

EXHIBITION REVIEW

The White City of Tel Aviv-Tel Aviv's Modern Movement

Curator: Nitza Szmuk

Architekturzentrum Wien (AzW)

21 February to 19 May 2008

At its current stop in the Architekturzentrum Wien (AzW), the travelling exhibition *The White City of Tel Aviv – Tel Aviv's Modern Movement* is being shown for the first time in a German-speaking country. The exhibition offers insights into the Israeli city's building history by presenting its architectural heritage as well as measures for its preservation.

After its foundation as a garden suburb of Jaffa in 1909 the young settlement Tel Aviv grew rapidly due to immense Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe and, beginning in 1933, from Germany. While the first buildings were erected in an eclectic manner striving for a synthesis of European-historicized and oriental forms, it was the International Style that emerged as the city's architectural *lingua franca*. Though architects like Erich Mendelsohn and Arthur Korn already had proposed the forms of *Neues Bauen* for Zionist colonization as early as 1923, architectural modernism was definitely established from the 1930s on by immigrating and returning Jewish architects educated in Germany, Austria, France or Belgium. Based on a masterplan developed in 1925 by the Scottish urbanist Sir Patrick Geddes, these architects applied different European traditions of modernism adapting them to local (climatic) conditions. As a result, Tel Aviv became an experimental zone for the functionalist style with a unique inner-city ensemble of about four thousand apartment and business buildings whose color inspired the nickname "White City." Since July 2003 parts of Tel Aviv's city center are listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

View of the exhibition *The White City of Tel Aviv-Tel Aviv's Modern Movement*
Architekturzentrum Wien (AzW)
Photograph: © Pes Hejduk



View of the exhibition *The White City of Tel Aviv-Tel Aviv's Modern Movement*
Architekturzentrum Wien (AzW)
Photograph: © Pes Hejduk



Organized in 2004 by the City of Tel Aviv and curated by Nitza Metzger-Szmuk, teacher of building conservation at the Faculty of Architecture in Haifa and author of the dossier for the UNESCO list, the exhibition in AzW's Old Hall consists of several sections focusing on different aspects of the "White City." The principal medium of presentation is large-scale photographs illustrating the historical and current state of the modernist structures. In addition, films – such as contemporary footage, television documentaries, and the presentation video for UNESCO – as well as LCD projections, animated 3-D graphics, architectural models and city maps contribute to the visualization of the topic. Beginning with the European influences – in particular Le Corbusier, Erich Mendelsohn and the Bauhaus – the exhibition analyzes eleven representative buildings erected between 1931 and 1959. Furthermore, seventy-eight architects who worked in Tel Aviv in the 1930s – such as Erich Mendelsohn, Richard Kauffmann and Arie Sharon – are vividly introduced in short biographies organized by country of origin and place of training. A separate section is dedicated to the Geddes plan and the subsequent development of the city structure with its characteristic free-standing apartment houses. Here, architectural models illustrate the hierarchic road grid consisting of four different types of streets. Particularly suggestive are photographic documentations of balconies, staircases and windows directing the visitor's attention to design details and to characteristic surface treatments. Reports on the preservation of the unique inner-city ensemble complete the exhibition.

The show is an additional contribution to the rediscovery of the modern architectural heritage in Tel Aviv – a topic treated for the first time in 1984 with the Israeli exhibition *White City* curated by Michael Levin and further explored in 1993-94 with the German exhibition project *Tel Aviv. Neues Bauen 1930-1939* led by Winfried Nerdinger. Though the original thematic consistency of the exhibition was altered when adjusted to the AzW premises, the quality of this very graphic, visual and comprehensible show is not diminished. The AzW deserves much credit for having developed a substantial supporting program exploring questions surrounding the emigration and expulsion of Austrian Jewish architects after 1938. The program also featured a two-day symposium entitled "Renovating the Modern Heritage" in April 2008 – co-organized by the Austrian Bundesdenkmalamt – which focused on the preservation of modernist structures in Tel Aviv and elsewhere.

View of the exhibition *The White City of Tel Aviv-Tel Aviv's Modern Movement*
Architekturzentrum Wien (AzW)
Photograph: © Pes Hejduk



View of the exhibition *The White City of Tel Aviv-Tel Aviv's Modern Movement*
Architekturzentrum Wien (AzW)
Photograph: © Pes Hejduk



Publications related to the exhibition:

A richly illustrated French-English publication by Nitza Metzger-Szmuk – based on a 1994 Hebrew publication by the same author – serves as exhibition catalogue. Furthermore, the AzW has published a special issue of its quarterly journal *Hintergrund* including texts by Ita Heinze-Greenberg, Jeremie Hoffmann and Pe'era Goldman:

Nitza Metzger-Szmuk. *Dwelling on the Dunes. Tel Aviv – Modern Movement and Bauhaus Ideals*. Paris, Tel Aviv: Éditions de l'Éclat, 2004, 447pp., € 65, ISBN 978-2-8416-2077-7

Gabriele Kaiser and Sonja Pisarik, eds. "Tel Aviv." Special issue, *Hintergrund* 38, Vienna: Architekturzentrum Wien, 2008, 96pp., € 7, ISBN 3-9502423-2-4

Andreas Zeese
[Technische Universität Wien]