt to declare that the Nazi regime did not totally succeed in its nationalist agenda, as some seeds of a different German culture were transmitted through this dark chapter of history, to form an outstanding contemporary urban metropolis?

In conclusion, the historic urban landscape of Tel Aviv is a physical manifestation of a transnational, shared heritage. It stands for diverse international influences creating a new language of modernism suited to the Levant. Heritage should be first and foremost considered as a cultural common denominator, a public domain beyond boundaries and nationalities, a sign of a unique historical project reflecting the evolution of society in a given geographical area. Just as the Bauhaus school cultivated a pioneering spirit creating avant-garde solutions for contemporary problems, their legacy today is a sign for our civilization to collectively engage in the most profound challenge of our contemporary society: dealing with social injustice and with the exploitation of our planet's resources leading to a climate disaster.

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