

The Politics of New Towns in Israel

Israel has been, since its inception as a state over 60 years ago, one of the most prolific proliferators of New Towns. In principle, civilian occupation and the setting up of new settlements has always been construed as Israel's most effective weapon in an ongoing territorial and ethnic warfare. Against all economic and social sense and often by various means of population engineering, dozens of New Towns were built and are still being built today, albeit in a slower rate. Like other practices of mass armament, New Towns policy is a mystified strategy taken for granted as both a redemptive act and a survivalist impulse. It is therefore safe to assume that in the foreseeable future it is highly unlikely to expect Israel to sign any New Town non-proliferation agreement. So, if there is such a hidden agenda to this conference, do not count on Israel. This would counter its instinctive predisposition of continuous manipulation of its own boundaries as well as constant fragmentation of the yet to be shaped Palestinian state.



Allow me then to declare in advance the conclusion of this paper: the notion of New Towns in Israel – within or beyond the "green line" - designates three fundamental and inter-related Zionist pro-active ideologies, or rather ideological practices:

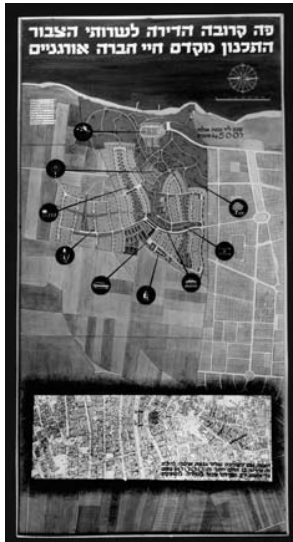
The first is the praxis of geographic dispersal and marginalizaion, to the degree that the state as whole, or at least most of it, is perceived as frontier, a perceptually precarious zone that necessitates vigilant measures all the way through both public and private realms.ⁱ

The second is the praxis of gradual ethnification or jewishification of space in ways subtle or blunt. The New Towns of the 50's, for example, were not only low-cost housing depositories, but also a project of systematic obliteration of Palesitnian indigenous towns. A recent example would be the newest New Town processed these very days in Israel, the town of Harish at the heart of the Arab area of Wadi Ara.

Harish is explicitly designed for Ultra-Orthodox Jews only with the double mission of providing urban solution for the particular needs of this fastest growing community, and creating an instant "demographic equilibrium" in the area.

The third Zionist praxis informing the rate of production and the architectural qualities of the Israeli New Towns is de-urbanization, or more precisely unti-urban urbanization. Simply said, the New Town is conceived as a machine to dissolve notonly the native town of the past, but even more so the big city of the future, or the future of big cities.





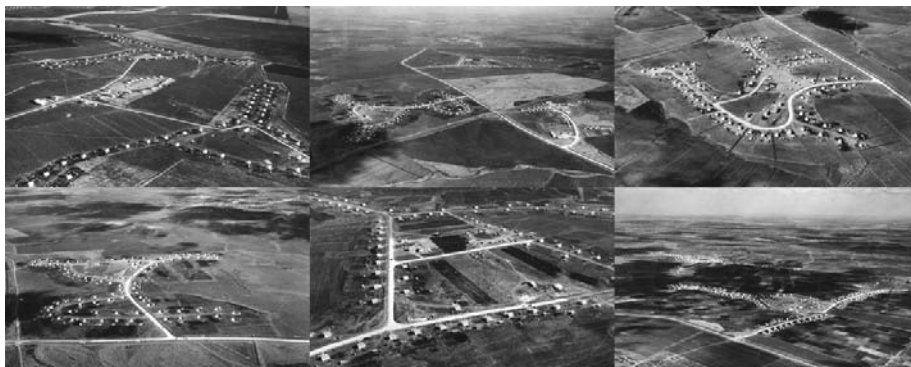
I will elaborate on these particular notions and practices later on, but since the term Politics appear in the title of my paper, let me clarify here that for me, in this context, Politics simply means the consolidation and maintenance of these practices across the Israeli ideological spectrum, keeping it afloat from Left to Right; from physiocratic socialism of the formative decades of the State of Israel, to the neo-liberal or neo-conservative fundamentalism of the last decades; from the workers' Garden Cities of yesterday to the dormitory Gated Communities of today.

Indeed, the architecture of the Israeli New Town has been transformed considerably as I will briefly clarify - mimicking the shifts of political taste and consumption trends - but the very notion of an ever open process of towning has always been kept alive. Needless to say that this open process is an entropy of accelerating deterioration, since New Towns are doomed to quickly grow old, drained and partially abandoned, in face of a newer town with ever more enticing tax exemptions, ever more seductive sun sets and ever more indulging infra-structures. So, towning, at least in Israel, is always also a cover up operation for an indirect yet highly effective process of urbanicide.

The Israeli New Town was born in 1950 as an integral component, or more precisely as the highlight, of what is known as the Sharon Plan.ⁱⁱ

Generally speaking, the concept of New Town is second name for centralized planning and centralized planning is the emblem of the Zionist spirit itself, emanating from layers of fictional prose, ideological manifestoes or programmatic protocols and printed on the landscape over and over again with every new spatial move or architectural object since the end of the 19th century.

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.



As a rule it may be said that in its first fifty years, during the first half of the 20th century, the Zionist movement devised and developed a range of pioneering models of agricultural settlement supported by sophisticated logistics of manufacture, organization and marketing (the most legendary of those is the Kibbutz), but never imagined, planned, or actually built a city. In fact, the modern metropolitan city was consistently portrayed in both literary utopias and direct propaganda as an anathema to the Zionist concept of land redemption; a parasitic growth threatening to undermine the primary values of the re-emerging Hebrew civilization. Thus, controlled planning and a well-coordinated course of action had characterized the Zionist Enterprise from its very outset - however, the country's crucial "conversion" was

obtained with the founding of the sovereign state of Israel. Only a few weeks after the Declaration of Independence and still during the War of 1948, Arie Sharon, a Bauhaus graduate and one of the prominent architects of Israel's Labor Movement, was commissioned to establish the governmental Planning Department. Within about a year, this department presented an overall master plan for Israel and provided the political leadership of the time a powerful tool for molding a new landscape and dictating the shape of things to come.



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 (mainly those coming from Asia and North Africa). 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. (The Sharon Plan aim 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. Today, about 20% of the Israelies live in new towns, much less than projected by the Sharon Plan, but still a fairly large portion of society).

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 – or the New Town, whose optimal size was the subject of lengthy academic discussions among the planners. Over 30 New Towns were built during the 50's and 60's. 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 real-estate and other urban illnesses associated with the cosmopolitan city.



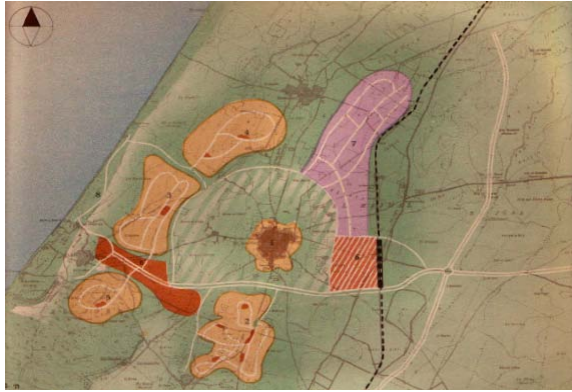
In order to prevent at all costs the development of unruly colonization and socialization patterns typical of New World countries and immigrant societies, the Sharon Plan chose to emulate the European historic layout, whereby the majority of

the population dwells in small and medium-sized towns integrated into the agricultural hinterland, and only the minority lives in the big cities.



The planners of Israel tried to squeeze this historic process into a single heroic decade, backing their ambitions with intricate pseudo-scientific theories that analyzed the link between settlement patterns and endurance during times of crisis. (An especially authoritative model for the Israeli planners was the “Theory of Central Places”, formulated by German geographer Walter Christaller in his 1939 doctoral research and implemented by the Nazis in the occupied regions of Poland).

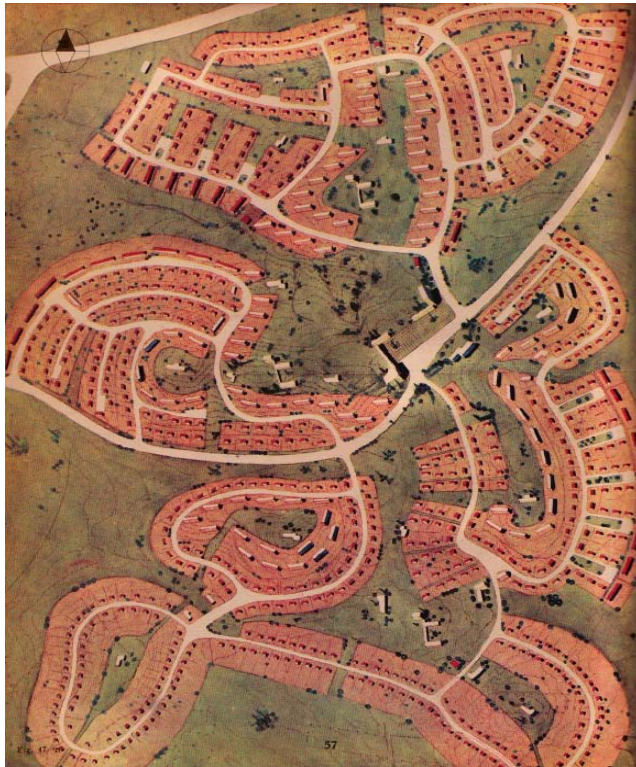
The general Zionist attitude of activating a regressive revolution, or a pioneering Old World, may be discerned not only in the dispersal of towns and settlements on the map, but also in the attempt to base the architecture of the towns themselves on a conceptual crossbreeding between mechanistic planning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



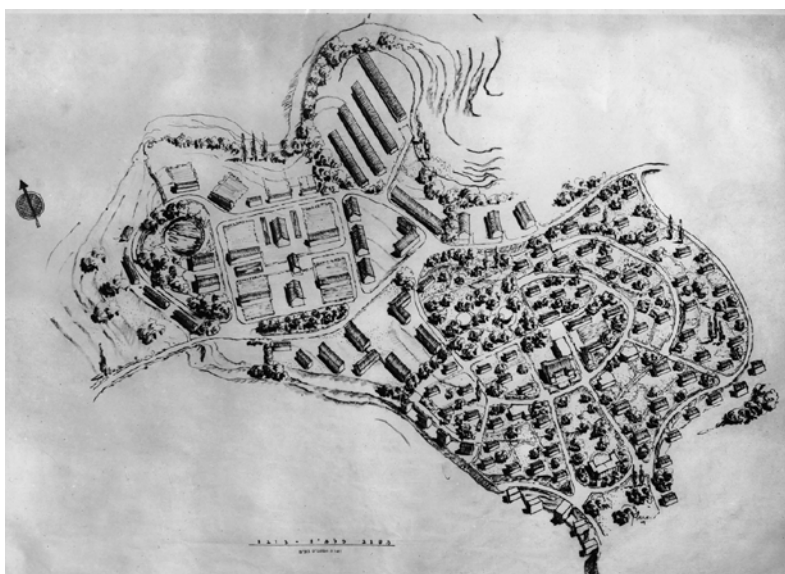
The Neighboring Units were the structural organizing principle of the new towns. In theory, they were intimate urban sections with biomorphic contours that rejected orthogonal grids and endowed the instant towns elasticity and vibrancy. In reality, the separation into autonomous units created a jumbled grouping of disembodied organs containing a limited variety of housing types and self-contained in terms of commerce, education and leisure services.

The smooth, plexing lines of the units; the abundance of open space within and between them; the placement of education and recreation facilities at the heart of the units amidst lawns or woods; the removal of industrial areas from living quarters and their separation by green belts; the design of repetitive social housing on undivided land, rather than normative parceling and speculative construction – all these forge 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, the New Town came into being superficially and coercively— a professional and bureaucratic doctrine forced upon a population of unsuspecting immigrants 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 towns 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 pace at which the immigrants were sent to the New Towns. Veteran urban population remained in the cities and ignored the national challenge. 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 the New Towns, and completely discounting the planners’ regionalist vision. The vast expanses that had been water-colored green on paper, were totally inappropriate to the climate, the water resources and the maintenance facilities in the country, and in reality became dead zones, severing the urban fabric. The autonomous, inward-looking units and the separation of motorways and walkways, obstructed the development of street-life.



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. The citizens of the New Towns who played a historic role in realizing the 50's rhetorics of "Bynian Ha'aretz" (building the land), became the propagators of the social unrest and political turnabout of the seventies, which brought the rise to power of the Right Wing Likud Party and the first loss of hegemony of the Labor Party.



Citizens of "second Israel", as the New Towners were called, were now in a position to protest the patronizing project of the Left and to demand retribution for their effacement in generic housing projects and for keeping them away from property ownership.

Prime-minister Menachem Begin and minister of housing David Levi, himself a North African immigrant of the 50's, a New Towner from Beit She'an and a former construction worker, responded quiet effectively by launching a nationwide project of 'Build Your Own House'. The springing satellites of this project were perplexing from the outset and seemed like a vengeful costume party of former public housing residents, celebrating their new status as landlords and joyfully desecrating the forced solidarity and anonymity of the State's top-down engineered landscapes. Against every conceivable principal of the socialist New Town, it was now enveloped by rings or clusters of subsidized subdivided land, sold in small plots to the town's better to do residents so they could give shape to their own notion of identity, or at least their own personal protest against the local dialect of modern architecture.

[Photos by Gilad Ophir]



בנינת ארז, ארז עקב, ס' 33, 1993, no. 25, Neighborhood Of Akiva
בנינת ארז, ארז עקב, ס' 34, 1993, no. 24, Neighborhood Of Akiva

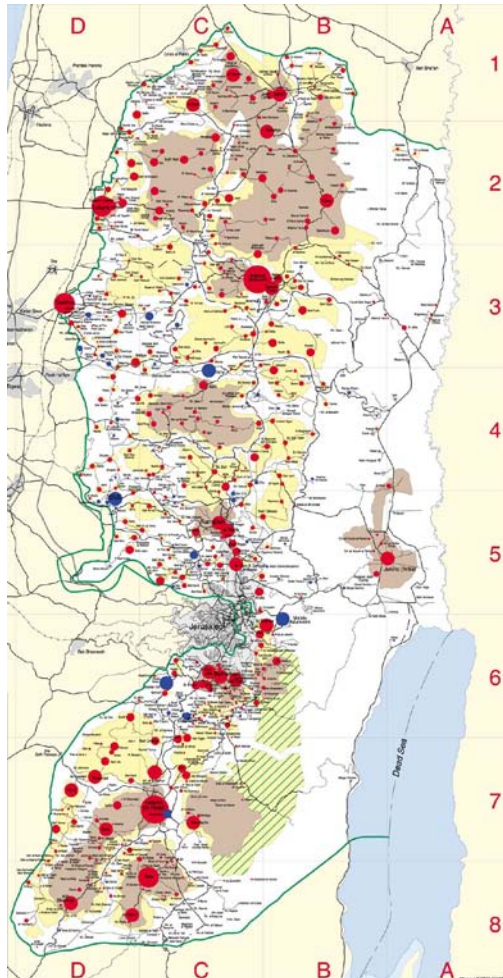


Sure enough, the process of privatization of land and property only increased patriotism and amplified the political power of the Right. If indeed New Towners traditionally voted for the Right (in rates of 70-80%), they did so during the 50's and 60's in protest against their marginalization and subjugation, while from the 70's on they could do so as equal participants in a project, not merely national, but overtly nationalist and ethnocentric. In a strange turn of events, owning a villa became patriotic, as if being a landlord had greater symbolic implication; and residing in suburbia meant from now on living in a 'community settlement', as if rural setting had some amalgamate effect. The collective neighborhoods and austere public housing projects of the old New Towns became a liability of the old regime, memorials of days of Bolshevism.

The very policy of proliferating New Towns was not reversed by the successive Right wing governments. Quiet the contrary, it was radicalized and used efficiently to push forth their political agenda and territorial ambitions. Drained of its socialist rhetoric of the melting pot, twisted from its origins in Garden City reformist schemes and cut off from the regionalist vision of equilibrium between the urban and the rural – the New Town of the Right appeared as a plain instrument to establish political "facts on ground" and create a permanent and irreversible civilian occupation of the west bank and the Gaza strip.



In the West Bank, an ever expanding network of civilian outposts and colonies of various sizes and varying degrees of urbanity was laid out on the hilltops, housing growing numbers of inhabitants, reaching today about half a million. Like the Kibbutzim in the past, who spearheaded the old Zionist settlement movement, it was now the ideological and religious settlers of Gush Emmunim who pioneered the Jewish settlement of the West Bank and triggered an ever-increasing migration drift toward and across the 'green line'.



Unlike their predecessors, the new settlements could not rely anymore on social engineering and crowds' mobilization in order to develop and multiply, nor could they expect state-owned industries as instigators of workers-towns or market forces as generators of company-towns. Beyond politics (and tax benefits), they had to fabricate anew their *raison d'être*, their civic appeal and their urban typology, even if they hardly had a viable economic justification, even if they could not offer local employment, even if their pastoral settings could barely conceal the inherent hostility and danger found in their very inception.



While the ideological settlers took control over the inner West Bank hilltops overlooking Palestinian towns and villages, 'dwelling improvers' seeking better 'quality of life' inhabited the New Towns closer to the pre-1967 border, which were in effect garden satellites of the greater metropolitan area of Tel Aviv. For the price of a small apartment in Tel Aviv, and at a distance of 20-30 minutes drive from the big city, settlers could get hold of their own red-roofed house and benefit from massive government subsidies.



Eyal Weizman, in his rigorous studies *Hollow Land*ⁱⁱⁱ and *A Civilian Occupation*^{iv}, (actually, the only existing analyses of the architecture of the Jewish occupation of the West bank), clarifies the ostensible mimesis between geography and urban layout in the new settlements:

The mountain settlement is typified by a principle of concentric organization in which the topographical contours of the map are retraced as lines of infrastructure. The roads are laid out in rings around the summit with the water, sewage, electricity and telephone lines buried under them. The division of the lots is equal and repetitive, providing small private red roofed houses

positioned along the roads, against the backdrop of the landscape. The public functions are generally located within the inner most ring, on the highest ground.^v



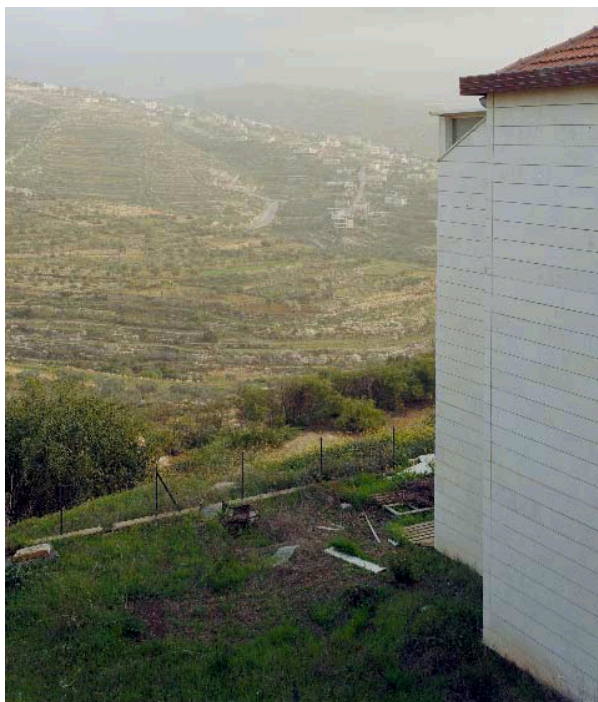
So unlike the old New Towns of the 50's and 60's which were often located in desolate countryside with dull scenery and therefore had to assume an arbitrary form and fake their own organicity, the new New Towns of the West Bank were "the end results of tactical, land use and topographical constraints".^{vi} And, indeed, if the old New Towns were meant as municipal crossroads or service centers within a regional network (or at least, a regionalist vision), the new New Towns were devised as 'cul-de-sac utopias', a typology of their own, within a cartographic patchwork of isolated nodes and oversized infrastructure. Sociology, as we read in Weizman's work, comes with the territory and takes its proper shape. Again, unlike the crowding subjects with erased identity of the old New Towns, it is now pro-active settlers organized in gated communities:

Socially, the 'community settlements', a new settlement typology introduced in the early 1980's for the West Bank, is in effect an exclusive member's club with a long admission process and a monitoring mechanism that regulates everything from religious observance thru ideological rigor. Furthermore, they function as dormitory suburbs for small communities which travel to work in the large Israeli cities. The hilltop environment, isolated, overseeing and hard to reach, lent itself to the development of this newly conceived utopia. The

community settlements create cul-de-sac envelopes, closed off from their surroundings, utopian in their concentric organization, promoting a mythic communal coherence in a shared formal identity^{vii}.



What is actually new in this settlement typology? Its particular hybridization of various local and imported models, urban and rural settings, civilian and military designs. The postcard dormitory community of New Urbanism is superimposed here with sectarian, often messianic, territorialism. The structural and communal cohesiveness of the Kibbutz is blended into the nouveau rich ambiance of 'Build Your Own House' neighborhoods and re-enacted as the new Heimat iconography.



While the old New Towns remain more or less as they had originally planned - barren Garden-Cities, lethargic Development Towns, bypassed regional centers, homogeneous melting pots, under-developed urban odds and ends still struggling to preserve their special Class-A tax-reduction status, granted by the various governments to 'areas of national preference' – most of the new New Towns are thriving and rated consistently among the highest in Israel in terms of living standards, municipal services, education and even security. (In Ariel, one of the biggest urban settlements in the West Bank, there is even a university and a school of architecture). It should be pointed out that sham and superfluous as they may be, these settlements are never referred to as New Towns. So instantaneously are they naturalized and soaked into the Israeli field of vision.



Building regulations in Israel require a public shelter in every public building, a common shelter on ⁱ
each floor of an office building and a private shelter in each new or renewed apartment.
The following description of the New Towns of the 50's and 60's is Based on my research *The Israeli* ⁱⁱ
Project, Building and Architecture 1948-1973 (published in Hebrew by the Tel Aviv Museum of Art,
2005)
Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land, Israel's Architecture of Occupation*, (Verso, London, 2007) ⁱⁱⁱ
Eyal Weizman and Rafi Segal Eds., *A Civilian Occupation, The Politics of Israeli Architecture*, ^{iv}
(Babel, Tel Aviv, Verso, London, 2003)
A Civilian Occupation, p.83 ^v
Ibid. p.83 ^{vi}
Ibid.pp83-84 ^{vii}