

Shikun

The term “shikun” – embalming the efficiency and the benevolence of the Welfare-State apparatus as well as the affrontery towards the public and the cohesive policy of social engineering associated with the ambitious project of providing elementary housing for the hundreds of thousands of new immigrants and veteran citizens in the first years of statehood - is, in fact, the proper name of a worker’s housing company, established by the Histadrut: the Shikun Company, active in the housing industry since 1928. In Shikun were developed the architectural precedents that designed the nation’s landscapes anew, determined the generic Israeli look, influenced decisively the national planning, building and dwelling culture, and illustrated spatially the alterations of local politics.

The British government, at the time of the Mandate (1917-1947), had not taken an active role nor a centralized policy in the field of public housing. The first organized public housing projects in Israel were established by the Histadrut with the aim of an institutional response to the growing housing distress of the workers and the municipal employees. The Histadrut’s initiative in this domain produced two main architectural typologies: Me’onot Ovdim (literally ‘Laborer’s Dormitories’) - cooperative worker’s housing projects in the heart or peripheries of the cities, mostly populated by the Histadrut elites – and Krayot Amal (literally ‘Labor Towns’)– garden-suburbs for unionized workers with low income. These two models paved together the way to the “block” and to the “Neighboring Unit” (a Block’s Compound, as it was referred to in professional literature of the 50s and 60s), that became the dominant unit in cities and townships during the first decades of statehood in Israel.

In matters of settlement and housing, the Histadrut activities expressed to the letter, the agenda and the taste of the hegemonous streams in the Zionist movement since the early years of the 20th Century. In general terms, this agenda envisioned an Arcadian Utopia comprised of productive agrarian villages and pastoral green suburbs. In 1913, for instance, Nachman Sirkin,

a prominent Zionist ideologue, recommended to establish in Israel-Palestine “cooperative garden-cities, factories, urban quarters, shops, food houses and cultural institutions – and all upon cooperative foundations, so as there would not be a place for capitalist exploitation, nor barbaric distinctions between the landlords and workers”.

The rhetoric that enveloped the erection of the Cooperative Worker’s Housing is similar, but their architecture indicates a significant deviation from the mainstream spatial conception of provincial Zionism. The essence of this deviation lies in the change of the conventional scale of housing units and in the articulation of the first prototypes of urban cells. In the petit-bourgeois urban fabric of the 20s and 30s, which was based on a parceling into small lots of private ownership and free-standing buildings (Ownership is a key factor since only landlords had the right to vote in municipal elections), the Cooperative Worker’s Housing compounds alone represented a correlation between Architectural Modernism and working class ethics and logistics. The reliance upon established European models (the Perimeter Block) and upon the newer ones (Parallel Row Blocks) and the exploitation of the Histadrut’s political and organizational capacities, made possible a concentrated acquisition of large lots, a continuous site plan up to the “zero lot line” and the merging of the unbuilt remainders of lots, which usually surround the local apartment building, creating a large, cooperative, protected and protective public space. In comparison to the rather porous existing urban building patterns, which emphasizes the autonomy of the single building and weakens the street edges – the elongated facades of the Cooperative Worker’s Housing offered the missing urban dimensions of size, continuity, density, efficiency and homogeneity.

However, the Cooperative Worker’s Housing more than providing the city, asked to be provided for; and their continuous walls, more than enhancing the street, screened it off and defined an exclusivity – an internalized existence, parasitical in the sense that it is totally dependent on the city but resists its logic, its liberal-bourgeois source of vitality. If we are to posit the Cooperative Worker’s Housing along the lineage of architectural reformation and urban

cooperatives , it should be emphasized that unlike 19th precedents – such as Charles Fourier’s Fallansteries, who developed communal models (still Neo-Classical) facilitating urban life for the workers and amplifying the new metropolitan experience – The Cooperative Worker’s Housing aimed to construct a revolutionary architectural cell that would be impervious to the Modernist City and its social malaise.

Following the establishment of the state in 1948, the disdain of the city assumed a different expression – less utopian, less privileged , more efficient: the big block that had been transplanted into the city as a “Trojan Horse”, as “Kibbutz+Bauhaus” (the name of Architect Arie Sharon’s biographical book) - was exiled far beyond its boundaries carrying the message of class solidarity on to remote regions , cloning itself endlessly in perfectly planned geometric fields, , relieving itself from the habits and memories of the old city.

The Labor Towns, though their ideological and mechanistic source was shared with that of the Cooperative Worker’s Housing, suggested an entirely different spatial model: spread, modular, minor, village-like, pronouncedly ex-urban. About three decades before the first Labor Towns were actually built, they were written in *The State of the Jews*:

“The workers' dwellings (which include the homes of all manual laborers) are to be erected by the Company itself. I am certainly not thinking of the dismal workmen's barracks of European towns, nor of the miserable shanties that are lined up around factories. Our workmen's homes must also present a uniform appearance, to be sure, because the Company can build cheaply only if it produces the materials in large quantities - but these detached houses with their little gardens shall be combined into attractive groups in each locality. The natural qualities of the surroundings will inspire the happy genius of our young architects which has not yet been sapped by routine, and

even though the people may not understand the great outlines of the plan, they will at any rate feel comfortable in this uncrowded arrangement.”

The distance between literary visions, advertisement leaflets and programmatic manuals diminishes upon studying the bulletin of the Shikun Company, which built Labor Towns on the outskirts of Haifa, Holon, Ramat-Gan and Tel-Aviv. It is written there that the company “is guided by the social ideal of spacious Garden-Cities for workers, offering a basis for a pleasant and healthy life, cooperative public responsibility as well as education and culture for all of its residents, [...cities] are designed for the purpose of aesthetics and comfort and planned for the well-being of the individual and the community.”

The term “Garden-Cities” is embedded so naturally in the text (as though it were not a polemical professional term loaded with numerous versions), due to the fact that the relationship between the Zionist establishment and the International Garden-City movement with its variations, was indeed fundamental. As a matter of fact, it may be said that the text of the Shikun Company was no more than a Hebrew translation of the definition adopted in one of the manifests of the founders of the Garden-City Association.

It should be pointed out that in comparison to the European origins of Garden-Cities and Garden-Suburbs, Labor Towns were less nostalgic and aestheticized (in the sense of Arts & Crafts) and more Spartan and schematic; less Nationalistic (in the sense of “Heimat”) and more class-conscious; less Romantic and more Productivist; less “back to nature” and more “settlement” and “working the land”; less lawns and flower gardens and more farm allotments and vegetable gardens; less a definite dream of the familial property and more a transitory training stage in the proper direction:: from the consumerist city to the productive village.

Berl Katzenelson – the ideological leader of the Hebrew Workers' Movement – referred to the subject of Labor Towns in the Council of the Histadrut in 1924: "If we cannot offer him [the urban and agrarian worker] to create a complete settlement, an orderly farm and a new industry, we will give to him, in the vicinity of the city, a plot, to enable him to establish his hut or cabin and his basic domestic farm, we will give him the Workers' Suburb": and at the Third Convention of the Histadrut, in 1927, Katzenelson said: "The forthcoming period is not a time for heavy settlement, but for a light one. If, during the coming year and the year to follow, our strength will not be sufficient for large settlement projects, we should attain a maximum of light settlements, meaning – farm allotments for the employed worker, a workers' neighborhood for the country laborer, a workers' neighborhood for the city laborer".

It should be emphasized that the interests of the Histadrut and the national goals were not always identical. From the perspective of the Histadrut, the urgent quantitative problem was to supply housing for the workers and employees in the central cities and townships. These crowds could not live a great distance from their work place and large plots on the outskirts of cities or in the country, which were usually under Jewish ownership, were required. The Jewish National Fund and the Jewish Agency, however, gave priority to the "Redemption of Land" that was not under Jewish ownership and to their cultivation by agriculture and forestry. For this reason, the national establishments reduced their part in the building projects of the Histadrut. With the establishment of the state the opposing interests were resolved when the Jewish National Fund received large areas of "abandoned lands" (a legal term referring to formerly Palestinian property deserted during the War of 1948 and held by the Israeli government) in the vicinity of the townships and handed them over to the Histadrut Housing companies, which were already skilled in the "rational planning of large areas". In addition to the land they accepted from the JNF, the Histadrut companies received concessions of leasing from the development authorities, on government land within the abandoned cities and villages (mainly Lod, Ramle, Yahud, Akir, Beit-Dagon, Yavne). Here it was proved that the "planning conception" of the Histadrut was not only good for the creation of settlements and model

neighborhoods *ad nihilo*, but also for the pioneering “rehabilitation” of destroyed settlements, as may be learned from the ten-year anniversary bulletin of the “Neve-Oved” company in 1954:

The company took upon itself the rehabilitation of several abandoned villages that were populated by families of new immigrants.

The Arab village, with winding alleys and wild buildings, is not suitable for any planning conception. Therefore, our planning included plots of land that were integrated with the village, upon which the company built the extended village; amongst these are Yahud, Beit-Dagon, Akir, Yavne. The village centers, in which there still exist inhabited buildings, were planned for public establishments and for gardens – and with time, the citizens will be relocated to the new quarters, and the old buildings, usually inappropriate for residence, will be destroyed.

The state’s responsibility for the planning and building of public housing had formerly been institutionalized in 1949 with the establishment of the Housing Department in the Labor Office, which dealt mostly with systematic and infrastructural solutions to the problem of housing the new immigrants (the managerial responsibility was entirely upon the state – but the execution was divided between the Housing Department, which built 29,645 apartments between 1949-1955, and the public companies, some of which were of the Histadrut, that built 29,630 apartments during that time).

The dilemma between “heavy settlement” and “light settlement” (as defined by Berl Katzenelson) – or a preferred combination of both approaches – stands at the core of the state’s building perception. In general, it may be stated that the Cooperative Workers’ Housing bequeathed to the state shikun its crudeness, the block as a basic building unit – while the Labor Towns endowed them the inexpensive plots outside the “neighboring units” with the

biomorphic contours, the principle of repetitive building prototype, and the replacement of the traditional street, with neighborhood centers of services and commerce.

In the beginning, the state adopted the pastoral model that the Histadrut had developed in the Labor Towns, out of the assumption that the uniform little houses (that in the state version were named "Blockons"), with generous farm allotments (between half a dunam and one dunam in size) to aid domestic economies, would be a quicker and cheaper response to the urgent housing problems, would encourage the production of basic foods for personal consumption in times of crisis, would allow the employment of an unskilled labor force in building (the tenants themselves), and would be the core from which the future growth of the house would extend. Typologically, the "blockons" were a little more diverse and complex than the houses of the Histadrut Labor Towns: single level, two-family houses, with apartments of 24 meters squared; two leveled, four-family houses with apartments between 25-29 meters squared and a shared staircase; or single level row houses of different length. And yet, these permanent, simple houses were not built at a satisfying pace and were left anecdotal in relation to the immediate accommodation needs in the first years of Israeli Independence. Upon this, the government developed in cooperation with the Jewish Agency, the temporary solutions for the masses of different camps and ma'abarot (transit camps), and also the project for populating "abandoned property". In most cases, the spacious "block" neighborhoods did not develop into a garden-suburb "designed for the sake of aesthetics and comfort", "the growing house" did not grow (at most, improvised sheds were annexed), the farm allotments became a junk yards, the gardens became fields of thistles, the infrastructure remained faulty, modesty and frugality became wretchedness and remoteness.

In the time that the state adopted the model of Labor Towns for the new immigrants – the Histadrut launched a "Veteran Citizen's" projects and built the first Block Neighborhoods in the country: compounds of row houses of three or four stories built on the outskirts of big cities (the example of Yad-Eliyahu in Tel-Aviv, Kiryat-Eliezer in Haifa or Kiryat-Moshe in Jerusalem).

Within these new compounds, the Histadrut hybridized both of its pre-state typologies to a new Israeli type, vague and radical at once: vague – in its attempt to negotiate between suburban “organic” conception and urban blocks; radical – in abandoning the block as a threshold defining the interior-exterior relationship and turning it into an autonomous object, disseminated frivolously in space, and indicating no more than general orientation, spacing and serial production.

Although the Veteran Housing projects began the process of mass reproduction and distribution of the blocks, they represented in themselves a status symbol, through which the Histadrut asked to maintain its position as a prominent housing authority in the face of the state’s agencies efforts to dictate generic standards. The area of an apartment in the Veteran Housing buildings was between 55 to 75 meters squared, twice of three times the area apportioned to new immigrants by the state. This significant gap enrooted the notion of “luxus apartment”, defined “Veterans” and “New-Comers” as distinct sectors in Israeli society, and enriched the lexicon of designated housing projects which classifies the eligibles according to the bizarre index of interest groups developing under the carpet of the egalitarian Welfare-State: Engineers, Foreign Office Officials, Military Officers, Krakow-ites, War Veterans, Anglo-Saxons, Agriculture Workers..

Following the first Emergency Years, with the launch of the project of evacuating the Transit Camps,, the Block became the “Philosopher’s Stone”, solving in itself spontaneously, as it were, the problem of housing the masses, regulating the demographic ratios between center and periphery, and supplying an architectural trope for the slogan of “melting pot”. What had began as the luxury of privileged socialists, , quickly turned into the “Housing Machine” of the Modern Welfare-State.

A seemingly paradoxical situation of growing authority of the state apparatus on one hand, and deepening sectoriality on the other, characterizes Israel of the 50s, and assumes its most

apparent embodiment in the Public Shikun. In the local race for housing, remained those who could not be labeled as workers of unionized work-places, refugees of specific traumatized communities of origin, or veterans of official organizations -those who were neither stately immigrants nor members of the Histradut and could not afford the prices of private housing projects. For them, was invented the sector “popular”, which became, against the grain of Labor politics, the first course of stones in the process of the privatization and commodification of the Public Shikun.

The “Popular Shikun” is not an architectural typology, nor a class distinction, but a process of financing and economizing based upon the individual participation of the tenants. The question of financing became central following the rapid increase of construction costs. In 1948, the price of one meter squared was 19.4 Israeli Pounds, and in 1953, already 74.4 Israeli Pounds – a rise of 400%. At the same time, the rise in mortgage loans made by banks was very slight. If, in 1948, the value of the loan made up about 40% of the cost of the apartment, in 1952, it valued only 16-20%. These circumstances demanded a greater intervention on the part of the government by way of funding– but also led to the gradual decline in the state’s position as the central building and housing body: In the first phase of the Popular Housing Project, the state provided comfortable government loans which made up 51% of the total building expenditure. In effect, the government was now a provider of securities, both to a growing number of potential tenants and to public and private companies, which could now increase their production. So began the shift of the Public Shikun from the ideological left to the economic right and the Popular Tenants, as they were referred to, went from being a crowd lacking means and choice, to a community of consumers with options to choose from and decision abilities concerning their homes (for instance, 60% of those who signed up to the Popular Housing Project abandoned their rights to be housed by it and eventually withdrew their deposits).