

UPDATING THE URBAN LANDSCAPE

» *By Harel Nir*

When travelling abroad, Israelis tend to make a negative comparison between the sorry look of our cities and the cities in Europe and North America. Most major cities in Europe and North America are very well kept. They have attractive boulevards and squares, well-maintained buildings, diverse architectural styles and many historical structures.

During the nearly 30 years of the British Mandate of Palestine, the authorities made sure that the cities in what is now Israel were well planned and well maintained. The three major cities were Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa. In Jerusalem, the first British city governor, Sir Ronald Henry Amherst Storrs, decreed that all the buildings would be built of Jerusalem stone, something that gave Jerusalem a very unique look.

In Tel Aviv, the mandatory authorities commissioned renowned city planner Sir Patrick Geddes to plan the new city. He created a revolutionary garden city of wide avenues such as Dizengoff, Chen and Keren Kayemet (now Ben-Gurion); well-designed buildings such as the use of the Bauhaus style; and single apartment buildings with small gardens, in contrast to the European style of apartment buildings joined in a continuous row that spanned the entire length of the street.

In the seaside mountain city of Haifa, it was Richard Kaufman who designed the new Haifa, namely the Hadar

Hacarmel and Carmel neighborhoods, which were built and planned in a unique hilly Bauhaus style.

However, all this changed after the establishment of the State of Israel. In 1948, there were only 10 towns in Israel and only one, Tel Aviv, with more than 100,000 inhabitants. This had to change quickly. The new state with only 650,000 inhabitants tripled in size in less than five years. It had absorbed hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees from post WW II from the shattered continental Europe, as well as the Jews expelled from countries such as Iraq and Yemen. In those years, city planning and attractive architecture took a back seat. Of prime importance was the construction of new homes as quickly as possible for the influx of newcomers. This meant, among other things, building new cities in the peripheral areas such as Ma'alot and Shlomi in the North and Yeroham and Dimona in the South. Cities such as Tel Aviv, Ramat Gan and Hezliya were rapidly expanded, as were the practically unplanned or badly planned small rural communities (moshavim) such as Rishon Lezion, Petah Tikva and Zichron Ya'acov. Because speed was of the essence, these new towns and neighborhoods looked like bad copies of each other. Take a stroll along Herzl Street in Netanya or Herzl Street in Petah Tikva or Rehovot, and you will be walking on virtually the same street. The architectural styles are boring and repetitive. At times, there is no logical connection between the various neighborhoods and their contexts.

I believe that urban renewal programs will go a long way toward resolving some of these



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problems. But that in itself is not enough. In addition to urban renewal programs, the municipal authorities, with financial help from the central government, will have to initiate widespread programs of infrastructural upgrading of streets and sidewalks, sewage and water pipes, electrical cables, etc. The municipal authorities will have to make sure that all new construction does not clash with each other. The buildings should be of more or less regular height, with varied architectural styles that complement each other, as well as a wealth of green spaces.

In the not so distant past, there was the misconception that high-rises were undesirable and that urban entities should be as uncrowded as possible. This perception no longer prevails, evidenced by the large number of high-rise buildings that abound in Israel.

It is not only erroneous but also impractical. With an area of 21,000 square kilometers and a population of nine million and growing, Israel is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. High-rise buildings are a necessity. If we do not build high-rises, which in essence means that the number of apartments in each square kilometer remains small, eventually cities will be drastically overcrowded with no room for green spaces, decent roads or even streets.

Today, the Geddes concept of the garden city of low-rise two- and three-story buildings is still a very attractive urban model. However, under the current circumstances, it is not practical. It is not practical in a crowded country like Israel, and it is not practical in a global environment of mega metropolises with tens of millions of inhabitants such as Mumbai, Mexico City and Cairo.

Building high-rises requires stricter planning rules. It also requires a great degree of technology. Building a two- or three-story apartment building is a relatively simple affair. It does not require elaborate machinery. Not so with a high-rise apartment building. In Israel, the tallest residential tower is just over 60 stories, while in Dubai, Malaya and China, buildings of well over 150 stories are the norm. These buildings require hi-tech equipment. The higher the building, the more elaborate the technology. For example, a 50-story building may have more than 200 apartments that accommodate some 1,000 residents who must be supplied with the services and facilities for a high-quality standard of living. They require state-of-the-art elevators, an elaborate electrical network, an efficient water and sewage system, not to mention safety features such as fire fighting equipment. ■

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