

Land Marks: The Emblematic Architecture of the Israel Museum and the Shrine of the Book

Zvi Efrat

(draft)

**[slide. general view, the hill before and after construction].*

The Museum Hill in Jerusalem - constructed in the early 1960's on the former lands of the Arab village Sheik Bader - has acquired an aura normally reserved to sacred sites and historical monuments. Evidently, its topological status has little to do with the value or interest of the treasures it beholds, even less so with the programmatic, functional, or aesthetic qualities of its various structures. In fact, as will be suggested here, before it was a place, an object, a landscape, it was already a landmark, a paper landmark, a graphic remark, an icon of a fabricated "genius loci", a fake relic of a (missing) past and at once a brave new model projected onto a white future.

The Museum Hill is one and often described as an "organic whole", but it consists of two distinct architectures: the first, that of the Israel Museum, is a megaform disguised as minor architecture, the second, that of the Shrine of the Book, is a compact garden folly invested with endless monumental aspirations. One (the Museum), was designed for the specific hill site it occupies, whereas the other was initially designed for

another site and only by circumstance landed on the hill. The structural, phenomenal and rhetorical difference between the two architectures will be developed in the following, but only in order to present them as varying manifestations of the same foundational notions sustaining Israeli architecture at large: the notions of displacement, un-grounding and de-territorialization.

The Israel museum was conceived in the late 50's - a decade after the establishment of the State of Israel - as a national art and archaeology museum. It was programmed to be both the storehouse of tangible historical evidence and the showcase of a rejuvenating nation, the sign of its creative force.

In 1959, an architectural competition was set up to determine the museum's architect. Ten of the major Israeli architects of the time were invited to submit their proposals. Most of their projects were futile attempts to pastiche International Style Modernism with archaic figures such as ziggurats and stepped pyramids. The winning project, by architects Alfred Mansfeld and Dora Gad (in charge of the interior), was the simplest proposition, the least presumptuous one, clean of any decoration and any archaeological motifs - (no motifs, yet the whole set up evoked an assemblage of ruins). It was sharp looking, reductive, and at the same time picturesque.

**[slide of the pers. + Malha]*

Its picturesque quality was not left for interpretation. It was expressed right at the head of the first board submitted by the architects through an analogical sketch depicting an Arab village, specified in writing as the village of Malha, and below it perspective and plan of the proposed museum.

As we learn from the competition proceedings, it was this sketch, this enchanting homology, that caught the attention of the jury and was the prime reason for their choice in this project. The village of Malha was accepted as the myth of origin that authenticates the museum to be.

The mechanism of dis-placement and re-placement at work here should be articulated in some detail since it soon became a legitimate and rather common mode of operation informing the production of the Israeli surface:

Malha, a village emptied of its inhabitants during the war of 1948, was confiscated by the government and declared “deserted property”. Its masonry houses were spared and used as temporary accommodations for new Jewish immigrants, usually of North-African origins. Later on, during the 60’s, the immigrants were engineered into pre-fab housing projects - those “melting-pots” created to compress difference and produce the still vaguely defined sameness called Israeli identity, while

Malha, vacant again, went through a process of gentrification. Like other particularly pictorial villages and neighborhoods under the legal limbo of “deserted property”, it was now colonized by resourceful squatters - bohemians of all sorts who could appreciate its beauty. After the war of 67’, the legal status of the property was changed to enable the squatters to buy the houses and establish the village as a desirable suburb - an “artists colony” that would cancel out any possible quest for return by the original owners.

Against such actual process of expropriation, it is hardly surprising to find the ghostly image of Malha emerging in architectural drawings as their poetic-truth factor. For most of the Israeli cultural community, the Arab village did not represent antagonistic reality or political conflict. It was the sign of the sensuous native; the soft image of organic, non-aggressive, anti-monumental architecture-without-architects. The frivolous appropriation of this image rarely raised moral questions, rarely pointed at the ongoing destruction and expulsion of indigenous communities, rarely hesitated to (dis)simulate that which it erases. Indeed, many local artists and architects of the time were obsessed with such appropriation, at least on paper, but the Israel Museum, to my knowledge, was the first and the most celebrated instance of its embodiment in actual built form - a “village” for a village.

A photo-collage created by Willem Sandberg, the museum's first director, leaves no room for mistake. The museum and the Arab village are flattened into one seamless and painless continuum. Sandberg's work is devoid of any reflexive dimension. It is not an acerbic critic about the technique of collage, nor about the orientalist gaze of the architect, but a simple admiration for the progressive architecture of the museum. (Sold for years as a poster at the museum's shop).

**[Photo-collage by Willem Sandberg, who was the museum's first director.]*

The collage shows morphological likeness between the museum and the Arab village, a superficial likeness to be sure, but it is precisely such trivial mimesis that allows it to subvert the image, to whiten the village and white-it-out, to oscillate on the high-low spectrum. The timeless setting of the native village is magically morphed into the aesthetic rigor of modernist scenography. Le Corbusier never did it any better.

**[slides. perspective views]*

A look at the architect's drawn perspective of the museum, reveals that alongside the appealing contour of the Arab village, the museum is haunted with yet another image, that of Mies van der Rohe's unbuilt "brick house" of 1923 .

**[slide. Mies's Brick House. perspective]*

The conspicuous import of this image to the museum hill is significant because the “brick house” is firmly established as one of the groundbreaking paradigms of modern architecture.

Peter Eisenman writes about the “Brick House” [*miMISes READING: does not mean A THING*, in *Mies Reconsidered*, ed: John Zukowsky, The Art Institute of Chicago and Rizzoli, 1986]:

**[slide. Mies. plan]*

“The first indication in Mies’s work of textual notation is found in the Brick Country House. The project begins to explore the limits of the independence of the object from the subject and how these limits can be articulated. It is concerned with the first order of textuality, the reduction of symbolic objects to mere objects, i.e., objects without the traditional narrative of man. With the Brick Country House, Mies begins to deploy the elements of architecture as textual counters. The first of these is the wall. Here the walls speak to the fact that there is no space in the house. The walls do not define space; rather, they define their own condition of being - that is, their capacity to support and their capacity to divide. Traditionally, walls are read as the perimeter of space: they either contain, enclose, or exclude space. But the walls in the Brick Country House are merely object presences, divisions where there is no space to

divide or where the space has been removed and only surfaces exist. Van Doesburg's painting of 1918, *Rhythm of a Russian Dance*,

**[slide, Van Doesburg]*

which is often cited as the original model for the Brick Country House, in fact does not reflect such an attitude toward space. It utilizes no such absence of space; in it space is active as ground. For Mies, the absence of space eliminates a major classical element - the ground - leaving the walls as suspended figures.”

Eisenman's argument is essential if we are to clarify if indeed Mansfeld, the Israel Museum's architect, aligns himself with Miesian architecture, if he is interested in textual notations, if the museum is “leaving the ground”, if it is concerned with the object at all?

**[museum. plan]*

A brief study of the museum's plan reveals that Mies is indeed misappropriated by Mansfeld. The free-standing walls and floating planes, become in Mansfeld's plan regular boxes - modular, reproducible, even, situated arbitrarily on a matrix.

The “Brick House”, radical as it may be, is still a discourse about the autonomy of the object, about form, about composition, and certainly about space (or spacelessness, as Eisenman suggests). The Israel museum, however, is not at all about the qualities and possibilities of the object, nor about form, composition, or decomposition. It abandons

modernist pre-occupations altogether in favor of a new kind of architecture, fashionable during the late 50's and 60's in Europe (especially around Aldo Van Eyck's circles) and derivative of structuralist theories of the time in linguistics, anthropology, psychology, and the new science of cybernetics.

This architecture was alternately called "Structuralist Architecture" and "the New Humanism". (Mansfeld referred to his work as Structuralist). "Humanism" - because of its anthropological gaze, its studies of native pueblos in America or Casba formations in north Africa. Structuralism - because of its reliance on Gestalt Theory and especially on what was called at the time System Theory. The logic and logistics of this architecture is best explained by Mansfeld himself:

"The system generates design, design sustains the system. Thus for us design is the act of preservation and enhancement of the intrinsic character of the system. At the same time we should always bear in mind that a system is merely a tool, in other words it is the language - Architecture created with its help becomes the speech".

The tautological circuits created by the so called "structuralist architects" could not be fully explored here. For our purposes, suffice it to point out that, in effect, we are talking about a new diagrammatic architecture based on binary thinking of plus-minus, open-close, form-counterform,

which organizes basic elements into spatial patterns called clusters, habitats, bee-hives, infra-structures, mega-structures and other favorable “concepts” of the time. What is so new and convenient about this architecture is precisely the fact that it is not architectural in the traditional sense of form-giving or space-making; it rejects the pre-determined object and the coherent form in favor of an auto-generic system - a system that reproduces, permutes and adapts itself along spatial and temporal axes. The built result - and the Israel Museum is one of the best existing examples - is an aggregation of cells or modules, interior and exterior, that have no definite shape or contour. They are formless in essence. Because they can change, grow, and “adapt” with time, they assume such attributes as “organic”, “environmental”, “topographic”, “regional”, and so on.

But rhetoric aside, the most useful quality of this architecture is its elasticity, (in contra-distinction to plasticity). The fact that it can expand and contract on its prescribed matrix and according to the rule of the system without changing its “genetic” character. Needless to say that in reality it only expands (the Israel Museum has tripled its size since its initial construction), and I dare take it further here - it is expansionist in nature and as such serves well any expansionist ideology. It tends to grow in increments, to crawl elusively; it eats up in time any emptiness

around it, it has no boundaries, no limits. It looks friendly, un-aggressive, because it does what it does “considerately”, not by way of monumental impositions, but through the dissemination of small scale units, camouflaged as it were in the topography, well situated. But then, it multiplies and expands like cancer. It covers ground in the most efficient way. It turns the Arab or Mediterranean paradigm into a deterritorializing machine.

Mansfeld’s title of his own work: “Growth, Change, and Uncertainty” summarizes the logic of “structuralist architecture” at large, but it also provides an astute insight into the principle drive and the guiding politics of Israeli architecture after the war of 1967 and the annexation of the “territories”. In a coarse outline, the history of Israeli architecture is divided between two general attitudes: the first, stretching from the very beginning of the Zionist settlement up to ‘67, is concerned with the idea of detachment. Albeit significant changes of style during this long period, architecture always accentuates the presence of the free-standing building: its intelligible form, its four elevations and defining roof, its separation from the ground, its indifference to topography and its cultural autonomy.

The second attitude has spread after ‘67 around Jerusalem with the frenzied construction of new satellite towns, neighborhoods and

settlements on the hills of the “new territories”, covering them with all kinds of clusters, “habitats”, “carpets” and “stepped housing”, all equipped with the structuralist code of formlessness and limitless growth. The Israel Museum, this diagram, this design-system, this collage of ice cubes against a biblical-imaginary, effectively reverberates between the rooted village and the isolated acropolis, between the hilltop bunker and the last site of aesthetic relief, between the refined model and the authoritative generator of the architectural “structuralism” that decomposed the Israeli landscape after 67’.

**[slide]*

Roland Barthes has written that structuralism could be defined historically as the passage from symbolic consciousness to paradigmatic consciousness. Perhaps, but let us be sure that the paradigmatic never fully recovers from the symbolic, never successfully blocks its own ideological and political abuse. It is, moreover, always a passage to the generic.

An enigmatic structure situated in the museum garden, near the main entrance to the compound, leads us on a passage back from the paradigmatic to the symbolic. The Shrine of the Book, as it is called, was conceived in the mid 50’s, several years before the Israel Museum was

designed and with no spatial relation to it. It's original site was a nearby hill, Givat-Ram, where the new campus of the Hebrew University and the National Library was being built.

The function of the Shrine was to house the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in 1948 in desert caves. The story of the discovery and purchase of the scrolls - indeed a fascinating script for an Indiana Jones sequel - and the contemporary debate about their writers and their significance, could not be elaborated here. For our story of the Shrine, suffice it to describe the scrolls as the oldest original documents found which include biblical texts and historical testimonies written between 150 B.C. and 70 A.D. (the time of the second temple), by members of an ascetic sect hiding in the caves of the Judea desert. The scrolls, then, point at a moment before the Jews dispersed in the Diaspora and the fact that their discovery coincided precisely with the end of the British Mandate in Palestine and the UN recognition in the State of Israel added an irresistible symbolic narrative, an a-historical linkage that connected the new state with a remote moment two thousand years ago. It provided a vertical, messianic linkage, that allowed to ignore the in between, the continuous history of the place. There are no Palestinians in this story, except for the Bedouins who actually found the scrolls. This revisionist "historicism" is well expressed in the architecture of the shrine. If the museum has built its

imaginary on the spatial foundations (and ruins) of the Arab village, the shrine constructs a totally fictional time and a totally fictional topos.

**[Kiesler and Bartos]*

The Shrine's architects, Frederick Kiesler and Armand Bartos, designed it as a self-contained object underneath the National Library. A one-to-one model was built on site to test the design. It was appeared to be a misfit within the hard-core International Style of the campus and was fiercely objected by the local architects of the campus. After a few more attempts to relocate it on campus, it was decided to move it over to the nearby museum hill, then under construction. (Kiesler disliked and publicly mocked Mansfeld's concept of the museum, but could not give up this last opportunity to build the Shrine).

Segments from Kiesler's diary reveal the pathos and mystic this projected was endowed with from the start:

October 25, 1957:

“Our firm was chosen to design a shrine for the scrolls, a shrine on the campus of the new university under construction. My partner Bartos and I flew to Tel Aviv. We rode up the hilly rode to Jerusalem and on the following day we sat with many of the faculty heads as well as the president of the university and listened to the story of the origin and discovery of the precious documents. The account seemed to me beyond

belief but, as I learned later, was factual indeed. The earth had given forth seeds of truth”.

October 27, 1957:

“Two days later, on the flight back to New York, unable to sleep, I turned the overhead light on. I quickly designed: a double parabolic dome. The drafting went rapidly and when it was finished, it spoke to me with conviction as a plastic representation of ‘rebirth’”.

Spring 1958:

“When we returned to Jerusalem, the concept was fully approved by the faculty. The gratifying fact was that no further explanations were necessary. The plans were exhibited on the walls. Everybody seemed to understand”.

(I skip the pages describing the rejection by the local architects and the new location on the museum grounds).

October 13, 1959:

“We went to Haifa, invited by Al Mansfeld the architect of the new art museum in Jerusalem, whose neighbor, the Shrine, will soon be within the galaxy of museums. In Haifa one can practically hear the growing pains of this city, squeezed between Arabian culture and Western industrialism”.

Fall 1959:

*(Here Kiesler describes the addition of the black wall next to the white shrine. This wall was received by many as a reference to the welling wall, then in the Jordanian controlled part of Jerusalem and inaccessible to Israelis.)

“Today was another victory in the making. It concerns a new type of a giant free-standing-wall, with an unusual method of joining the chunks which form it. This huge barrier would be built up of boulders of basalt in the raw, just as they came from the crater.This concept was the result of the new location (the museum) since the plot is entirely open on all sides to the views of the hills. In addition, the white dome demanded a counterbalance in shape and color”...

April 20, 1965

“The Shrine of the Book opens with a gala ceremony”.

**[the shrine in water]*

If the Museum was described above as an architectural metonymy, the Shrine of the Book is a pure metaphor. A metaphor of the new Israeli State erupting from tectonic depth and solidifying in a sudden into a monolithic form: pure, sterile, just, soft-and-hard, plastic-but-not-elastic. It was born autonomous and finite, indifferent to anything beyond itself,

untouched by time and circumstance, unable to decay, to accumulate patina, to grow old. An enigmatic, scaleless vessel that has landed in the museum garden to mediate between a legendary past and a fanciful future.

The architecture of the museum tries to blend in, to fit, to be rooted, and it does so by reducing village formation into a diagram; by lowering its architectural profile and blurring its form. The Shrine of the Book, on the contrary, is accentuating its figurative presence and idiosyncratic form in order to stand-out and exist-beyond. If the museum plays authenticity, the shrine is all about artificiality and superficiality: a sculpture, perhaps, with not a hint of the mundane or the inhabitable. An odd monument enclosing, protecting and edifying the document.

The exterior hygiene of the Shrine is reversed once entering inside.

***[inside the shrine]*

The interior is all about the overwhelming tactility of a cave, the evocation of primordial antiquity, the softness and wetness of intra-uterus space - the kind of architecture dreamed and described by the Surrealists. And then, after the visitor is led through such groto-esque experience, he is led from dark to light, from the sensorial to the intellectual, from the stone to the text. The scrolls are at the center, under a column of light - fetishized to an absurd degree.

From the moment it opened to the public, the Shrine of the Book accumulated a myriad of applied meanings. Everybody seemed to have his own idea of what it is and what it stands for. There was nothing like it before in Israel, because there was no real symbolic architecture to speak of, except for archaeological remnants and religious sites.

Kiesler, on his part, denied that the Shrine had any symbolic meaning. In a reply to a newspaper article in the Jerusalem Post he insisted on the purely structural and functional qualities of the building, but his insistence constantly slipped into the depths of the symbolic and only re-affirmed the mythical status of the building:

“Your correspondent sees symbols in the upper part of the dome as of a woman breast, as of an onion, as of a pagoda, or as a turbine station. Of course, everybody is free to develop his parallels of imagery, but it would have been more professional from a journalistic point of view to interview one of the architects before writing the account, rather than relying on gossip. The sanctuary is neither an image of a breast, nor of an onion, but simply a vessel, a container that rises from deep down the underground in a traditional double parabolic form, from a wide base to an open neck. It is a continuous flow of a new type of shell construction which I have been developing since 1924 and which has proven structurally highly resistant and, in this case, a valuable design for

maintaining an even temperature and breaking the reverberations within a circular building. There are so many industrial techniques and equipment incorporated in the construction of the site that they cannot be accounted for here. They are not just functional designs - but they are “developed” functions incorporated into a ritual building. There is no symbolism attempted. *The Shrine is a purely structural design in which the idea of continuity from the past and present into the future is expressed*”. (My emphasis).

The Israeli built landscape of today is a dense matrix of hilarious metaphors which constantly invent false connections between past and future - overlaid on a surface of creeping metonymies which defy contours, erase borders and liquidate space. The museum hill, both the lab and the emblem of this landscape, remains isolated, white, well preserved, immune from the virus it disseminated.

