

Green, White or Black City?

A Historical and Architectural Bauhaus Tour of Tel Aviv

A. History

Foundation

Tel Aviv was founded as a Jewish suburb of **Jaffa**, an Ottoman Turkish port city, in 1909, originally called **Ahuzat Bayt** (freely translated as “Homeowner’s Association”). The name Tel Aviv (“Spring Hill”) is likely a mistranslation of the designation of this area of grown-over dunes along the seashore in a local Arabic dialect, *tel al-rabey* “Grass Hill,” which in standard written Arabic would have meant “Spring Hill.” However, the prevalent folk etymologies of the name Tel Aviv connect it to the title of the first Hebrew translation of the Zionist novel *Old-New-Land* by leading early Zionist activist Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), as well as to a mentioning of the name in an unconnected context in the Bible (Yehezkel, 3:15). In ca. 1920-1950 Tel Aviv was separated from Jaffa administratively under the rule of the British Mandate in Palestine. Tel Aviv’s early buildings looked like typical Eastern European small town houses with their trademark red tile roofs against heavy rains and snow.

The “Eclectic” Boom (1920-1925)

In 1920 the population of Tel Aviv was 2,000, but in 1925 already 34,000, mainly due to the influx of World War I “Little Shoah” Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, as well as Jaffa’s Jews fleeing a wave of pogroms there in 1921. This first building boom was characterized by the “**Eclectic**” or “**Orientalist**” style, which tried to combine European and Middle Eastern architectural elements, such as arches, domes, ornamental tiles etc. The city administration also pursued the idea of the “**Green City**” or “**Garden City**,” in which 2-3 story buildings would be interspersed with boulevards and public parks.

An Early Depression (1926-1928)

In 1926-1928, the British Mandate of Palestine experienced an economic depression, since Jewish immigration nearly dried up due to the brief interwar economic boom worldwide, a short blossoming of democracy in Europe and the general improvement of the status of Jews in Diaspora countries.

The “Bauhaus” Boom (1929-1937)

The British Mandate in Palestine was one of the single exceptions of countries, which did not experience the world’s Great Depression of the 1930s, “thanks to” massive immigration of Jewish refugees from fascist Poland, Nazi Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union. In 1931-1937 almost 3,000 buildings were constructed in Tel Aviv (in the following eight years less than 1,000). The new building style was imported from the German “**Bauhaus**” Architectural Academy, where many Palestinian and German Jews or Communists from Jewish family backgrounds had studied. The Bauhaus Academy was effectively closed down by Nazi German authorities in 1933, and many of the architects, mainly men, but also several women, moved to the British Mandate of Palestine. Among others, it was due to the negative political connotations of the German language that they renamed their distinct style into the “**International Style**.”

The master plan during this period was provided by a Protestant-Christian, Scottish city planner Sir Patrick Geddes (1854- 1932), who put down strict rules to preserve and develop the concept of the “Garden City.” His city limits, the Yarkon River in the North and Ibn Gvirol Street in the East, are still seen as the “real” city boundaries of many old and new Tel Avivians today.

B. Architecture

Some principles of the Bauhaus style:

- *Cheap*: plain, geometrical facades and compact, symmetrical floor plans, that made for cheaper buildings, needed due to the economic misery of the refugees
- *Adaptation to the surroundings*: white facades that reflected the sun, shades over the windows and large balconies, that kept the buildings cooler in the intensive summer heat of the region and allowed for “outdoor living” in the evenings
- *Reflection of Communist political principles*: industrial windows, especially in the staircases, as well as flat roofs for the common use of all residents, reflecting Communist ideas of “the beauty of labor,” as well as communalism.

C. The Long-Term Architectural Impact of Bauhaus

A strong influence of the Bauhaus style can be traced also in the building boom of the 1950s. Jewish militia had expelled tens of thousands of Muslims and Christians from Jaffa during the 1948 war, but several thousand Muslim and Christian refugees, whose villages were razed by the Israeli army in the Galilee, were resettled in the city. In the 1950s, the new State of Israel was also flooded with European Jewish Holocaust survivors and Jewish refugees from Arab states. By the end of the 1950s re-combined Tel Aviv – Jaffa reached a population of 130,000.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Bauhaus resurfaced as an economic boom following the Peace Accords of Israel with Egypt, Jordan and the PLO combined with the postmodernist trend that emphasized the value of historical and local styles. Today, many modern buildings in Tel-Aviv-Jaffa integrate Bauhaus architectural elements or at least continue some of its principles, e.g. by using tiles on the façade (to avoid frequent repainting and keep the buildings cooler). The current city population is ca. 380,000 (ca. 5% of Israel’s population), or including its agglomeration (“**Gush Dan**”) ca. 3,000,000 (ca. 40% of Israel’s population).

D. Preservation and Debate

Of ca. 4,000 surviving Bauhaus buildings in Tel Aviv – Jaffa (the largest such concentration in the world), some 1,000 have been earmarked for preservation and declared the “**White City**” World Heritage Site by the United Nation’s Cultural Organization, UNESCO. In the wake of this declaration a significant number of preserved buildings were immediately razed by their owners, who feared high restoration and maintenance costs, especially since the Tel Aviv – Jaffa municipality offers no financial incentives for owners of preserved buildings, in contrast to worldwide standards.

The name “White City” itself has led to fierce polemic debate, with intellectuals arguing that this was a racist designation, which did not reflect the color of the buildings, but the municipality’s preference for the “white” Ashkenazi, secular-Jewish population segments. The label “White City” was allegedly used to suppress the memory of Tel Aviv’s *alter ego*, the “**Black City**” – which some see as being solidly Mizrahi-Jewish and Israeli-Arab (“black-skinned”) Jaffa, but others as mostly Palestinian-Arab and Haredi-Jewish (“black-hat”) Jerusalem.

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