

BAUHAUS TEL AVIV

By Paul Kearns

It is a well-worn architectural quip in Tel Aviv that the Bauhaus ‘White City of Tel Aviv’ doesn’t actually have any Bauhaus buildings at all, but rather that this UNESCO World Heritage City of the Modern Movement was built entirely in the International Style. While ‘Bauhaus’ will always remain the school and ‘International Style’ the architectural expression, the terms are used here somewhat loosely and for those interested in the Modern Movement, the city of Tel Aviv is simply an architectural wonderland.



In 2003 UNESCO declared The White City Tel Aviv a World Heritage Site. [1] The concentration of buildings, their centrality and vitality – 65,000 people live in the UNESCO designated area at the heart of the city – distinguishes ‘The White City’ from other global pockets of International Style architecture. It is this density, vibrancy and, according to the book The White City of Tel Aviv, A World Heritage Site (2004), the “extent of the site and its stylistic homogeneity and completeness” located at the centre of a city metropolis that was fundamental to informing the designation.

The ‘White City’ is also considered to be a unique laboratory of experimentation and expression of the International Style, an architectural “meeting point of different factions of the Modern Movement” (The White City of Tel Aviv, 2004). The principal Tel Aviv Bauhaus architects were Arie Sharon, Joseph Neufeld, Carl Rubin Shmuel Miestchkin, Shlomo Bernstein and Dov Karmi. Both Rubin and Neufeld worked with Erich Mendelsohn in Berlin. Arie Sharon studied at the Bauhaus in Dessau under Walter Gropius and Hannes Meyer. Miestchkin and Bernstein also studied in Dessau under Mies Van de Rohe. Following the abrupt closure of the Bauhaus schools by the Nazis in the early 1930s, these architects returned to British Mandate Palestine to design and build what was to become the greatest collection and concentration of “International Style” buildings to be found anywhere in the world. Thus 1930s European political turmoil, an influx of Jewish immigration, International Modernism, Zionism, and the rather prosaic local practical need for a stripped down construction technique, all combined to provide the context for this unique laboratory of simplicity and minimalism in design and construction materials. The result is Bauhaus or International Style Tel Aviv.

It is this Central European and Middle Eastern fused heritage which has given rise to the distinctive architectural Tel Aviv expression. The International Style’s extensive use of glass, which doesn’t easily allow for regulation of strong light and high temperatures, was abandoned in favour of open balcony and doorways. The diversity and playfulness in form of open balcony expression is perhaps one of the most delightful and iconographic characteristic of Bauhaus Tel Aviv. The authenticity of materials and workmanship in plaster, carpentry, stone

terrazzo and ironwork, in particular the variety of design and execution of internal communal balcony balustrades, stairwells banisters, are fundamental to an appreciation and understanding of Bauhaus Tel Aviv. Walking from ‘house’ to ‘house’ in many parts of the city today, it is possible to gain entry through open doorways to tour communal interiors. Bauhaus Tel Aviv was largely a privately funded, speculative developer driven adventure. There were few civic or public buildings built in the 1930s. Architects found expression on

individual housing plots, housed albeit within the overall framework of the Sir Patrick Geddes Town Plan for the City. Whilst fundamental in determining the grain and layout of the city, the Geddes Plan did not prescribe or directly suggest architectural form. Combined with International Style architectural expression, it generated a city of three and four-storey single cube-like blocks, sitting in pocket gardens arranged in a giant mosaic of carefully and methodically planned sequence of hierarchical private and public spaces parks and boulevards. Tel Aviv is an extraordinarily leafy and green city today. The density of tree planting in the 1930s has matured to generate one of the most pleasant and high density liveable urban environments. Today Tel Aviv’s liveable urbanism, however, owes as much to 21st century municipal ambition as it does to 1930s architectural and planning vision. The branding concept of the ‘White City’ is somewhat a recent invention, the city’s International Style architectural heritage was in effect rediscovered in the past 20 years or so.

By the late 1970s the magnificence of the architectural achievements of the 1930s had become increasingly eroded. Urban hollowing and suburbanisation, the arrival of the now ubiquitous air conditioner attached to façades, an ageing city centre population and a high ratio of rent controlled apartments all combined to undermine Bauhaus consciousness and investment in renovating the built physical fabric. Many if not most buildings were in poor condition. A change in attitudes, in part driven by a reaction to proposed demolition plans, led to a growing understanding and recognition of the wealth and importance of the local architectural heritage. In 1984 Tel Aviv’s premier art museum hosted a seminal exhibition titled White City, International Style Architecture in Israel, Portrait of an Era. The concept ‘Tel Aviv - The White City’ was born.

The city’s architectural heritage was championed over the next decade and beyond by Nitza Szmuk (City Conservation Architect) with vocal support from by Esther Zanberg (Journalist with Haaretz). In 1994 Tel Aviv Municipality organised a DOCOMOMO and UNESCO sponsored international conference on “the values of the Modern

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Movement in architecture and the International Style in Tel Aviv.” Five years later, the 12th International ICOMOS-UNESCO congress recommended that the Tel Aviv Municipality propose “The White City” as a World Heritage Site with formal UNESCO adoption in 2003.

Whilst generally hailed as a huge success – particularly from conservation, urban regeneration and city branding perspectives – the rediscovery of the White City of Bauhaus Tel Aviv in the 1980s has not been without local critics. Sharon Rotbard a respected Tel Aviv architectural academic, in his book White City - Black City (2005) is scathing of the consensus narrative of Tel Aviv’s emergence out of the empty sand dunes adjacent the Palestinian port city of Jaffa.

Perhaps a more common local criticism is that the UNESCO designation has been responsible for the gentrification of the city core. Property prices, in particular much sought after renovated International Style apartments, have soared some 70% since designation in 2003. This is somewhat an unfair criticism. UNESCO designation cannot be faulted for any Municipal or State failure to deliver an adequate supply of socially affordable housing. Whilst it is difficult to attribute the housing price boom primarily to the UNESCO designation (The Israeli economy has had robust growth over the past decade), what is not in doubt is that the city core has increasingly become the preserve of the well-off. “Owning a little piece of Bauhaus Tel Aviv” is a typical marketing tool of the local real estate market. Living in the heart of the (White) city has become the default choice of the local wealthy elite.

The construction of tall buildings is also not without controversy. “Tall building” is a relative term. In Tel Aviv there are already a dozen buildings over 40 storeys with plans to build many more. Many were proposed before

but built after designation. Others, including some located on the very fringes of the UNESCO designated area (the 37-storey Richard Meier tower on Rothschild Boulevard) are currently under construction. A recently completed 28-storey tower designed by local architects Moore Yaski Sivan has been disparagingly dubbed “The World’s First Bauhaus Tower” on account of its self conscious curved corners, inspired say the architects by the tradition of local Bauhaus some 24 storeys below.

The interests (or at least an astute understanding of the interests) of “real estate” has however driven the entire conservation strategy. Municipal funding for conservation led restoration was and remains minimal. This is a highly regulated but nevertheless private sector driven regeneration. Material modifications and substantial extensions to UNESCO designated International Style buildings are not simply tolerated, they form the heart of the original and ongoing conservation driven urban regeneration.

A precursor to UNESCO designation was the critical success of the Municipal “Lev Ha’yir” (City Core) 1990s approved plan that allowed for the construction of two-and-a-half additional stories on buildings that were over three stories high, upon condition that original building be fully renovated. The architectural and conservation outcomes have, for the most part, been considered successful. The urban core of the city has been transformed. It perhaps may intrigue the architectural-planning profession in Ireland that it was the Conservation Department of Tel Aviv that initiated and drove this innovative and radically pro-development regeneration strategy.

UNESCO Lessons for Dublin Georgian Dublin, or “The Historic City of Dublin” to be exact, is currently on the “Tentative List” for UNESCO Designation – an inventory of those properties which a country intends

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2. XXXXXXXX
3. XXXXXXXX
4. XXXXXXXX
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to consider for nomination to the World Heritage List. In October 2008, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government had set up an Expert Advisory Group to review Ireland’s Tentative List of properties for future nomination to the World Heritage List. The review was undertaken during 2008 and 2009, when the Group considered which properties best met the criteria required for inscription on the World Heritage List. The lessons for Dublin from the Tel Aviv UNESCO experience are multiple. They include the importance of popularising and democratising the architectural heritage “story” prior to designation. This took time in Tel Aviv, but when successfully done, gives meaning and a sense of civic ownership of the architectural value of the story being told. It also assisted in embedding a successful branding strategy for the city (i.e. Tel Aviv - The White City).

It may also be of particular interest to some who may fear that UNESCO designation will put into place undesirable statutory barriers to the further positive physical development of the city, that the Tel Aviv skyline (for good or ill) has been dramatically transformed by taller buildings, a skyline that is continuing to evolve since the designation was awarded. The UNESCO terms of contract permitted “taller buildings” outside, but on the edge of the designated area. A UNESCO status for Dublin, underpinned by a residential vision provides a significant branding opportunity for Dublin city. Dublin’s Georgian ‘redbricks’ along Upper Mount Street may, in time, become the fashionable equivalent of the ‘brownstones’ New York.