

Kibbutz + Bauhaus

Modernism and Zionism as reflected in the Lifework of Arie Sharon

Introduction

Kibbutz + Bauhaus is the autobiography – published in the mid 70's – of Arie Sharon¹, a Bauhaus student who became, 20 years after his studies, the author of what is known as the Sharon Plan, an all encompassing master-plan for the new state of Israel, established in 1948.



Kibbutz + Bauhaus by Arie Sharon]

As I will argue in this paper, we are looking here at a figure who not only masterminded the spatial organization of the State of Israel – a structure and modus operandi still persisting this very day and still informing every territorial discussion in the region - but in a deeper sense also personifies the moral ideologies and the political strategies of the Zionist national movement. As such, Arie Sharon may probably be considered in quiet a literal sense as the most instrumental and prolific Bauhaus graduate and perhaps one of the most powerful architects of the Post-War era.

Bruno Zevi, in his introduction to *Kibbutz + Bauhaus*, writes:

The fascinating, sometimes almost hypnotic, peculiarity of this volume is that it blends and synthesizes three books into one. Firstly, there is the biography of a life made up of rare ingredients: Zionism, Kibbutz, Bauhaus, national planning, professional activity on a local, then on an international scale. In the second place, there is the story of a building of a country, agricultural settlements, urban housing, hospitals, universities, up to the reconstruction of a united Jerusalem. Finally, we have the achievements of an architect, his creative products, his space-time language in the dynamics of its numerous modern trends.ⁱⁱ

Kibbutz + Bauhaus is designed in the format of an album, relying mainly on visual images with extended subtitles in English, German and French. It is divided into 9 chapters, each with a short introductory text. In this paper, I will read through the main chapters of the book, with greater emphasis on those more relevant to the story of the migration, dissemination and permutation of Bauhaus ideas in Israel. I will follow Sharon up to the 50's and will not discuss the chapters dealing with his public projects in Israel and in Africa of the 60's and 70's.

A young man's way to the Kibbutz 1921-1925

The first chapter of *Kibbutz + Bauhaus* recounts the story of young Arie Sharon, who at the age of 12 joined the Jewish youth movement of Hashomer Hatzair at his hometown in Galicia.

Our overall aim, writes Sharon, was to transform ourselves, the children of the Jewish bourgeoisie, devoted to commerce and the professions, into productive farmers and workers returning home to Zion. [...] We dreamt, we would turn desolate swamps and arid wastes into productive farms by the labour of our own hands. At the same time, we would create a new type of egalitarian society, the members of which would contribute according to their ability, and would receive according to their needs.ⁱⁱⁱ

In short, we read here the familiar glorifying narrative of the socialist-agrarian brand of Zionism, the one that will be always both mainstream and pioneering and as such will remain hegemonic for about five decades to come, before and after statehood.

indispensable backstage actor within the Bauhaus scene – a scene, by the way, that he regards as a Kibbutz of a sort, an avant-garde productivist commune transforming the institutions of art and design. His former practical building experience exempted him from 2 years of training at the Bauhaus craft workshops and turned him into the handyman in charge of the maintenance of the Master Houses designed by Walter Gropius. He could now learn from up close the problems of the construction details of these "buildings of clean design" as he referred to them, and especially the shortcomings of insulation methods and installation systems. From this insider position, he also chanced to see behind the scenes of the power struggles between the school's staff, ending with Gropius' leaving the Bauhaus, the appointment of Hannes Meyer to director, and the election of new teachers, "all of them", according to Sharon, "shared a more pragmatic attitude towards design and opposed the quasi-formalistic former Bauhaus ideas."^v Grateful as he was to Walter Gropius for admitting him to the school and allowing him all kinds of shortcuts, Sharon soon develops a strong affiliation and total identification with Hannes Mayer and his doctrine. The pragmatic, Objectivist, or "Post-Humanist Architecture", as Michael Hays has termed it^{vi}, of Hannes Meyer and his partner, Hans Wittwer, are admired by Sharon, as we can see for example from his appraisal of their entry to The League of Nations competition: "an extremely significant and construction-true project, by far more avant-garde than all the other projects including even Corbu's brilliant proposal."^{vii} The comparison to Le Corbusier of course is supposed to indicate a radical transition from the aesthetics and rhetorics of the machine to a practice deviating altogether from the confines of aesthetic judgment, into a pure structural and organizational evaluation.

When Meyer was invited to participate in the competition for the design of the education center of the German Trade Unions (Bundesschule des ADGB), and when he won the competition, Sharon, together with the other architecture students at the Bauhaus, were recruited to work on the project. Sharon recalls Meyer's instructions: "The organization of the building should only be the plastic translation of its socio-pedagogic functions, [...] a direct printout of the functional diagram."^{viii}

With the termination of his studies, Meyer invited Sharon to be the architect in charge of the project, and for two years (1929-31) he inspected the building process and functioned as Meyer's office manager. The instructions Sharon received from Meyer, peeled off the paradigm of White Architecture with no sentiments:

The execution has to be effected in a truly purist way, without using any plaster or other 'camouflage'. Bricks, concrete, wood, steel, plywood, and asbestos had to keep the natural color and texture [...] All the pipes and fixtures had to be exposed.^{ix}

These instructions establish Meyer's building not only as a quintessential sample of The New Objectivity, but also as a preliminary model of the New Brutalism as articulated after the war by Alison and Peter Smithson, Reyner Banham^x, and others.

Tel Aviv on the Mediterranean – A Town on Pilotis 1932-1939

Chapter 3 begins with Sharon's disappointment, even depression, upon returning from Berlin "the liveliest city of the late 20's", to Tel Aviv, "a provincial Mediterranean town, [...] with two to three storey houses with little mediocre shops lined on the streets".^{xi} He was disgusted with the facades "decorated with various different balconies and alcoves in the poor style of eastern Europe".

And even more so, he is critical of the misconceived town planning of Tel Aviv, designed by Patrick Geddes, as a "typical English style dormitory garden city although located on the Mediterranean".

But this biting critique is merely the launching pad for the enunciation in the book of the new phenomenon re-shaping the city of Tel Aviv in the early 30's: the abrupt formation of an architectural avant-garde which begins within an exclusive circle of young architects returning from progressive schools and offices in Europe, and sweeping in no time both the building industry and the public taste.

Sharon, one of the founding members of the architects Circle, writes:

Within a relatively short time, we succeeded in infiltrating into the well-established architects' and engineers' association, in introducing and organizing competitions for public buildings and housing estates, in establishing architectural committees and even in publishing an architectural magazine, of which, Julius Posner, a newcomer from Berlin, was the editor. The time was ripe for an architectural revolt. Thousands of Jewish immigrants [...], had already been imbued in Europe with new progressive ideas in art and architecture. The economic situation in Israel improved [...] the impact of the new architectural circle was felt immediately.^{xii}

This impact resulted in a sudden proliferation of exquisite modernist buildings, accumulating to what is proverbially known as "Tel Aviv Bauhaus" or "The White City". Instead of these stylized petit-bourgeois objects, Sharon presents in his book his own Bauhaus legacy – cooperative housing projects designed by him and built in Tel Aviv during the 30's.



Cooperative Housing, Tel Aviv 1935, from Kibbutz + Bauhaus

Between 1931 and 1936 twenty Cooperative Worker's Housing estates were built in Tel-Aviv (13 of which were planned by Arie Sharon) on four different sites.

The planners of these housing projects were chosen through competitions and although they make up a small portion (393 housing units in all) of the buildings in Tel-Aviv during the 30s, they represent a counter proposal regarding the organization of urban space.

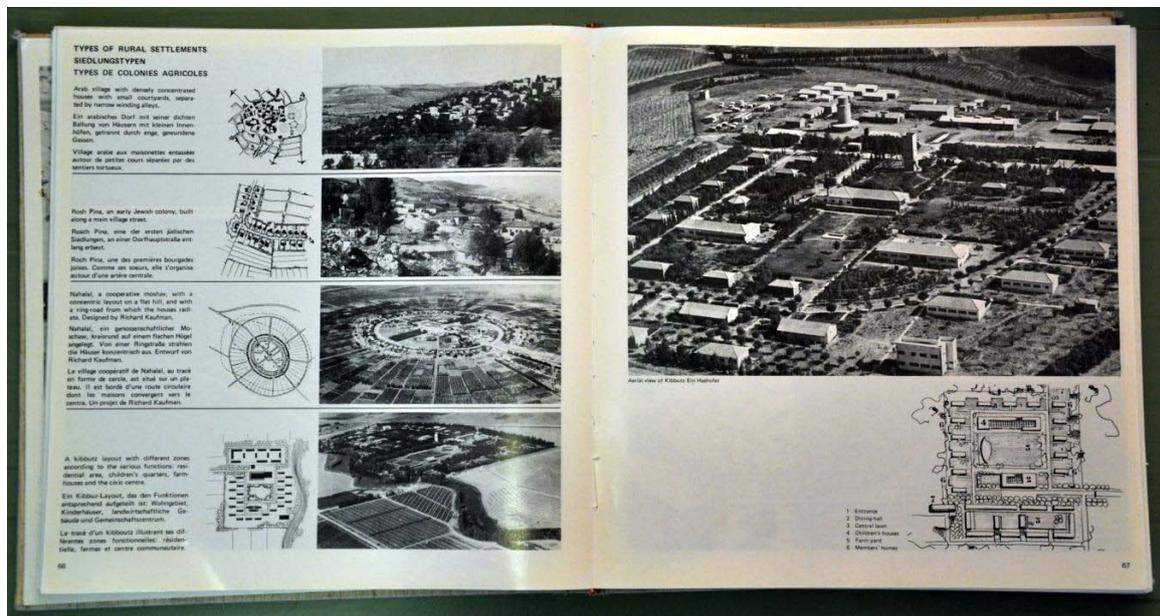
In place of the typical small plots of Tel Aviv, intended for buildings of four to six apartments and distanced from one another, creating unusable left-over open spaces - the Cooperative Worker's Housing were based on the adjoining of plots and the construction of perimeter or parallel blocks around a large courtyard or garden, shielded from the street. In the basement level, which turned towards the garden, were the social functions of the housing estate: the grocery, the laundrette, the medical clinic, the reading room, the kindergarden, etc. The interior courtyard also

symbolized the importance of working the garden and the bond with the soil. From a social perspective, the internalized structure was a declaration of segregation from bourgeois city life. The large building block, prominent in the urban fabric, were later nicknamed the “laborer’s fortresses” and served to demonstrated the power of a homogenous society possessing self-organizational capacity. The utopian aspiration for a cooperative, egalitarian and perfectly planned community is bounded to create a mechanism of a differentiation, isolation and homogenization.

Kibbutz Planning 1940-1947

In Chapter 4, Sharon returns to the Kibbutz, now as an architect who seeks the ur-form, the organizational logic and inner structure of the Kibbutz.

During the 30's and 40's the Kibbutz has grown into a community of several hundred members and proliferated into hundreds of frontier settlements all over the country.



Types of Rural Settlements, from Kibbutz + Bauhaus

I shall not dwell on this chapter in this presentation, but I should stress 3 significant issues that come up here and will be critical to the understanding of the architecture of Statehood during the 50's and 60's.

1. Kibbutz is the most extreme manifestation of Zionism, not merely as a national socialist movement, and not slightly as a visionary utopian fraternity, but more so, as an agrarian, and sure also Arcadian, revolution focusing on the concept of land redemption. As such, kibbutz is the emblem of Zionism's consistent anti-bourgeois and even more so anti-urban sentiments.
2. Kibbutz is also a strategy. A frontier strategy; A population dispersal strategy; A "facts on ground" strategy; A civilian occupation strategy (yes, it is the Left who invented all these territorial maneuvers that the extreme Right is using today). All in all, we should point out that the most conspicuous use of centralized planning - not merely for territorial organization, but rather as an apparatus molding a new ethos - is manifested in the consistent efforts to shift the political, cultural and economic weight from the city to the countryside and from the center to the periphery.
3. Kibbutz is an architecture without a precedent. It is a new social form that called for a new typology, a new structural paradigm. We cannot get here into the details of this new invention, suffice to mention that the organizational uniqueness of the Kibbutz lies in its inner fluid space, in the fact that it is not based on parcelation, subdivision, or any other property demarcation, but instead on functional zoning.

Planning a New Land, Regions and New Towns 1948-1953

I am now coming to the last and the most significant chapter of Kibbutz + Bauhaus that I will discuss today, *Planning a New land*:

Contrary to common belief and to visual impression, the state of Israel was not born of haphazard improvisation, emergency solutions or speculative entrepreneurship – but rather of the unprecedented objective to put into practice one of the most comprehensive, controlled and efficient architectural experiments in the modern era, an experiment that I've termed *The Israeli Project*.^{xiii}

The end of the British Mandate over Palestine in 1947 and the ensuing administrative vacancy, the War of 1948 and the ruinous grounds created, the exchange of refugee populations during the war and immediately following it, the confiscation and nationalization of over 90 percent of the country's lands, the emergency legislation (most of which is still valid today) and the austerity decrees, the virtually absolute monopoly of Mapai (Israel Labor Party) over all State and Histadrut (Federation of

Labor Unions in Israel) apparatuses , the moral and material support provided by the world’s superpowers for the new state – all these came together to provide an opportunity and ostensible legitimization for a project of construction (and obliteration) more daring than any of its literary precedents.

Only a few weeks after the Declaration of Independence of Israel, Arieh Sharon was commissioned to establish the governmental Planning Department. He became literally the National Architect of Israel and immediately recruited (as Hannes Meyer had wanted) “a brigade of planners” – a team of eighty architects, urban planners, engineers, sociologists and economists.



Arieh Sharon, The Planning of Israel, 1951

Within about a year, this department presented an overall master plan for Israel (known as the Sharon Plan) and provided the political leadership of the time a powerful tool for molding a new artificial landscape, dividing the land into 24 districts, dictating a strategy of population dispersal, laying a web of roads and communication infrastructure, allocating open spaces for national parks and planning dozens of new towns and hundreds of new rural settlements.

In the opening session of the Government Districts and Zones Planning Committee (Dec. 6, 1948), Sharon presented not only his own view as an architect who had literally chanced upon a country to plan, but also – mainly – the spatial perception of his patron, David Ben-Gurion, the founding father of the state, and in fact the very essence of Zionist rhetoric:

I am glad to have been granted the opportunity to present to you some of our work and discuss with you the problems and difficulties that we encounter. For many years those engaged in the field of planning have felt the lack of central and national planning – a factor that hinders our work and restricts our capacity to build the country. [...]

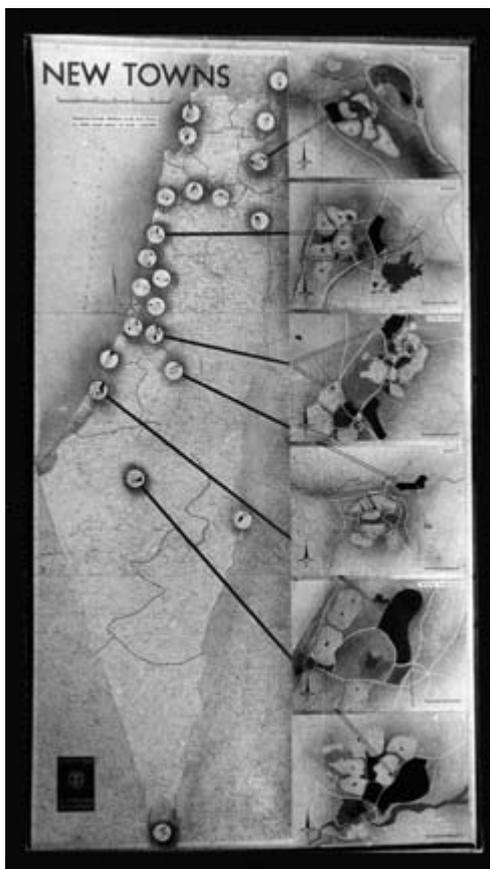
We are told that various, wealthy countries have existed and thrived for many years without central planning institutions. To this argument one should reply by stressing that affluent nations can perhaps afford experimentation and lack of planning. At the same time, one must also note the incurable chronic illnesses in the big cities of these countries.

[...]

The new ownership of the land makes it possible to put in order and re-arrange the space and to ensure the people's physical and mental well-being through central planning. The "Old World" is already degenerate, sick, spawning urban monsters. Here there exists an opportunity for a fresh start, on a *tabula rasa*, as it were. Here, as opposed to there, there is not enough space, there is no leeway for uncontrolled developments, there is no room for degeneration.^{xiv}

The pressing national task assigned to Sharon and his team of planners was providing temporary housing solutions for the masses of new Jewish immigrants and settling the country's borderlands, in order to stabilize the 1948 cease-fire lines, prevent territorial concessions and inhibit the return of Palestinian war refugees. The planners accomplished this by drafting a statewide network of civil frontiers composed of transit camps and outpost agrarian settlements, as well as by re-settling deserted Arab villages with new Jewish immigrants.

Concurrently, a long-term mission was outlined: preparing a plan for a local population of 2,650,000 inhabitants (a target obtained in 1966), which would be dispersed throughout the country, thus adjusting the “anomaly”, or the “colonialist pattern,” as the planners dubbed the development of the Jewish community in the country during the British Mandate (upon the establishment of the State of Israel, two thirds of the Jewish population was concentrated in the three large cities: Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa. 82% lived along the coastal plane. The aim of the Sharon Plan was that only 45% of the urban population would dwell in the big cities, while 55% would settle in the new medium-sized and small towns).



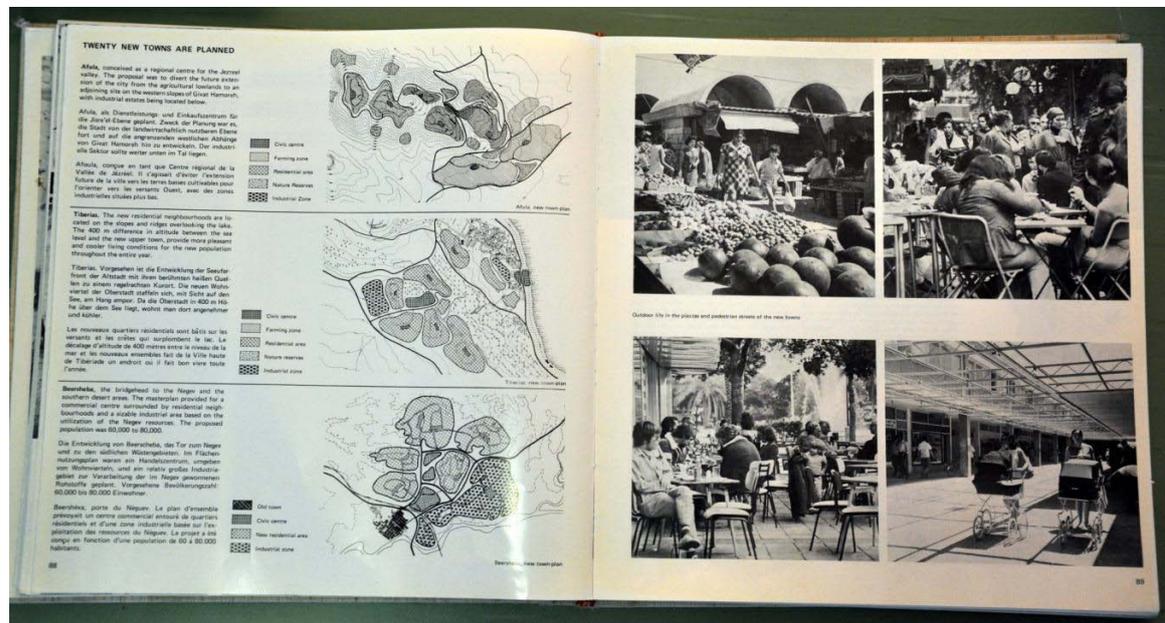
The map of the New Towns, from Sharon's The Planning of Israel

De-territorialization and de-centralization (according to the strategic precept of using civilian settlements as military outposts *de jure* or *de facto*, a precept developed already in the early pre-state days and valid to this day) – formed a supreme cause, which dictated all moves and procedures of the national plan, even if at times they were inconsistent with professional good judgment, even if they entirely failed the test of economic logic, even if they turned the “melting pot” rhetoric against itself and

created, in effect, severe geographic and social segregation between veteran residents and new immigrants.

Over 400 agrarian settlements were founded during the State's first decade according to the Master Plan's guidelines, but its epitome was the creation of the district town – the infamous development town – whose optimal size was the subject of lengthy academic discussions among the planners.

Ultimately, the preferred model was of an intimate town, housing between 20,000 and 50,000 residents, assumed to be exempt of the disorientation, alienation, social injustice, speculative realty and other urban malaises associated with the cosmopolitan city.



The New Town Typology, from Kibbutz + Bauhaus pp.66-67]

The seemingly paradoxical Zionist attitude of activating a regressive revolution, or a pioneering Old World, may be discerned not only in the dispersal of towns and settlements on the map, but also in the attempt to base the architecture of the towns themselves on a conceptual crossbreeding between mechanistic planning methods striving to render the traditional city more efficient - and more picturesque conceptions, willed to tone down the city by deconstructing it into small, autonomous communities, protected from street life, zoned off from industrial sectors and wrapped by green pastoral surroundings.

The design of repetitive social housing on undivided land, rather than normative parceling and speculative construction - provides the most deceptive illusion of all: the new Israeli town was meant to be a blown-up kibbutz based on homogenous community, collective and egalitarian, without private capital or unanticipated market forces.

However, unlike the kibbutz, or even the pre-State Cooperative Worker's Housing in the well-established towns, which were created as exclusive and hegemonic structures by and for the members of a social avant-garde movement, the new town came into being superficially and coercively – a professional and bureaucratic doctrine forced upon a population of unsuspecting newcomers, used as passive subjects of a national experiment. With the foundation of the first New Towns, it became apparent that the progressive zoning principles and the generous “ecological” aptitude simply do not work. The detached, sparsely-populated ready-made town weighed down disproportionately on the national budget due to the huge amounts of infrastructure they demanded. The supply of capital and entrepreneurship required for the creation of jobs in those out-of-the-way locations lagged behind. The veteran agrarian population of the kibbutzim already had a well-organized marketing network of its own, having no use in the services provided by New Towns. The “alienation, degeneration and low quality of life” in the big city, so consistently denounced by official state propaganda, were replaced in no time with homogeneity, remoteness, and deprivation.

Fifty years after its official publication, the Sharon Master Plan still holds its own. The vision of colonization and modernization laid out by the plan has, for the most part, been implemented. The country has developed at an unprecedented rate of growth. The New Towns – a well-intentioned hybrid of imported urban theories and physiocratic local ideology – still exist more or less as they had originally planned: barren Garden-Cities, lethargic Work Towns, bypassed regional centers, homogenous melting pots, under-developed urban odds and ends still struggling to preserve their special Class-A tax-reduction status.



The New Town of Dimona, 1960's

and images, we may retrospectively observe that the iconography of the early Bauhaus - that of Gropius' Master-Houses for example - drifted to Palestine and proliferated as the "White Architecture" of the 30s and 40s throughout the cities and the rural settlements. It became the embodiment of a national revivalist movement, a movement that had no images or icons to return to, a movement nevertheless wishing to identify itself through the stylized representation of cosmopolitan modernity.

The generic rigor of the later Bauhaus - that of Gropius' Törten Estate housing at Dessau, or that of Mayer and Hillbersheimer Objectivist architecture, would become an even higher paradigm for the architectural manifestation of Zionism, it will prove to be no less than the manual for the production, allegedly of the Israeli welfare state of the 50's and 60's.

Arie Sharon, *Kibbutz+Bauhaus: An Architects Way in a New Land*, (Karl Kramer Verlag Stuttgart and ⁱ Massada Israel, 1976)

Ibid p.6 ⁱⁱ

Ibid. p.14 ⁱⁱⁱ

Ibid. p.17 ^{iv}

Ibid. P. 29 ^v

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- K. Michael Hays, *Modernism and the Posthuman Subject: The Architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995) ^{vi}
Arie Sharon, *Kibbutz+Bauhaus* P. 29 ^{vii}
Ibid. p. 30 ^{viii}
Ibid. 30 ^{ix}
Reyner Banham, *Brutalismus in der Architektur* (Stuttgart: Karl Kramer, 1966) ^x
Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (London: Architectural Press, 1966)
Arie Sharon, *Kibbutz+Bauhaus* P. 46 ^{xi}
Ibid. p. 48 ^{xii}
Zvi Efrat, *The Israeli Project: Building and Architecture 1948-1973*, (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2004, published in Hebrew) ^{xiii}
Arieh Sharon, *Protocol of Government Districts and Zones Planning Committee* (Dec. 6, 1948) ^{xiv}