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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“...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

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 after 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.

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, had been lavishly created by “cultural agents”, using Tal Alon-Moses’s term. 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.”

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”. 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...”

5 Theodor Herzl., Altneuland, Hermann Seemann Nachfolger, Leipzig, 1902, 63-64.
7 Ibid.
8 Azaryahu, Tel Aviv: Mythography of a City, 7.
9 Mann, A Place in History, 13.
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.”

Zvi Efrat is telling about a “a tendency to ‘whitewash’ 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.”

“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.

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11 Azaryahu, Tel Aviv: Mythography of a City, 9.
12 Nitzan-Shiftan A, On Concrete and Stone, 58.
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](image)

![Figure 6. Rothschild Boulevard, circa 1930, the Israel Internet Association via the PikiWiki, 45653](image)

Such artists as Reuven Rubin and Nahum Gutman, who was another city storyteller, or "storypainter", 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.”

![Figure 4. The Stiasny plan for Ahuzat Bayit, perspective drawing. April 1909. Source: TAMA](image)

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.” 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.”

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

13 Mann, A Place in History, 74.


15 Ibid, 289.
ing in this respect at once more beautiful and more health giving than any previous form of large community in human annals.\textsuperscript{16}

**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.”\textsuperscript{17}

Lotte Cohn wrote about using the word combination “Garden City”:

“Kauffmann uses it, more for its propagandistic value than for it 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.”\textsuperscript{18}

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 “Aloneuland” (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.

Scepticism 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”\textsuperscript{20} and notes: “The myth provided the energy necessary to realize the vision in terms of buildings, streets, infrastructure, and public institutions.”\textsuperscript{21}

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\textsuperscript{16} Patrick Geddes, Town-Planning Report – Jaffa and Tel-Aviv, 43.


\textsuperscript{18} L. Cohn, Richard Kauffmann Architect and City Planner.


\textsuperscript{20} Azaryahu, Tel Aviv: Mythography of a City, 5.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 7.
entrance systems, designed as stages of light and garden visual perception22

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.”23

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”.24 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.”25

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22 Segre A., Survey of entrance gardens in the White City (from Hebr. Maarochoth ha-cnisa ba’ir ha-levana), 11 vols., a report commissioned by Tel Aviv Conservation Department, 2015, 22.
24 Azaryahu, Tel Aviv: Mythography of a City, 11.
25 Ibid.