

## Tel Aviv. Tracing the Ideal City dream

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### *Abstract*

*In descriptions of Tel Aviv often occur reflections about the ideal “first Hebrew city”. A gap between real Tel Aviv and its visionary model is a commonplace. Nevertheless, links between them are plentiful, although they are discussed either with irony or with pathos. The paper gives a cursory review of some of such links.*

*Keywords: Tel Aviv, garden city, modernism*

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### I

“...It is as if this style tells the story of the people who wanted to build here a new society - pure, simple, frugal - the antithesis of ostentation and extravagance. A style that constitutes a worldview rather than being its illustration; a style that suits the landscape, the dreams, the hopes, the noble ideals of the pure and simple.”

Dani Karavan<sup>1</sup>

Tel Aviv birth in 1909 and its further formation was impacted by Zionist, Garden City, and Modern Movements. Balancing between utopian and practical approach, the adherents of each of these movements had their own vision of the new settlements arrangement on the land of Palestine. Their texts were written as idealistic dreams, their planning ideas were full of white cities in greenery.

Did they really hope to build an ideal space? Did they succeed?

A present-day cityscape seems to contain too much negative images of shabby and overcrowded places af-

ter about a hundred years of Tel Aviv's growth, its “eclectic”, “white”, and “grey” periods. However, the city keeps many environmental and architectural clues to the ideals of its founders and planners. Some of them are obvious, and it is especially true for the modernist buildings of the so called White City of Tel Aviv; some, like landscaping and greenery structures, need to be rediscovered.

Studying physical realization of the past environmental ideas, interwoven in modern urban mosaic, is the main field of my research, but here I would like to shift the focus to the ideals, visions, and myths as such.

The analysis of city structures demands to separate intention and implementation, but it leads to discarding of the “non-implemented ideas”. For example, besides few certain episodes of Tel Aviv planning history, which were directly connected with Garden City theory, other decisions were so multi-stage and mediated, that the city was never mentioned as a Garden City study case. Yet many materials contain a lot of links, which cannot be attached to the pivotal event or location, but demonstrate that the Garden City ideas in different interpretations were in the air in early Tel Aviv history from its very beginning or even before.

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<sup>1</sup> Dani Karavan, in Nitza Metzger-Szmuk, *Des Maisons Sur Le Sable Tel Aviv: Mouvement Moderne Et Esprit Bauhaus*, 2004., 14.

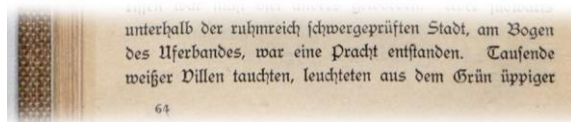
In addition to that, there is a corpus of so-to-say “untrustworthy evidences”, which is represented by staged photo chronicles, propaganda films, poetry, songs and paintings. That “Mythography of a City”, using the title of Maoz Azaryahu’s book,<sup>2</sup> had been lavishly created by “cultural agents”, using Tal Alon-Moses’s term.<sup>3</sup>

I will concentrate on two of Tel Aviv dreamed of features: white architecture and flourishing gardens – those essential visual characteristic of almost every self-respecting ideal city.

### “White city”

The cloud of intentional images apparently is formed around the Herzl’s 1902 vision of the Altneuland – new Jewish state and its futuristic cities:

“...Tausende weißer Villen tauchten, leuchteten aus dem Grün üppiger Gärten heraus. Von Jaffa bis an den Karmel schien da ein großer Garten angelegt zu sein, und der Berg selbst war auch gekrönt mit schimmernden Bauten.”<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 1.** Scan of Theodor Herzl’s Altneuland page

The novel is considered the most influential, yet not the single and even not the first one in “the plethora of Zionist utopian novels published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries”.<sup>5</sup> Among other Barbara Mann’s examples is “A Voyage to the Land of Israel in 2040” (1892) by Elhanan Leyb Levinski, and I like that modest “some” in his attempt to be more realistic:

“All the buildings are amazingly beautiful; some are built from white marble...”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Maoz Azaryahu, *Tel Aviv: Mythography of a City*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Tal Alon-Moses, *Landscape and Ideology: the Emergence of Vernacular Gardening Culture in Pre-state Israel*, 42, accessed January 14, 2017, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/250231586\\_Landscape\\_and\\_Ideology\\_the\\_Emergence\\_of\\_Vernacular\\_Gardening\\_Culture\\_in\\_Pre-state\\_Israel](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/250231586_Landscape_and_Ideology_the_Emergence_of_Vernacular_Gardening_Culture_in_Pre-state_Israel).

<sup>4</sup> Theodor Herzl, *Altneuland*, Hermann Seemann Nachfolger, Leipzig, 1902, 63-64.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara E. A Mann, *A Place in History: Modernism, Tel Aviv, and the Creation of Jewish Urban Space*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

So, «the city was imagined in various forms years before its establishment»<sup>7</sup> and then, “as a mythic construct, the First Hebrew City coincided with the foundational phase of Tel Aviv”<sup>8</sup>, and “at the very moment of its founding ... Tel Aviv began to construct for itself a coherent narrative describing and explaining the meaning of its origins to its citizens.”<sup>9</sup>

A core of the legend of Tel Aviv appearance is its birth “ex nixilo”. Later, when I turn to the garden city point, I will tell about some clues to that time of Tel Aviv, miraculously “flourishing on the empty sands”. Its “garden city dream” evidently drove city formation from the very beginning, but the “white city image” – for some period remained just the idealistic visual metaphor: “The “nothingness” on which Tel Aviv was founded undergirded the ultimate white utopia: it was a city with no prehistory – and therefore indisputably and authentically Zionist.”<sup>10</sup>

Young “little TelAviv” was motley and eclectic, but it seems that the dream continued to ripen. Shining on the Arie El-Hanani’s (Sapozhnikov) poster, white city of abstract geometrical forms amazingly preceded the coming of modernist architecture in the 30s.

The panoramic view on another poster, announcing the film ‘Terre promise’ (and in fact in the film ‘The Land of Promise’, 1935 itself), looks like a transition line from oriental and eclectic city to the modern one.

The same picture we can see on the Levant Fair 1934 archival photo (Fig. 4). The exhibition seems to be a kind of a full-scale model of the designed city, the premiere of the new townscape as a modernist Gesamtkunstwerk. The photo shows modernistic fair pavilions in the foreground and sporadically scattered little houses in the background.

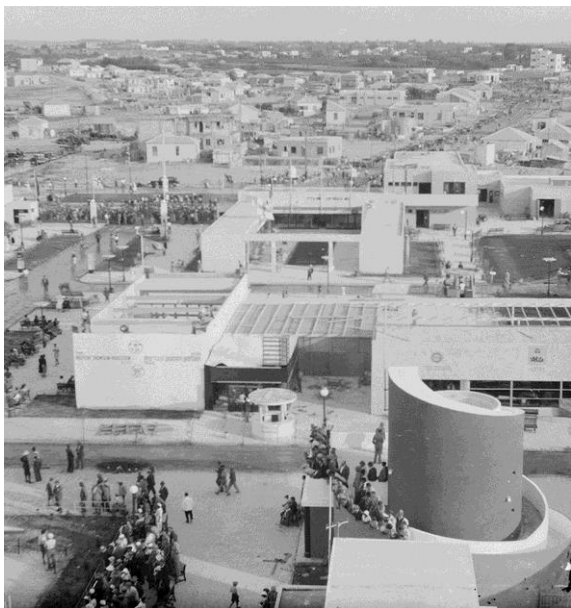
<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Azaryahu, *Tel Aviv: Mythography of a City*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Mann, *A Place in History*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Alona Nitzan-Shifan, *On Concrete and Stone: Shifts and Conflicts in Israeli Architecture*, in: *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (FALL 2009), 58.





**Figure 2.** Levant fair, 1934, Tel Aviv, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, [LC-DIG-matpc-13300]

Over the next few years an impressive amount of modern, even futuristic dwellings from the foreground would actually fill the north-ern part of Tel Aviv. That period from the 30s to 40s was the first time, when the imaginary picture of a new, pure, exemplary white city got its first real physical manifestation.

In 2003 the White City of Tel Aviv was claimed as UNESCO World Heritage site. This historical part of the city has been widely surveyed and described. The modernist city, built in the 30s–40s, was no longer a myth, but the mythologization of the White City has never stopped. In the 30s, the new city look has become a key motive of propaganda films, posters and photos.



**Figure 3.** view of Tel Aviv, thirties, source - Arieh Sharon, *Kibbutz + Bauhaus: An Architect's Way in a New Land*, Stuttgart, Kramer, 1976, 44

Since that, the iconic image of an ideal white city lived in parallel with the real one, sometimes coming closer, but mostly diverging quite significantly.

Two waves of public interest to the modernist architectural image of Tel Aviv, or the so-called “Bauhaus revival” of the 1980s and 2003, evoked some new phenomena – a kind of a “retrospective dream”. According to Maoz Azaryahu: “This phase of the mythic Tel Aviv is permeated with nostalgia, wherein the White City of Tel Aviv represents the city’s architectural heritage in the built landscape and the modernist legacy associated with it.”<sup>11</sup>

Zvi Efrat is telling about a “a tendency to ‘white-wash’ one period and dissolve the other”, and Alona Nitzan-Shiftan writes that “Tel Aviv - the first city built by Jews, and a purely “modern” city devoid of both Palestinians and reminders of the Orient – came to epitomize for Israelis a site of calm and nostalgic recollection. The modern age, ironically, has during the last two decades become the “good old days”; and this, in turn, has meant that the “history of modernism” is itself not without historiography ambivalence.”<sup>12</sup>

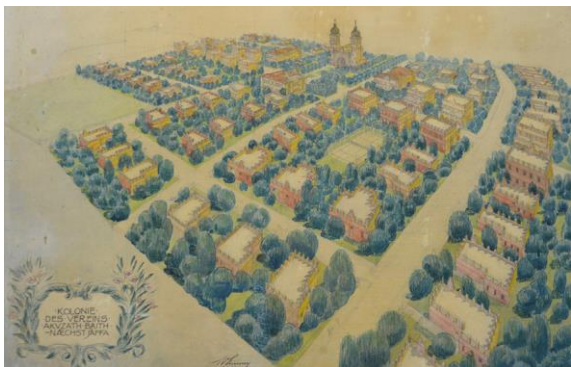
### “Garden city”

The agriculture and garden flourishing dream was the essential part of the Zionist utopia, hence it constantly accompanied the development of “the first Hebrew city”. Overwhelming majority of texts, plans, sketches were full of gardening intentions. Wilhelm Stiassny’s 1909 sketch and Patrick Geddes’ 1925 plan are the basic points of the Tel Aviv evolution; yet the first one is usually demonstrated as a non-implemented planning artifact, the second is widely mentioned as a significant stage of city development, but still often with the proviso about incomplete implementation of the plan.

<sup>11</sup> Azaryahu, *Tel Aviv: Mythography of a City*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Nitzan-Shiftan A, *On Concrete and Stone*, 58.





**Figure 4.** The Stiasny plan for Ahuzat Bayit, perspective drawing, April 1909. Source: TAMA

The final picture is a little paradoxical – the garden-city clues were rich and manifold, but most scholars do not recognize their legacy as something significant. Anyway, to build such more or less full picture and to tie these threads with the real city features is a main task in my research, which is more relevant to the size of a book. That is why for this article, which presents a cursory review of the “ideal space” intentions, I omitted many primary documentary sources and collected some traces of “Zionist city dream” from visionary texts, propaganda, and art.

I have mentioned above the main notional narrative about Tel Aviv, which mythically *grew out of the sands*. The moment of “plotting the sand field for growing a city” has its icon, a photo made by Avraham Soskin. By Barbara Mann’s opinion, this “famous photograph ... was a carefully staged portrait.”<sup>13</sup> Similar conclusion makes Tal Alon-Mozes, writing that the image of “white, virginal sand dunes on this photo ... did not capture the dense orange groves growing behind the dunes”, because that photo “served as a perfect setting for the Zionist myth of ‘making the desert bloom’, as a symbol of rootedness and prosperity”.<sup>14</sup>

Another symbol of the first years of Tel Aviv was “the Boulevard”, the second “main street” of the city nucleus consisting of a handful of houses. The mostly given explanation about the origin of Rothschild Boulevard is pragmatic: it is said that new settlement founders had set it up at the site unfit for building. Nevertheless, they began to chronicle Rothschild Boulevard from the very first days of its layout. It

doubtless was the showcase of the new town, and, what is important for my focus, – the statement about its intentions.



**Figure 5.** Rothschild Boulevard, 1913, Avraham Soskin, The Israel Internet Association via the PikiWiki, 49255



**Figure 6.** Rothschild Boulevard, circa 1930, the Israel Internet Association via the PikiWiki, 45653

Such artists as Reuven Rubin and Nahum Gutman, who was another city storywriter, or “story-painter”, also portrayed Rothschild Boulevard. Reuven Rubin lived on a new exemplary street, which was built in the 20s and led to the Town Hall. At the prestigious place next to was build the house of poet Bialik, one of the prominent “cultural agents”, who had helped to promote “the green vision for the first Hebrew town,” by Tal Alon-Mozes’s opinion. She writes: “The garden of the national poet Chaim Nachman Bialik ... constituted a living image of the green city.”<sup>15</sup>

Many texts by early pre-state Israeli visionary and planners were written as literary works. Even the official document, the Town Planning Report of Patrick Geddes of 1925, poetically described the garden future of Tel Aviv, which “can, and within a very few years become one of the most successful examples of the “Garden City” – a new type of civic group-

<sup>13</sup> Mann, A Place in History, 74.

<sup>14</sup> Tal Alon-Mozes, Rural ethos and urban development: the emergence of the first Hebrew town in modern Palestine, in: Research from the field. Planning Perspectives, 2011, 286.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 289.

ing in this respect at once more beautiful and more health giving than any previous form of large community in human annals".<sup>16</sup>

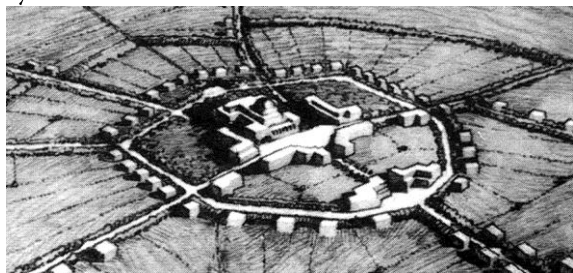
### White/Garden city

The most interesting thing is that both inspirations – the dreamed of white city and the gradually fostered garden city finally met in the 30s.

Although Tel Aviv was more or less developed basing on Geddes Plan, the German version of the Garden City movement with its inclining to functionality was even more influential for the Jewish immigrants, than the English theory. One of them, for example, was Richard Kauffmann, a very influential pre-state Israel planner, who had studied and worked in Germany before immigration. He planned modernist buildings and settlements and, according to the memoirs of his colleague, Lotte Cohn, "All of Kauffmann's suburban settlement plans included the label Ir-Ganim (Garden city), before they received an official name."<sup>17</sup>

Lotte Cohn wrote about using the word combination "Garden City":

"Kauffmann uses it, more for its propagandistic value than for its sociologist contents. He knows that this lacks the basis. But he takes over something else ... the new cities shall both include the residential developments that fit the modern requirements including, as the name already states, gardenlike grounds, they are to be light, hygienic and pleasant to the eye."<sup>18</sup>



**Figure 7.** Richard Kauffmann, perspective of Kfar Jecheskiel, Emek Yizrael, Palestine, 1922<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> PatrickGeddes, Town-Planning Report – Jaffa and Tel-Aviv, 43.

<sup>17</sup> Lotte Cohn, Richard Kauffmann Architect and City Planner, accessed January 14, 2017, <http://richardkauffmann.com/wordpress/biography>.

<sup>18</sup> L. Cohn, Richard Kauffmann Architect and City Planner.

<sup>19</sup> Source: Nitzan-Shiftan A., Epstein-Pliouchtch M. and Alon-Mozes T., Richard Kauffmann – Between architectural and national modernisms, in: Docomomo Journal, 2006, 65-69.

White modernist buildings in greenery became a new icon of a Zionist "ideal space", now inviting not only to realize it, but also to see it "being realized", - throughout the country and in its flagship, Tel Aviv.

No wonder that on meeting together two dreams "recalled its father" on the cover of 1941 edition of Theodor Herzl's "Altneuland" (Fig.8). It is designed in graphic style and we do not see white and green colors here, but a recognizable image of modernist Tel Aviv, which later will be called the White City, immersed in greenery under Herzl's blessing look, is quite clear.

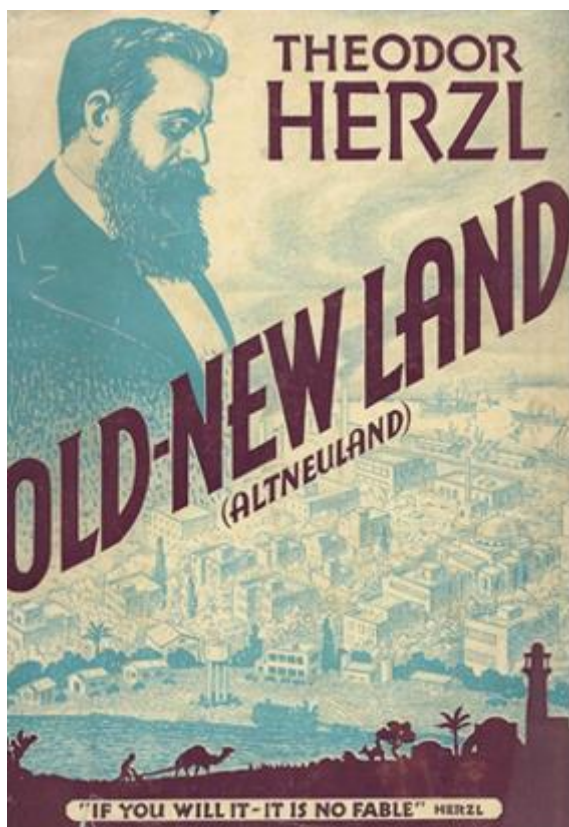
Scepsis and even irony of modern historians' approach, its demand to filter out the historical anecdotes, propagandistic tricks, and falsifications is necessary. This cover does not "prove" that Herzl planned the White City of Tel Aviv, the canonic photo of city foundation was staged, the Boulevard was set on a backfilled lowland and the Garden-City name was used first of all due to its magnetic amenity. Still, the words, images, and intentions were too closely interwoven with the process of physical creation of the city, coinciding too much with documents and deeds to be considered nothing than utopia.

Maos Azaryahu, to whom the term "mythic city" is central in his study about Tel Aviv, does not expose anything, but carefully examines it: "The mythic city consists of culturally shared notions about the city's essential character or constitutive idea. In this sense, it directs how people think about and make sense of the city"<sup>20</sup> and notes: "The myth provided the energy necessary to realize the vision in terms of buildings, streets, infrastructure, and public institutions."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Azaryahu, Tel Aviv: Mythography of a City, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 7.





**Figure 8.** The cover of Theodor Herzl' Old-New Land (Altneuland), Bloch Publishing, New York, 1941

Now let us turn for the first time herein to the realization. My investigation of “white” (Modern Movement) and “green” (Garden City) features of contemporary Tel Aviv buildings, streets and infrastructure went in parallel with cameral studying of researches and archival materials. Sometimes I have met something interesting in situ even before reading about its origin in the texts, however the background of some structures is still unclear. My summarized list of that features consists of:

- the principle of a detached house on every lot, surrounded by a garden
- boulevards
- “green gates”
- Geddes' “organic” parcellation, “home-blocks” with green spots in the middle, pedestrian lanes and wickets; “Acropolis site”, “wild flower park”
- low-raised residential houses, with a system of architectural extensions designed especially for interpenetration with nature and greenery arrangement

- entrance systems, designed as stages of light and garden visual perception<sup>22</sup>

Is Tel Aviv an Ideal City of Zionist dream? Is it as white as it is called? Can it be considered as a Garden City theory case? - It all is a subject for discussion. Ines Sonder, whose book was one of the richest with keys to my research, speaking about “Theodor Herzl's vision of town planning and publications by Zionist planners and architects, among them Davis Trietsch, Wilhelm Stiassny and Alex Baerwald”, wrote: “None of these visions were realized.”<sup>23</sup>

Concerning my own impression, I would say that the first question is beyond my competence; the second question may give cause for sarcastic comments, but aesthetically with every new proper renovated building, the modernist part of Tel Aviv becomes more and more white and impressive; and speaking about the third question, even if the real Tel Aviv does not correspond to the Garden City theory precisely, I am sure, that the Garden City idea was fundamental for its development. Its landscaping structures only need to be renovated and planted with greenery.

In conclusion, I will return to Azaryahu's discourse about mythography. He says: “Those who wrote about the city described what they expected to find”.<sup>24</sup> That is exactly how I see my research. Being a landscape designer and appreciating any public move toward turning our “Concrete Jungles” into flourishing urban spaces, I really was eager to find in Tel Aviv environmental history as much of “white” and “green” features, as I could. Nevertheless, Azaryahu continues: “The fact that descriptions of the city represent a bias also makes them a productive instrument for discussing the mythic city...Beyond the question that asks whether particular descriptions are credible and informative, their importance for the exploration of the mythic city' is that they present and represent fundamental notions about the city, thus asserting their cultural validity.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Segre A., Survey of entrance gardens in the White City (from Hebr. Maarochoth ha-cnisa ba'ir ha-levana), II vols., a report commissioned by Tel Aviv Conservation Department, 2015, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Sonder I., 5. Israel // L. Bigon, Y. Katz (ed.), Garden cities and colonial planning: Transnationality and urban ideas in Africa and Palestine, 2016, 124.

<sup>24</sup> Azaryahu, Tel Aviv: Mythography of a City, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.