

Walter Gropius' Torten Estate in Dessau  
Lecture at the Bauhaus – July 2009

I was asked to talk about the Torten Estate, a housing project designed by Walter Gropius and built during the years 1926-1928.



The project is comprised of 312 terrace houses of several typologies and a single 5 storey tower building. This project was Gropius' first opportunity to execute, demonstrate and test his concept of "home-building-factory" (Haus-bau-fabrik) pronounced already in 1916 and promoting his intention to create a laboratory to develop standardized building types.

I will describe the Torten Project as a significant turning point, a paradigm shift, within the very notions of Modern Architecture. I say notions, because at stake here is both the idea of modernity, or modernism, and also the definition of architecture as a discipline or profession. I had, just 2 days ago in Berlin, a conversation with an architect who's also the head of the German Werkbund of today and he claimed that this Project by Gropius marks no less than the end of Modern architecture. Of course,

what could be regarded as a culmination of a certain history or culture by some, is already endowed with the primary forces of a new beginning, by others.

So, we are looking at a polemical project and I shall try to clarify its significance within the chronology of Modern Architecture. An end, or a beginning, of what exactly?

Since I am coming from Israel and I spent many years studying Modern Architecture in Israel, I will look and comment at the paradigm shift occurring within the Bauhaus, thru the mirror of Israel. This mirror is certainly distorting, it is both limited and exaggerated as you will see, but it nevertheless may be useful to take a distance from the source of formative ideas and look at their dissemination, translation, and often aberration.



Precisely at the moment the Bauhaus ceased to exist as a school at Dessau and Berlin, in the early years of the 1930's – it gained an unexpected new life, a geographically remote revival, this time not at all as an experimental art and design movement, but rather as a pervasive architectural practice rapidly shaping the rural and urban space

of Palestine-Israel and in particular the look of the new city of Tel Aviv. During the decade of the 30's, several thousands of private and public buildings were built in Tel Aviv under the direct and mindful influence of Bauhaus and International Style dictum. And even if quiet clearly they were not all architectural masterpieces, but mostly derivative imitations of certain visual or compositional aspects of iconic modernist buildings, they nevertheless accumulate to a sudden phenomenon that I shall call here "Bauhaus Vernacular" (a term borrowed from scholars who wrote about the city of Haifa).

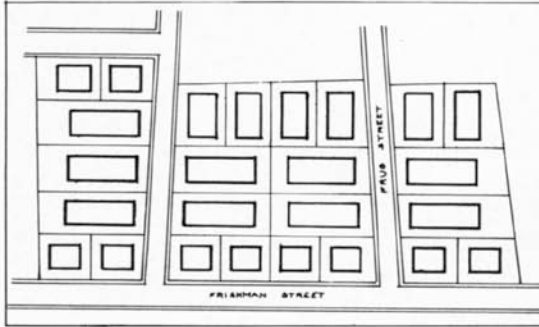


I use the oxymoron expression Bauhaus Vernacular in order to emphasize the critical difference between the European sources of Modernism and its reincarnation in Palestine. What has begun as an avant garde movement relating mainly to artistic, academic and intellectual circles, turns into an almost grass root movement engulfing all political convictions, social ideologies and ethnic backgrounds.

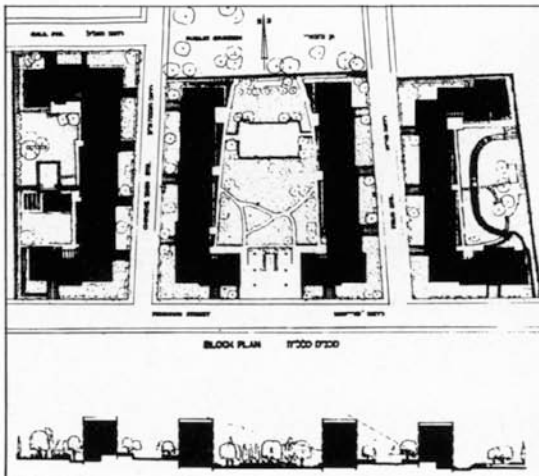


We can see, for example, that in Tel Aviv of the 30's, Bauhaus look is employed by private landlords and developers who build affluent apartment buildings, as well as by the labor union who builds communal workers housing projects. No matter who you are and what conviction you represent, it is practically impossible now to design a building that does not fit into the "Bauhaus City" of Tel Aviv.





Former parcellation



New layout



Plan of typical flats

Elevation detail with open staircase protected by glass panels from wind and rain

The point to be made is that what we see in Tel Aviv of the 30's has little to do with new technology, mass production, efficiency, rational organization or any other synonym of modern architecture. In fact, we witness here modernism without modernization, an aesthetic appearance that does not represent the modern condition, but rather masks its absence.

The question indeed is why did modernist images, objects and ideas flow so naturally to a place that did not yet experience the industrial revolution, or modern metropolitan life? My brief answer would be: because it seemed essential.

