

## The Secret of Kibbutz Charm

### Zvi Efrat Converses with Galia Bar Or



In answer to your question about the unique qualities distinguishing the architectural structure of the kibbutz, one has to stress, primarily, that these are cooperative settlements, in itself a rarity. They are based on full partnership in property and total relinquishment of private ownership of property and land. From the perspective of the history of human settlement, it is a conscious overcoming of the territorial urge, which forthwith gives rise to another type of territoriality, both public and private or, at least, one which does not dichotomously distinguish between the public and the private.

Unlike rural or urban places of settlement which develop organically, in the case of the kibbutz the development is tied with professional planning involving full participation of all the members of the community, for whom the entire place is their private home. Thus, we are always concerned with a-priori total planning, regardless of whether it is closed-

ended or open-ended. Such a concept has to be totally holistic: the kibbutz as a whole must embrace all of the aspects of life, and not only those of habitation; we have here an entire economy which is oriented not only inwardly (satisfaction of needs), but also outwardly, toward society as a whole. The kibbutz may be described as a cross between a home and a city-factory.



Necessarily, it always involves seriality; seriality devoid of modularity: the kibbutz is a set of 280 settlements, divided into sub-sets (the kibbutz movements). It is a quintessential, easily identified series, yet each item in it is different and distinct for two reasons: First, the kibbutz is underlain not by an idealistic-utopian scheme with an absolute geometry, but rather by several guiding planning principles which must be adapted to a specific geography, place, and ideology each time anew. Second, since the members are partners in the planning process, the plan articulates the individual-personal and social alignment

unique to each kibbutz: the different cultural backgrounds, the distinct conditions of production and consumption, the chosen economic branches, the different interrelations between all these functions and the dwellings. Sociologically speaking, the kibbutzim are indeed similar; socially, however, totally different communal and inter-personal conditions develop in them, and these acquire their singular architectural and landscape manifestations.



A planned rural settlement may be deemed an oxymoron. Historically, rural villages have developed organically and spontaneously, without planning—except of course, for utopian or autocratic projects where planning was forced and reproduced from the top down, and not in collaboration with the workers. In the kibbutz, on the other hand, we have a revolutionary-avant-garde process initiated by the workers themselves, oriented toward actual realization. Here it is always a "dirty" process, not entirely "organic," but not wholly

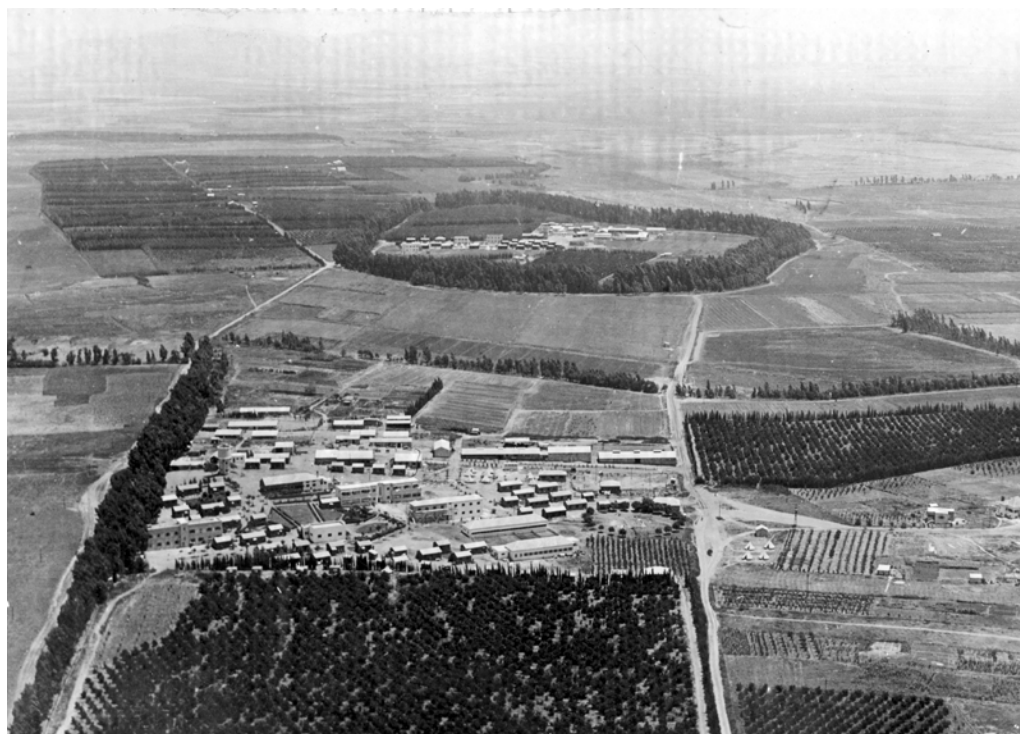
"artificial" either; a cultural process which involves professional architecture and planning institutions, but at the same time, it is dictated and modeled from the bottom by its initiators. This is why some kibbutzim are founded on a highly formalistic pattern reminiscent of modernist (and even pre-modernist) schools of urban planning, while the planning of others is much more flexible, loose, and innovative. There are no two identical kibbutzim, even though this phenotype called "kibbutz" is readily identifiable.

Even within the frame of modern architecture, the kibbutz is an unusual entity since it is located half-way between utopian idealism and vernacular construction. This is exemplified, *inter alia*, by the kibbutz's ramified systems of paths, or the typological blend of "Heimat" architecture and "Bauhaus" architecture. Each kibbutz exists within its own geographical and cultural setting, by which it is nourished and into which it integrates, to the extent that in many cases it is no longer possible to distinguish between different registers of rawness and processing in the landscape.

The kibbutz is innovative in yet another sense too, being a non-obvious hybridization of city and country; a cross which rejects the bourgeois life style, but also the rural, atavist way of life. It introduces an anti-bourgeois view, which is never anachronistic or romantic since it is avant-garde, and therefore it is not anti-urban either; on the contrary: it draws as much as possible from concepts of urban planning in order to construct improved communal life in a landscaped setting, without giving up productive, technological, and cultural values. The collectivist approach strives to combine all aspects of life in a single locus in order to provide favorable conditions for creation and growth.

Looking at the layout plans of kibbutzim today, one realizes that the kibbutz is an early paragon of Landscape Urbanism—one of the most creative fields in the contemporary

architectural discourse. It is urban planning whose primary motivation is always the landscape. The organizational strategy begins with the footpath systems, the planting plan, the relationship between primary and secondary public areas, the total aesthetic experience of life within the landscape. The landscape in the kibbutz is not perceived as a picture, but rather as a performative space: it is the stage, the cooperative scene of action. The landscape is not ornamental as in the city; it is not a means to beautify the architecture or to fill empty spaces; it is the living space itself. It is a case of urbanism and architecture assimilated into the landscape, as opposed to the dogmatic separation of values which led to the creation of villages located within a "nature"-turned-industrial-zone, and cities completely alienated from nature.



The urbanist principle of separate-use zoning is implemented in the kibbutz in a fascinating manner. The separate use approach in the city stems from the ecologically and socially good intention to prevent such situations as people living next to factories. In many cities, however, this approach has led to the creation of islands: "sleep areas", commerce areas, areas of light industry, and recreation areas. Mixed-use zoning, the life force of urban life, goes to waste in the modernist city. In the kibbutz, due to the small scale, these "neighborhoods" of dwelling, public institutions, and agriculture function both as an active organism and as an efficient mechanism. Thus we have an internalization of modernist perceptions, but also true innovation with regard to the history of agricultural settlement.

Contrary to any known rural, suburban, or urban typology, the type "kibbutz" did not evolve from an ordinary starting point of parceling, of division into plots; instead it invented a new, indivisible architecture, which fundamentally eschews the entire history of territorial delineation and fencing known to us. This invention enables stain-like rather than linear, diffusive rather than contoured, textural rather than structural thinking, and strives to create a space without borders between the private and the public, and without fences between neighbors. It is a unique form of architecture since it eliminates the common affinity between the house and the plot, between figure and background, thus enabling implementation of kibbutz ideology, which strives to set some of the domestic functions apart, to render them collective, and reduce domesticity to the necessary minimum. The private and the collective are delivered from their polarity, falling into a continuum in a manner unknown elsewhere. Walking along the kibbutz paths, we are at home, and there is no practical difference between the large and the small lawns, between the dining room and the "room" (i.e. kibbutz apartment)—they are all flexible, multi-purpose signifiers in the

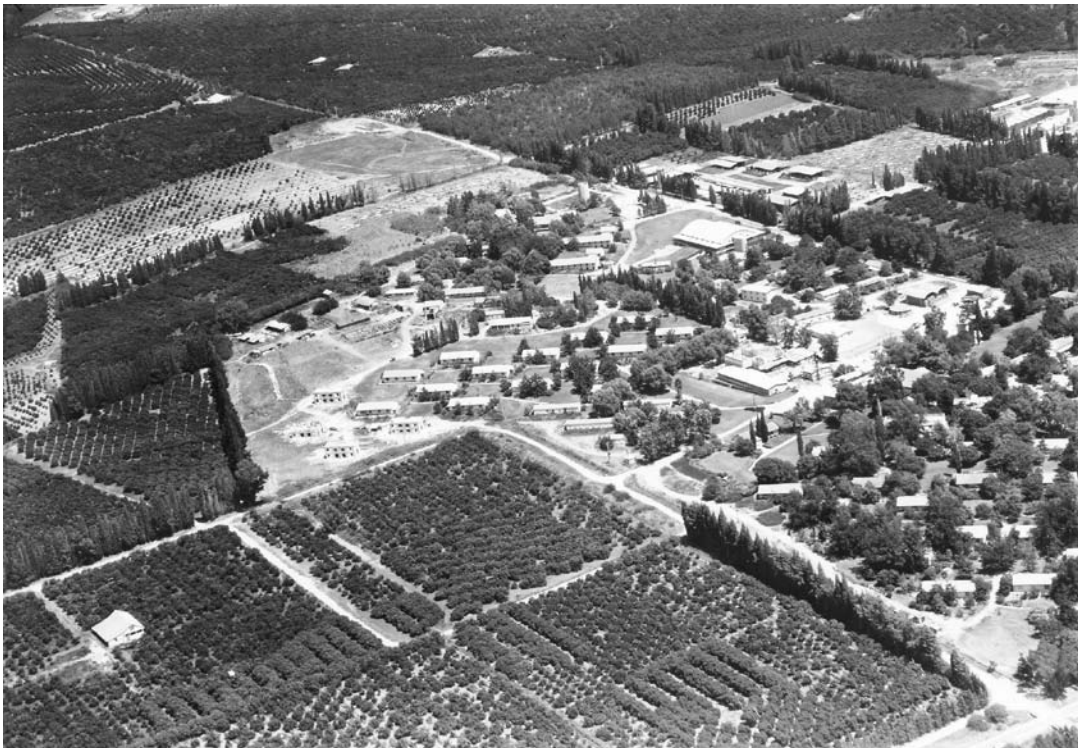
same continuous common space. Gatherings and ceremonies can take place on the big lawn or in the dining hall, in the culture club or in the field, and the same applies to chance encounters.

From the very outset, the kibbutz was regarded as the forerunner of the Zionist camp, as the ultimate realization of the New Jew and of New Settlement in the land of Israel; at the same time, however, the establishment regarded it as an esoteric current, which did not necessarily obey the dominant trends in the Zionist movement. The latter preferred more generic forms of settlement, which will be better able to devote themselves to their intended role as a network of villages which constitutes an agricultural hinterland for the renewal of Israeli society, without their having a defying cultural and ideological libido. The *moshav* alternative, although it also contains varying degrees of cooperativeness and mutual-guarantees, is a much more **state-minded** network, far simpler in terms of organization. The *moshav* is founded on a decentralizing division of agricultural land to individuals—as opposed to the kibbutz, which perceives itself as an autonomous economic unit with mixed economy. Even within the Israeli and Zionist context, the kibbutz represents Zionism and at the same time competes with it. It introduces entirely independent networks of production, supply, and marketing (as well as culture and education), which are not part of the official state system.

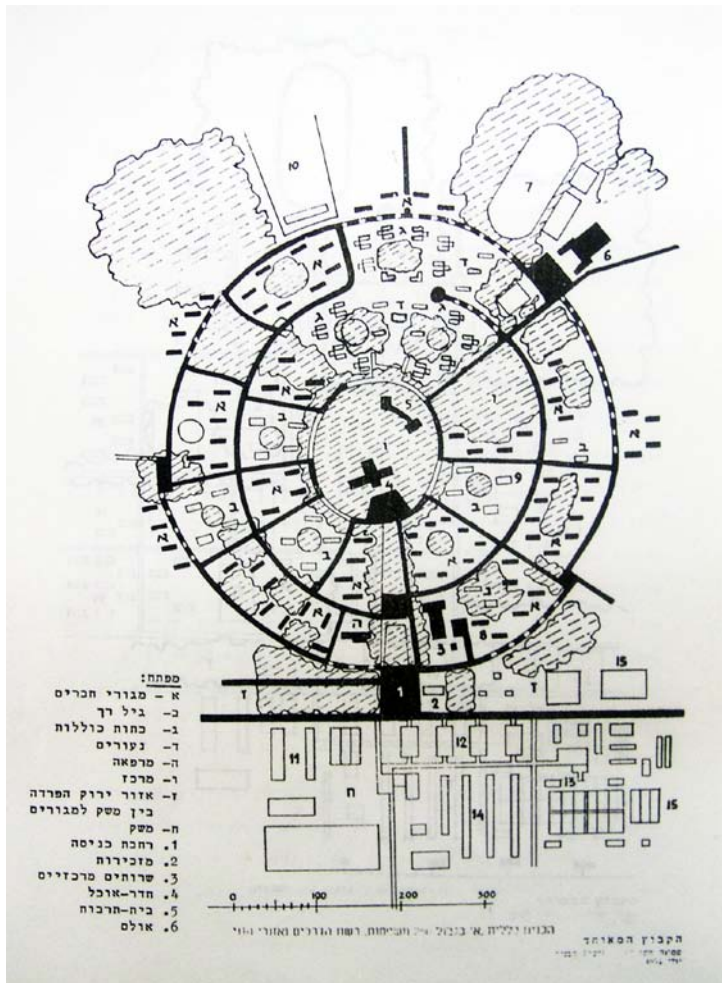
If we must preserve certain spatial values from our 20th century heritage, then the kibbutz is a worthy candidate, being an unprecedented model of architecture without parceling and of communal life which is not based on a contract, but rather on durable reciprocity in space. Understanding the uniqueness and significance of the kibbutz dictates the formation of a planning strategy which preserves its idiosyncratic spatial values while

proposing ways in which to revive the concept of the kibbutz and adapt it to the ideological and economic changes it is undergoing today. Can the privatization processes in kibbutzim be handled by means of renewed thinking of differentiation in contribution and payment? Is it possible, even today, to prevent atomization and fragmentation, and to avoid introduction of internal boundaries which will destroy the uniqueness of the kibbutz space?

Two major problems arise here: How are we to lead a process which will furnish kibbutz members with a certain sense of belonging, without requiring division into plots according to the model in communal settlements or suburban neighborhoods, and without overburdening the infrastructure (with access roads and parking spaces)? And a second problem: What should be done with the public buildings, that have become partly emptied of their original use, such as the dining hall, and possibly the clubhouse—buildings which previously functioned as focal points of the community's common life?



The issue of the kibbutz cultural buildings that have become empty of content is less complex than the issue of the kibbutz space, since, even in the kibbutz's privatized incarnations, these buildings may appeal to an outside public, and host various programs. This is not necessarily a situation of active communal gathering for a common activity. The big question pertains to the future of the dining hall: this open-ended, flat space, a large hall covered with a single roof. Is it at all possible to infuse such a space with an alternative program? In any event, this is a question that ought to keep the architect busy, a question which should be introduced for professional discussion with the participation of the members of the community.



The issue of adaptive reuse of spaces and buildings is not unique to the kibbutz; It is the most important architectural challenge of the 21st century: dealing with the "leftovers" of the 20th century, while creating new programs in a saturated world. Areas of production today undergo radical transformation as production shifts to the Third World, and many modernist typologies—cinemas, railway stations, factories, entire urban areas—become emptied of content. We witness, on the one hand, cities which contract for economic reasons, and on the other—the growth of megalopolises, even mega-regions in the "Third World." Architecture is constantly required to respond to these significant changes.

We have no choice but to accept the fact that we are living with layers of urban and architectural history, and instead of rushing to erase them, we must learn to reinterpret them, to adapt them to contemporary needs, and to develop within them. Obviously, this does not imply nostalgic conservation as such or clinging to an object whose sole value stems from its aging, but rather the construction of life within an environment which is an accumulation of ideas, techniques, experiences, aesthetics. It is our duty to identify what is valuable and what is relevant in that which was done before us, not in order to collect souvenirs, but in order to infuse the presence with depth via freer movement (back and forth) within the historical space. For example, we must determine what is so significant about architect Shmuel Bickels's work in the kibbutz; how his enterprise can be internalized in a way that will nourish our architectural practice and thought. If we fail to explain what is important and what is valuable to us in the existing built-up environment, we won't be able to create meaningful new architecture, one which is not arbitrary or detached. Engagement with the existent is not essentialist, but rather cultural, social, and political.



We cannot rethink the kibbutz space without delving into its history, without profoundly comprehending the architectural and landscaping processes which spawned it. We won't be able to plan the kibbutz anew without entering into a planning dialogue with the members, without leading to a situation where they themselves will sustain their habitat and identify with it once again.

A moment before the kibbutzim become mere manicured real-estate units, it is important to remember that their most significant quality is the common space which makes for a continuum between the private and the public, a community without fences and without partitions, and the sustenance of a full life in a single setting. In an era of accelerated privatization, this is the most pressing issue, and it ought to be discussed with the most charismatic people in the kibbutz movement, those who will be able to lead the next phase in its development and guide the kibbutz into another life cycle.