

ARCHITECTURE FOR A FUTURE – PAST

ARCHITEKTURA DLA PRZYSZŁOŚCI – PRZESZŁOŚCI

Abstract

The paper addresses the notion of early modern architecture as an artistic endeavor to combine past tradition and innovation in a single work of architecture. The cultural criticism and writings of Paul Valery and the design approach of Auguste Perret are identified as reflecting this notion, which is furthermore exemplified in the work of Alfred Neumann and Zvi Hecker from the 1960s, and evident in more recent architectural designs such as Rafi Segal's winning proposal for the National Library of Israel.

Keywords: architecture, future, poetry, art, modernism

Streszczenie

W artykule poruszono problematykę architektury wczesnego modernizmu rozumianej jako artystyczne dążenie do połączenia minionej tradycji z innowacyjnością w ramach tego samego dzieła architektonicznego. Krytyka kultury i teksty Paula Valery'ego oraz podejście projektowe Auguste'a Perreta uważane są za odzwierciedlenie tego pojęcia, które obecne jest również w twórczości Alfreda Neumanna i Zvi Heckera z lat 60-tych, a także wyraźnie zauważalne w nowszych projektach architektonicznych, takich jak zwycięska propozycja Rafi Segala dla Biblioteki Narodowej Izraela.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, przyszłość, poezja, sztuka, modernizm

1. INTRODUCTION

As Dariusz Kozłowski states in the conference statement “Modern Architecture is not the architecture of the future, it is the architecture – for the future.” Perhaps this is true for architecture in general and not only in regard to that of the modernist period. Although Modern Architecture – and I refer here first of all to the mid-20th Century idea of modernism as promoted by leading ‘modern masters’ such as Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius – has been associated with that which fully embodied a vision for the future, a ‘new architecture for a new era’ freed from any ties to the past. This is not the only legacy of modernist principles. An earlier generation of architects saw modernism primarily as a means to combine traditional principles of architecture with new building techniques. Early twentieth-century pioneers such as Adolph Loos, Peter Behrens, Auguste Perret, and Gunnar Asplund, who developed their work outside the avant-garde (i.e., without being associated as an avant-garde), saw the potential of modernism in its ability to unify tradition and innovation, and to implement neoclassical principles with a new architectural expression.²

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² K. Britton, *Auguste Perret*, Phaidon Press, New York 2001, pp. 14–15. Similar ideas were also expressed

In this short essay I will attempt to draw an intellectual lineage between this approach to architecture and the design thinking and work of Alfred Neumann and Zvi Hecker in the 1960s and my own work of the past years. In particular, the two projects I reference as examples highlight that the extension of tradition into new forms and expressions is primarily influenced through the medium of a cultural context: namely, how traditional forms are abstracted in response to the particular features of the site, place, climate and cultural heritage.

2. TRADITION AND NEW EXPRESSION: ARCHITECTURE AND POETRY

*Tell me (since you are so sensible to the effects of architecture),
have you not noticed, in walking about this city, that among
the buildings with which it is peopled, certain are mute; others
speak; and others, finally – and they are the most rare – sing?.*³
Paul Valéry

Auguste Perret was an influential and prominent teacher as well as practitioner who advanced the understanding of architecture as a discipline of what he termed “constructive logic.” According to Perret, assuring historical continuity while utilizing contemporary materials and techniques of construction in an innovative way offered a solid base of logical thinking that reflected a rational approach to architecture.⁴ For example, while tradition centers the importance of a proportion system as a design tool, basing the modulation of a building’s façade to a human scale or the symmetrical ‘classic’ layout of a plan, new materials such as concrete provided potential for innovative expression in design. As a result, modern practice was not a rejection of the base principles derived from historic architecture, but rather a reinterpretation of past traditions in the present cultural context.

Perret’s approach, as well as that of his contemporaries, was largely influenced by the literary and cultural criticism of writer Paul Valéry, particularly his renowned *Eupalinos, or The Architect*.⁵ Likewise, Perret’s notion of the architect follows closely Valéry’s notion of the poet.⁶ According to Valéry, the artist (poet) strives for new expression since that is the nature

in: Kenneth Frampton, *Notes on Classical and Modern Themes in the Architecture of Mies van der Rohe and Auguste Perret* [in:] *International Alvar Aalto Symposium*, and A. Salokorpi, *Classical tradition and the modern movement*, Finnish Association of Architects, [Helsinki] 1985, pp. 20–41.; Elias Cornell, *The Modernist and History*, from the same publication, pp. 8–21. Also see Peter Collins, *Concrete – The Vision of a New Architecture*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, London 2004 (second edition, first published by Faber and Faber 1959), particularly the foreword to the second edition by Kenneth Frampton and the introduction by Réjean Legault.

³ P. Valéry, “Eupalinos, or The Architect,” *Dialogues*, translated by William McCausland Stewart, with two prefaces by Wallace Stevens (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1956). “Eupalinos, or The Architect” was originally written and published in French in 1921.

⁴ This approach was prevalent within the Palais du-Bois – a studio set up by Auguste Perret for students and interns.

⁵ Karla Britton points out, “the intellectual foundation for Perret’s professional convictions,” K. Britton, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁶ Perret clearly stated that the architect was to be seen as a poet and architecture is to be understood as a combination of science and poetry. See A. Perret, *Architecture: Science et Poésie*, La Construction Moderne, 1932, no. VIII/2, pp. 2–3.

of the creative act and the guiding force, the *raison d'être* of all artistic aspiration. The search for the new is inherent to the act of artistic creation and stems from within the individual artist's inner desire for expression. It therefore need not be justified or argued by any other external reasons or explained as a response to changes occurring in the external world. Every era brings with it change, and within every artist lies the potential of new expression. Yet the human condition – the desires and needs of human beings – remains relatively unchanged throughout history. According to Valery's *Eupalinos* the architect's task, similar to the poet, is not necessarily to emphasize what has changed in the world but rather what has remained the same, expressed in a new way. That is how poetry extends time.

In architecture, as in other arts, the act of creation aspires to achieve the highest degree of expression; that is, to be considered "poetic." By poetic I refer to Joseph Brodsky's definition: "Poetry is not an art or a branch of art, it's something more. If what distinguishes us from other species is speech, than poetry, which is the supreme linguistic operation, is our anthropological, indeed generic, goal."⁷ The analogy of architect to poet, and thus architecture to language, is constructive in distinguishing between content (function/program) and form, as it suggests a conceptual divide between "what is said" and "how it is said." The separation between form, the means of expression, and content, the substance, idea, or function being expressed, dismantles the later modernist fixation of tying form and function together as inseparable, and so allows 'expression' to stand on its own as the cultural contribution of the architect (as artist) to society.

This understanding was shared by Alfred Neumann, a student of Auguste Perret, and by Zvi Hecker, Neumann's student and later collaborator, and one that I share as well. Neumann and Hecker's work from the mid-1960s, while perceived as a completely new kind of architecture, includes traditional architectural principles and vernacular forms that were abstracted, reshaped and integrated in their designs. This is evident in their first constructed public building – the Bat Yam Town Hall. In a time span of about fifty years later, my own winning proposal from 2012 for the National Library of Israel reflects a similar approach. Both projects saw in the design of a public building the potential and need to introduce a new form, an architectural expression that clearly stands out from its surroundings. Yet one that positions the work in a broader cultural context. In addition, both projects, as I will show, utilize geometry to transpose, abstract and re-introduce a traditional element into the new design.

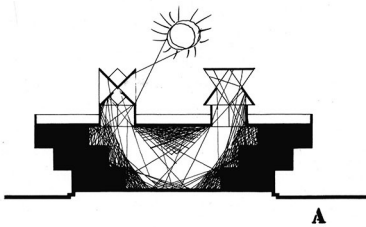
3. BAT YAM TOWN HALL AND CIVIC CENTRE, BAT YAM, ISRAEL 1959–63 ARCHITECTS: ALFRED NEUMANN, ZVI HECKER AND ELДАР SHARON

The Bat Yam Town Hall and Civic Centre project began in 1959 through a national architecture competition won by the proposal submitted by Zvi Hecker and Eldar Sharon. Upon winning the competition, Hecker and Sharon, two former students of Alfred Neumann, invited Neumann to collaborate with them on working further through the design and realizing the project. The project utilizes two traditional forms in a new public space for civic expression. First, the design incorporates vernacular wind chimneys, known as *Malqaf*, unique to the hot

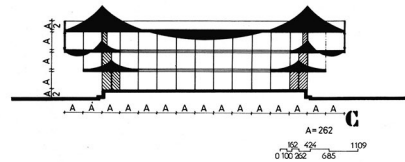
⁷ C. L. Haven (ed.), *Joseph Brodsky Conversations*, University of Mississippi Press, Mississippi 2002, p. 100.



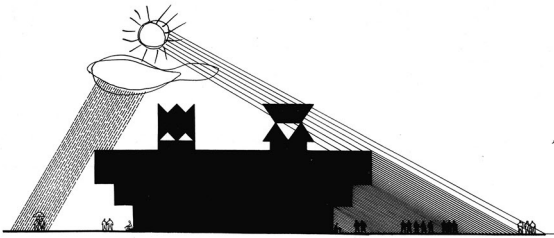
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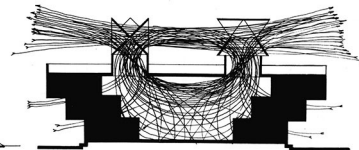
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C



B



D

3

- III. 1. Bat Yam Town Hall, Israel 1959–63. Architects: Alfred Neumann, Zvi Hecker, Eldar Sharon
- III. 2. Vernacular wind chimneys, Iran
- III. 3. Diagrams of Bat Yam building showing the function of the wind chimneys for ventilation (D) and light (A)

climate of the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. Second, it applies a proportion system heavily influenced by the traditional principles of human scale in architecture.

The incorporation of these elements into the design was introduced by Neumann as he reworked and developed the initial competition submission together with Hecker and Sharon. Neumann retained the proposed three-story inverted ziggurat shape of the design but reworked the spatial logic of the building by implementing a proportion system that he developed years before.⁸ The structure was then after conceived as a composition of several small, repeated

⁸ Alfred Neumann's proportion system was called EM-PHI System. For further reading see Rafi Segal, *Space Packed: The Architecture of Alfred Neumann*, Park Books, Zurich 2017, chapter 1. "Towards a Humanized Unit of Space" pp. 18–38.

office space modules along the exterior periphery of each floor, scaled optimally to human dimensions. These units formed a pattern on the building's façade, uniting the building's spaces, structure, and façade into one complete system. Last, Neumann imposed a 45-degree structural grid over the rectilinear building, which helped to finalize the forms of the volumetric units and ultimately govern the building's overall visual and spatial pattern. This structural change met the introduction of four wind chimneys, or wind catchers, on the roof of the building, organized in a square layout as traditionally found. The wind chimneys were designed to allow light and natural ventilation into the building's central atrium – a public space that extended the exterior civic plaza space into the building's interior. Shaped by polyhedral geometry the design of these wind chimneys could not have been farther removed from their vernacular origins, to the point that they do not formally look like anything traditional. The roof top 'chimney' elements dominate the design and greatly contribute to the building's uniqueness, making it an icon of 1960s Israeli architecture.

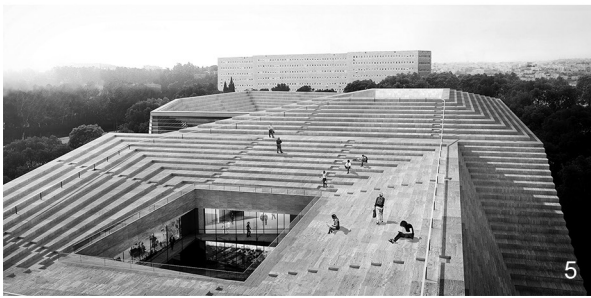
Incorporating the vernacular elements of *Malqaf* into the design of a new town hall in a newly established city in Israel presented a cultural-political position that saw Israel, via the shaping of its public architecture, as 'fitting into' the region, rather than incontestably copying the International Style architecture emerging from Europe at the time. The appropriation of a human scale proportional theory in the sub-division and dimensioning of the building's elements and facades reflected an attempt to maintain design principles of historic architectural practices, in sync with Perret's views, and more broadly linked to that of the Renaissance.

4. NATIONAL LIBRARY OF ISRAEL, JERUSALEM, ISRAEL, 2012 ARCHITECT: RAFI SEGAL (WITH PARTICIPATION OF YONATAN COHEN AND MATAN MAYER)

The second project I would like to introduce is a proposal for the National Library of Israel, the winning submission in the architectural competition of 2012 to replace the National Library's current location within the Hebrew University Campus with a new larger building better fit for the Library's future needs. The site for the new building, located in West Jerusalem, adjacent to the Israel Museum and the Israeli Parliament (Knesset) intended to enhance the Library's public presence, accessibility and symbolic role within Israeli culture, while rethinking the design of the library in the digital age. The project draws from traditional forms in two ways: first, through the stepped landscapes of the hills surrounding the city and the shaping of the historic plazas of the ancient temple mount; and second, through the appropriation of the ancient *mikveh* structure found in Jerusalem.

The project conceives the building as a 'landscape of stone steps' which ascend the bedrock and resonate with the terraced hills of Jerusalem. The library building is not placed 'on site' but as a foundation rebuilds the site, mediating the topographical differences of the surroundings to allow a continuous field of movement throughout its exterior and interior spaces. It upholds the Information Age dictum that knowledge be a field of interaction rather than an object of control and containment.

The *mikveh*, a traditional bath used for ritual purity in Jewish tradition, is re-appropriated in the project for its symbolic and spatial features as an open-air organizational element, one which invites people to converge around a voided center. In the Library project this element is scaled up and transformed into an inhabitable roof space that allows seating in square arrangement, similar to that of Jerusalem's ancient *mikveh* found near the temple mount.



- III. 4. National Library of Israel, Jerusalem 2012. Winning proposal. Architect: Rafi Segal (with participation of Yonatan Cohen, Matan Mayer)
- III. 5. National Library, view of roof
- III. 6. Ancient Mikveh, Jerusalem

In place of water, the center remains open to allow light and air to flood the interiors from above ‘carving out’ four luminous courtyard spaces which diffuse light into the interior and organize the four main uses of the building: Public Areas, Education/Culture, Research/Study, and Library Operations. Great columns surrounding the courtyards branch outwards as large canopies which connect at their perimeter to form a continuous roof structure. The undulating surface of the roof is shaped into thickened stone steps, and together with the building’s semi-buried condition echoes the experience of being on an elevated stepped plaza or landscape over-viewing the city.

Both Bat Yam Town Hall and the National Library project utilize traditional architecture elements, whether vernacular or historic, in order to make a claim about the project’s context. Abstracted and re-interpreted these elements allow the design to stand out from its immediate

surrounding and create a sense of a new architectural expression, challenging conventional forms of similar public buildings. Public architecture is situated within a cultural setting whereby the single building carries a collective memory of a past and at the same time envisions an architecture for the future.

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