

Doing Almost Nothing

In the context of today's lectures and discursive arguments, our presentation is merely a show-and-tell of architectural work in process. We will refrain from general theoretical statements about the architecture of museums, as well as from critical observations about architects of museums. However, in order to introduce our own work, we must briefly offer a few remarks, banal as they may be, about the current discussion concerning the changing role of the architect, his position in relation to other professionals, the nature of his commission and the definition of his scope of work.

In short, for us, beneath these issues lies the question of what constitutes an architectural project today. Two polemical points are to be made in this introduction to clarify our understanding of contemporary architectural practice.

The first point concerns the so-called brief or programme, the traditional quantitative list of spatial needs handed to the architect by the client, who is supposed to translate this textual and diagrammatic document into volumes, technologies and materials. Against this common practice, we insist that the brief or programme is precisely the architect's most creative moment and greatest contribution to the design process. There is a lot to be said about the architect's shrinking expertise in the various intellectual and technological areas, but if anything, his analytic and synthetic skills should be of use at the most critical stage of founding the conceptual structure of a building or institution. So, programming or re-programming is what we do and indeed in some instances, these are also the highest expectations of us, as it happened in the two cases we are about to present.

The second point pertains to the question of how much we should do or enable the client to do. Here again, against the automatic pre-disposition to maximize the volumetric and structural potential of a site, we believe that it is our responsibility to always pose a serious alternative of restraint and minimal change. Our generation cannot possibly propagate both modernist and post-modernist practices of abundant construction and steroid infused body-building architecture. We've had enough of that and we are left with senseless objects, empty shells and dinosaur institutions that

have no way to sustain themselves. Instead, we should insist on maintaining, re-programming, re-novating and re-enacting, existing structures and fabrics. In our mind, it is the obligation of our generation to do almost nothing. Especially when we are called upon to deal with large public buildings and institutions like museums and we find them already spatially and programmatically saturated. Doing almost nothing is not about inaction or passivity, but quite the contrary. It is about the willingness to meticulously read, analyze and re-interpret, existing situations.

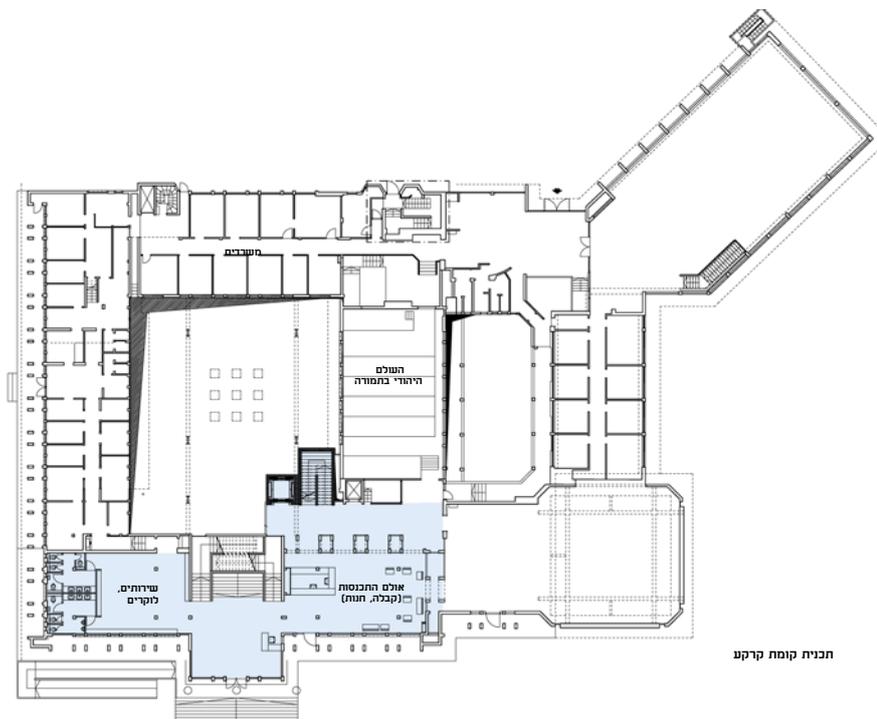
The seminal text in this regard is Rem Koolhaas' article about the St.Petersburg Hermitage:

Does every museum need to be modernized? Do all museums have to adhere to the same technical conditions? Do all museums have to be extended and updated? Or, can a certain amount of inaction, a certain resistance to change, actually be instrumental in maintaining a degree of the authenticity so frequently erased during the process of modernization.

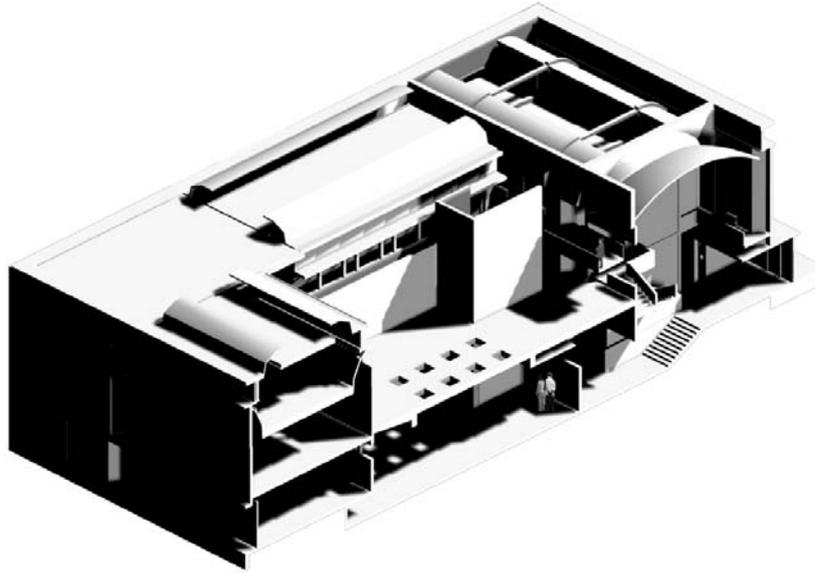
Can the architect, a person usually hired to change the conditions he finds, perform more like an archaeologist, scrupulously examining the current conditions, and proposing new forms of organization that allow each element to enjoy renewed value.

Indeed, this text may become a manifesto for a new generation of 'oddball architects', including ourselves of course, who instead of cashing in on the opportunity to build as much as they can, and to flatten on the way whatever existed on the site, use all sorts of delay mechanisms such as research, analysis, dialogues with role-players, and so on, before they even dare to begin a project. And so, when they finally begin, it is already at the point where existing structures and conditions are so familiar and alive that the very thought of total erasure and drastic replacement is inconceivable. In fact, this starting point whereby the architect is suppose to identify and select certain building qualities, parts, structures, patterns and habits, and to decide what to keep and how to reassemble it, is the moment when he himself becomes himself a curator of sorts. Yes, more than ever before, some architects are beginning to perceive themselves as spatial or environmental curators, if not by conviction, at least due to lack of big building commissions.

Warsaw. In contrast to other museums of the holocaust, and especially to Yad Vashem, it does rely mainly on a collection of detailed information and an encompassing historical description, nor is it a memorial embellished with allegorical references to the Shoah, but instead, it was conceived of and built as an active repository of first-hand testimonies and personal biographies, asking to memorize history as a continuous present, and to emphasize the relation between individual testimonies and the collective experience. The big narrative offered by other museums is here toned down into direct, subjective, spoken, intimate and unmediated meeting of the givers and the listeners of the testimony.

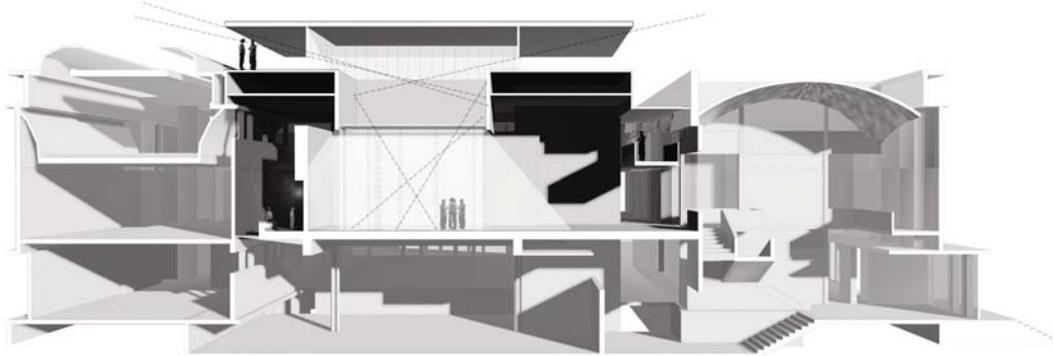


The live testimony of the survivors was initially the main museological or curatorial principal of BLH, and accordingly, the leitmotiv that determined the architecture of the building and the design of the exhibitions. The task was to enable the direct transmission of testimonies to groups of visitors who would follow the exhibitions guided only by survivors who originally collected and curated all the items. The exhibits were merely illustrative backdrops, unfolding scenery to support the story of the holocaust as told by survivors. So much so that most of the exhibits were lacking labels or precise reference. They were not readily understandable without the physical presence and commentary of the museum guides.

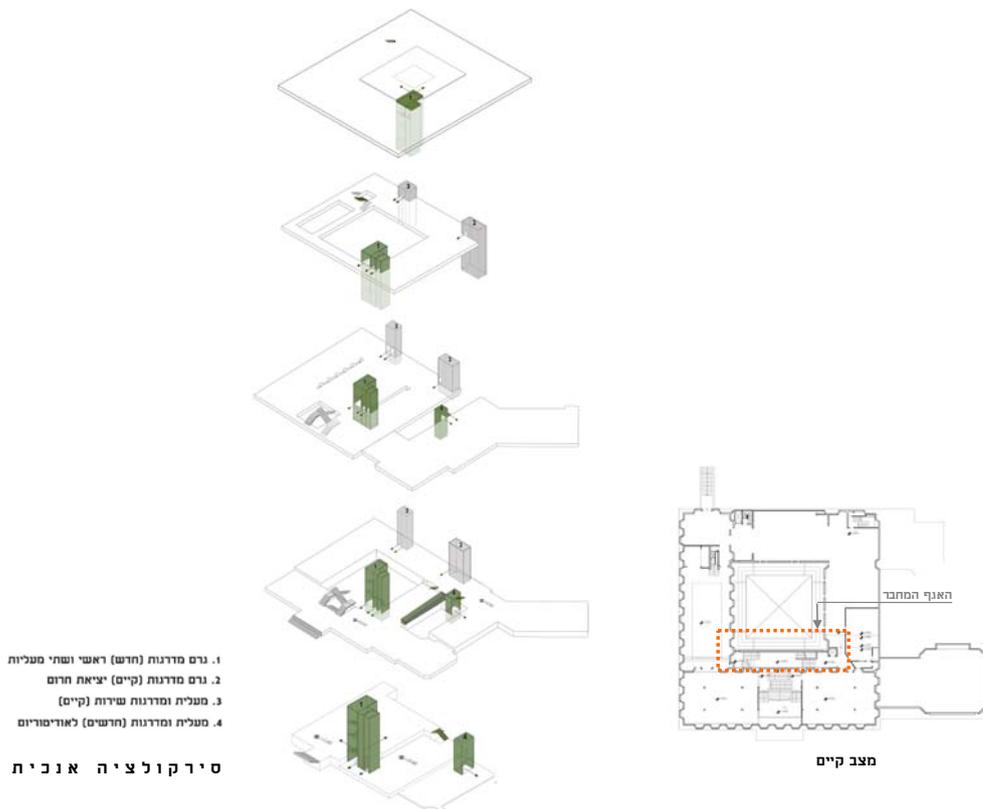


In 2002, with the growing hype around holocaust museums in Israel and elsewhere, BLHM felt a growing pressure to keep up with other holocaust spectacles and to update its physical property. An architectural competition to redesign the main hall and an auditorium was set up by the museum members and our office won with a rather simple proposal to reinstate an unbuilt scheme designed by the building's original architect, Shmuel Bikeles.

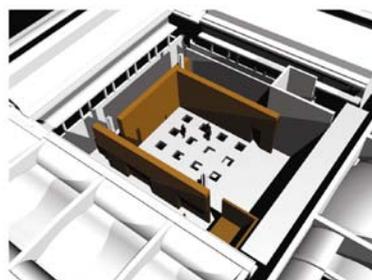
Regardless of the competition brief, the conceptual task was clear to us: how to maintain the existing museum as a physical building and as a reverberation chamber of live testimonies when the transmitters themselves are no longer there to meet the visitors and guide them through. In other words, the issue was not to reproduce or simulate, but rather to re-enact the originary scene of BLG concerning both the its relationship with the kibbutz and the re-presentation of testimonies.

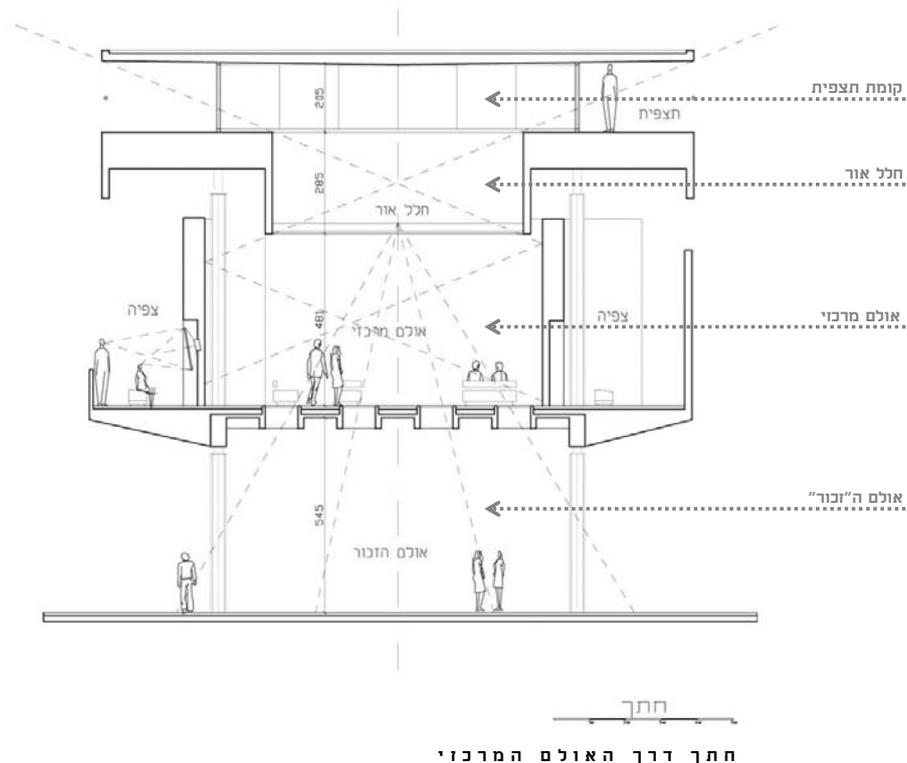


Our architectural strategy - our almost nothing - was to leave the building as-is, and to clear it of additions and elaborations that have accumulated over the years and brutally distorted Bikeles' original plans. Into this renovated building, we implanted a new autonomous steel structure that refers to Bikeles' unbuilt dome structure, and creates a new central hall for the museum. While our scheme is a respectful homage to Bikeles' building, and in fact exhibits it at its best, it by no means conserves or continues its phenomenology. Bikeles was preoccupied with the poetics of natural light and views, and accordingly created elaborate sections to allow different qualities of light, display and spectatorship. Our own interests lie more in the epistemic structuring of the look or more precisely, of the second look, in the reframing of the existing organs and collectibles of the museum, and in the staging of relationships between a static new volume at the heart of the museum and the flow of circulation through the galleries.



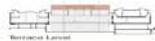
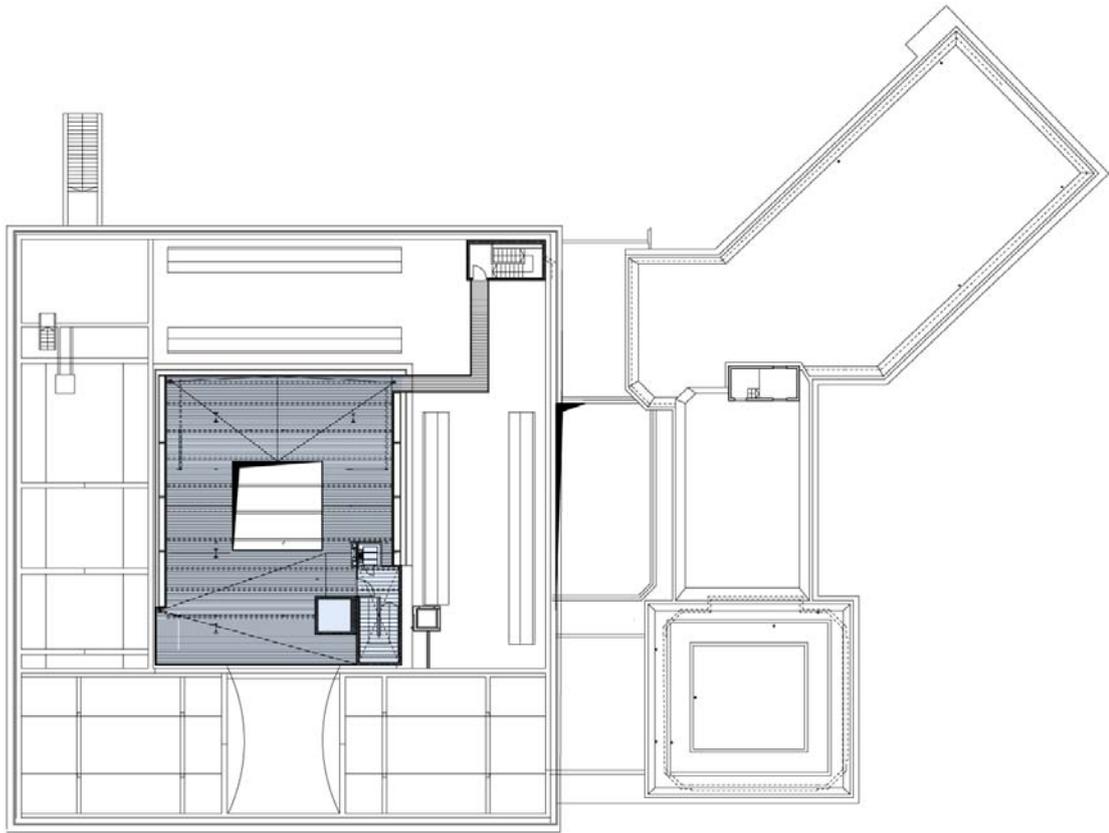
Hence the existing exhibits are left unchanged and the new central hall is designed to function as a transmission room replacing the live transmissions of the past and allowing the visitors an understanding of the following exhibitions in their proper context. In terms of function, the central hall is a reading room that invites a prolonged stay and the study of the multiple stories of the museum founders. A light ceiling designed by artist and designer James Carpenter, hovers over the reading area and allows in diffused natural light from the outside. The curatorial team of the hall is director of the museum, **Bina** sela-zor, artist Romi Ahituv, writer Dror Burstein, and architect Meira Kowalsky.





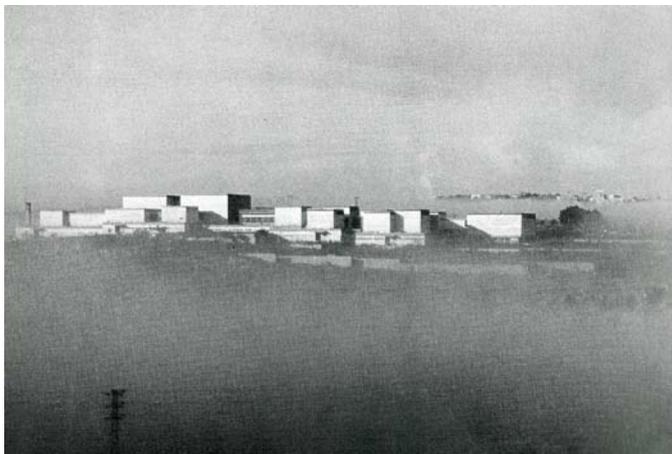
This hall is vertically connected to a memorial hall below – the ulam izcor – and to a roof terrace above. The memorial hall is devoid of any commemorative monument or ceremonial voids. It houses an archive of historical artifacts and artworks relating to the death camps and ghettos, including objects that had belonged to the Nazis. The archive is organized in drawers that are open behind dark glass panels. By touching the glass, the visitor lights the respective drawer to observe its contents. Indexical searches can be conducted and mark all the items relating to a certain topic.

The architecture of the roof terrace with its low horizontal tin roof and wooden deck opens up a look at the building's roof-scape as well as a full panoramic view of the kibbutz and its surroundings, while denying the possibility of a metaphysical end to the visit in the museum.



The Israel Museum

Following a competition in 1959, the winning team of Al Mansfeld and designer Dora Gad was commissioned to design a museum complex in Jerusalem, one of the most significant national institutions in Israel, which at the time, had neither funds nor content to match its ambition. Mansfeld and Gad resisted the temptation to propose an empty monument and instead designed a museum that would grow slowly. By proposing a 'design system' in accordance with structuralist ideas that would make growth both manageable and enjoyable, the team rejected an object-based approach, that would define the museum's final form. Their declared principle of 'change, growth and uncertainty' suited both the reality of an embryonic institution and the practical concerns for flexibility of museum management and gradual fundraising. Under the curatorship of Willem Sandberg the museum agreed to embark on an architectural experiment of an open-ended, evolving building process that has no historical equivalent, but with a particular symbolic significance in a state that was at the time just 11 years old.

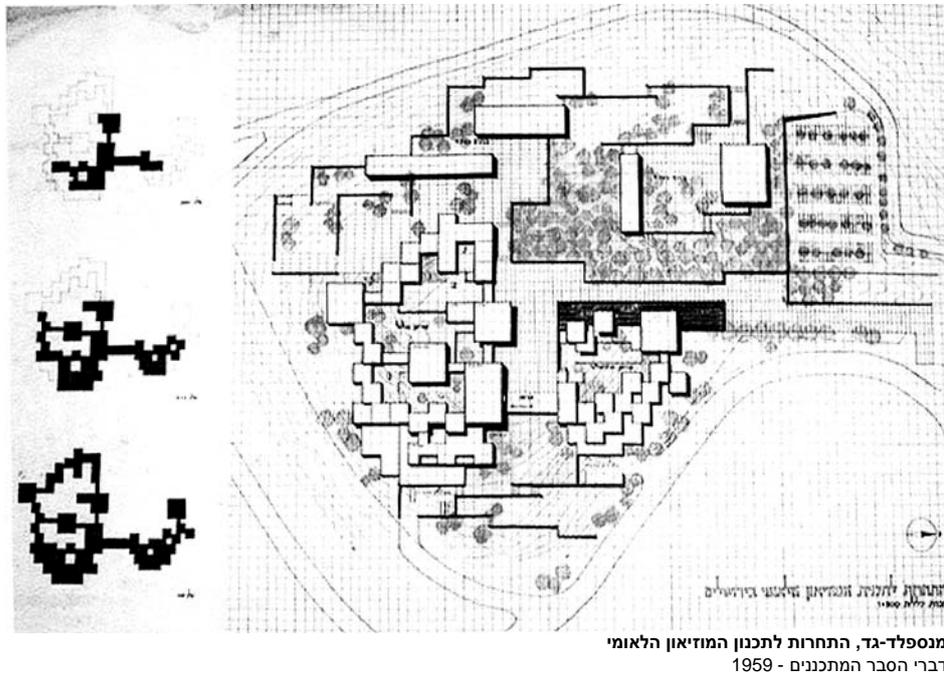


עכ"פּ Doing almost nothing | התחזקות מוזיאון ישראל | 2009

מוזיאון ישראל, ירושלים

Located on an unoccupied hill in West Jerusalem, an idealized landscape would grow, fusing history and future, synonymous with the emerging state of Israel and the inherently anti-urban vision of Zionism. The museum's architecture embodies a spatial and temporal concept that is situated on the line between urban and pastoral, fusing the metaphor of the historical Arab village with the planning language of British garden city planning and structuralist philosophy. Today, after forty years of

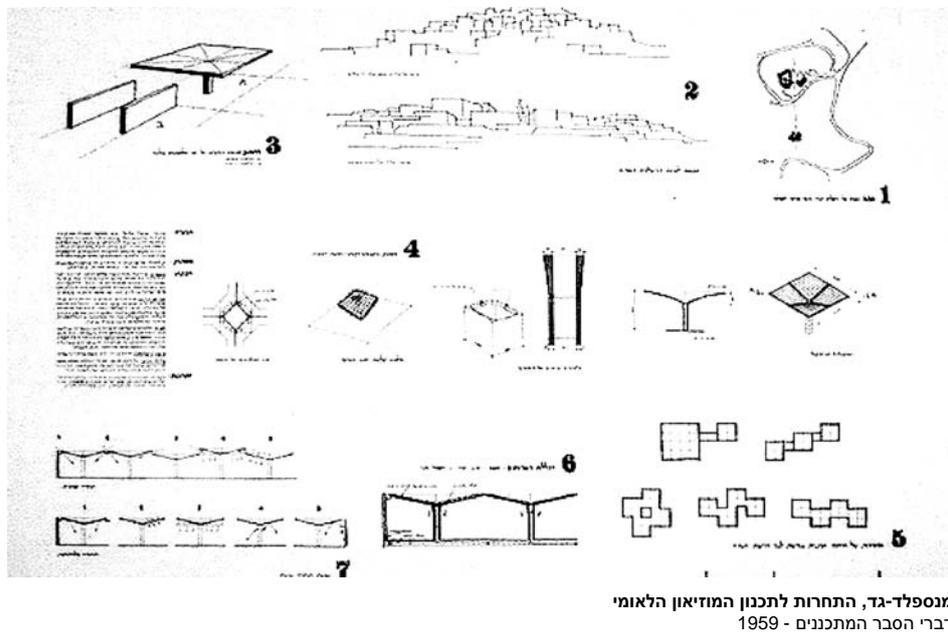
permanent growth in which the museum spaces have expanded ten times, the Israel Museum remains one of the most important yet little known examples of field architecture in the world.



The architects created an open yet defined 'design system' with in-built possibilities for growth within a fixed grid, through the additions of combinations of a predefined spatial unit of the 'mushroom' and a variety of linking elements. Mansfeld and Gad devised a modular planning grid based on variables of 0.7 sq.m in order to locate and proportion all subsystems ranging from public space furniture, infrastructural grids and mechanical engineering to all larger building components. In this way, grid points determine even the smallest details, such as the location of the brass-covered fittings for moving exhibition panels and showcases, electrical outlets in floors and ceilings, and the larger spatial units of the exhibition pavilions.

The grid system proportioned the dimensions of 11.2 sq.m hyperbolic, paraboloid concrete shells. The exposed concrete shell is supported by a pre-stressed central column with a hollow core, that contains all of the services. The so-called 'mushrooms' would occur as single units or joined up in predetermined combinations. The growth of the museum was conceived as an accumulative and open-ended process of adding and rearranging these elements in an assortment of interchangeable

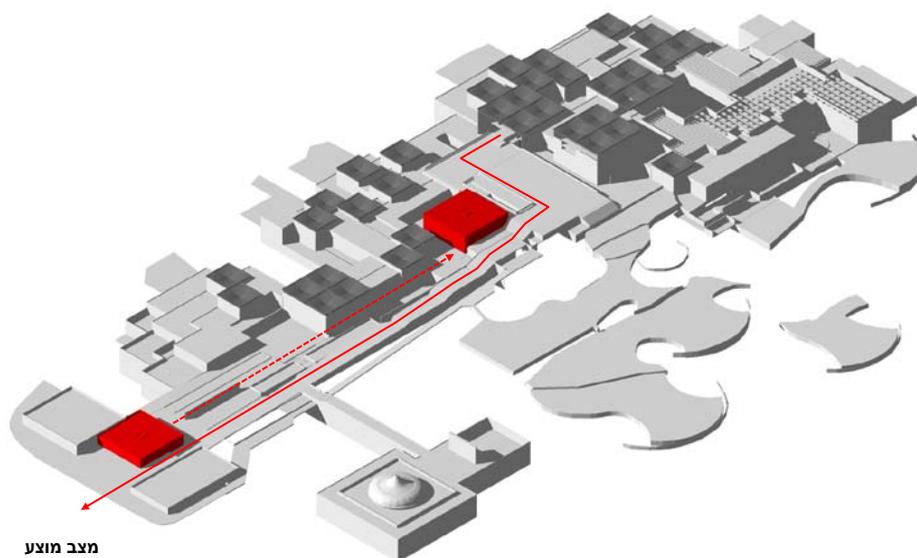
variations. This structuralist and self-generating system was fused with the metaphor of an organic Arab village of single-storey detached clusters, linked by green courtyards and passages. On the one hand, growth became the product of an essentially mechanical, cybernetic process: the reproduction of sameness where predefined elements are rearranged and reorganized in a non-hierarchical arrangement, like automatic writing on the landscape. On the other hand, the overall appearance remained a question of subjective composition. In order to realize and retain the desired pastoral appearance, both mushrooms and linking elements vary in height, following the local topography.



The unrelenting growth of the museum had brought the structure to the brink of organizational and managerial collapse. The service areas located in the basement had been neglected. The various museum departments were engaged in never-ending fights about spatial resources and funds, and the museum's general circulation and orientation system had broken down. The prevailing mentality of 'growth for the moment' had generated endless peripheral extensions but failed to provide vision or funds for the core services of the museum itself. While the initial design system had been successful in maintaining the appearance of formal coherence, internally the

colossal structure became unsustainable, out of scale and at odds with its own programme.

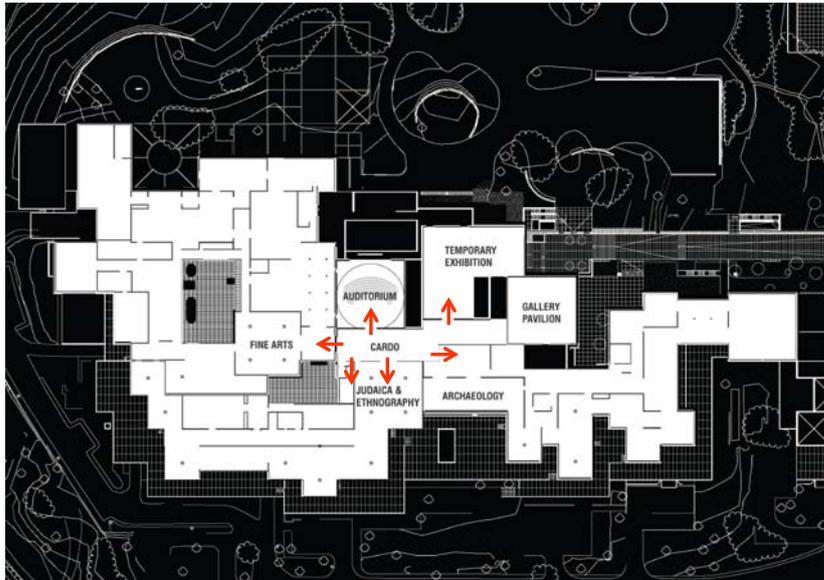
In 2003, an entrance structure was designed by architect James Freid of Peycobb-Freid architects, New York. This design generated a fierce public and professional debate and was finally rejected by the museum. Since we had been among the most vocal protestors against this proposal, we were called in by the museum's director, James Snyder, to explain our objection and propose an alternative in order to solve what was initially perceived as the problem of the entrance to the museum, but what we immediately understood as an issue concerning the internal, organizational system. Our first steps therefore involved meticulous architectural research and analysis. Rather than imposing new objects onto the site, we were interested in deciphering the decision processes that generated the existing fabric. This means separating decisions based on the rules of the design system from decisions that were made intuitively. We asked how these rules could inform future decisions without Mansfeld's intuitive mediation. In this way, we could begin to understand the potentials and limits of the system and develop our own critical attitude to intervene in the existing structure and continue the building process.



מצב מוצע

יציאה במעלה קרטור

during the relentless growth of the museum and frequent internal relocations, the vertical relationship between exhibition programmes on the upper gallery level and the service functions below had broken down. The result is a seemingly random spatial arrangement where both visitors and museum staff face long, impractical and disorienting walks between galleries, workshops, storage areas and offices.



EKA Doing almost nothing | התחזית מוזיאון ישראל | פברואר 2009

רה-ארגון

We considered our proposal as a subtle intervention that consolidates the existing cellular structures and adds missing links that would allow the organism to function again, quite literally giving space and gravity to the existing pavilions and anchoring them to the topography of the natural hill. As for the problem of the long, ceremonial entrance, we were convinced all along that the problem was not how to mark a monumental entrance, but rather where it should lead to within the museum. Once we found where to locate the central core that will function as a spatial and orientational anchor, all that was left was to design a connective route from the entrance pavilion down the hill to it. Following Mansfeld's mathematical logic, this proved to be an easy task since there was a gap between the buildings and the main axis of the Carter Promenade, which is precisely on grid and allows the insertion of the needed connector below grade. That's it. We cannot disclose any further information about the actual plans and architectural articulation of the solution. You'll have to wait for the public unveiling of this project.



מקשר בין ביתני הכניסה הנמצאים למרגלות גבעת המוזיאון לבין לב המוזיאון שבו נמצאת צומת ההתפצלות לשלושה האג-פים הראשיים (אמנות, ארכיאולוגיה, יודאיקה ואתנוגרפיה), לאולם התערוכות המתחלפות ולאודיטוריום. מהלך הכניסה החדש הזה מקצר ומפשט מאוד את "שקס החניכה" המפריך שהקדים בעבר את הביקור במוזיאון ומאפשר נגישות נוחה והתמצאות קלה בתוכנית הבניין.

מהלך הכניסה המקורי למוזיאון - "מעלה קארטר" - סיפק מימד טקטי מרשים והשתייה בין העיר לבין המוזיאון, אולם הוא הצריך הליכה לאורך 270 מטר וטיפוס של 12 מטר (ארבע קומות), ללא הגנה בחורף ובקיץ וללא נגישות לנכים. בעיות אלה הובילו לחיפוש אחר פתרון ארכיטקטוני שישפר את תפ-קוד המוזיאון ויקל על המבקרים. מהלך הכניסה החדש שתכננו במקביל ל"מעלה קארטר"

