

Tel Aviv: Building the Magnificent City

By Cheryl Kempler



Photo credit: The G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, Israel

A photo of Dizengoff Street taken during the 1930s.

In 1910 Ahuzat Bayit (Homestead), a nascent seaside community settled by families from nearby Jaffa, was renamed Tel Aviv ("ancient well of spring"), after the Hebrew title of Theodor Herzl's 1902 German novel "Altneuland" (The Old New Land). In his popular book, Herzl told the story of dedicated settlers who transformed a squalid land into a place of incredible beauty.

Loving the "Old New Land's" heritage and traditions, its inhabitants are committed to building a new society, symbolized by its architecture: "Splendid things had grown up. Thousands of white villas gleam out of luxuriant green gardens...A magnificent city had been built beside the sapphire blue Mediterranean."

The name change was prophetic: Planned and designed by those who made it their home, pre-state Israel's "magnificent city" would be identified with the gleaming white buildings that Herzl envisioned.

Three successful women architects would leave their mark on pre-state Israel's first modern city. Lotte Cohn, Genia (Eugenia) Averbuch and Elsa Mandelstamm Gidoni chose a profession that was open only to men during the 1930s. Once obscure, the work they produced has been researched and re-evaluated to reflect its significance

in the communal and architectural history of Tel Aviv, a destination celebrated and experienced by thousands of art and design devotees annually. In 2003, the city was named a World Heritage Site by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), which helped protect and conserve its buildings.

The city evolves

Populated by successive waves of European immigration, pre-state Israel was recognized as a Jewish homeland by the Balfour Declaration and governed by the British from 1919 until 1948, when Israel became independent.

As early as 1934, the arrival of refugees from Nazi Germany precipitated a housing crisis in Tel Aviv. More than 100,000 people—about 60% of those who came to pre-state Israel—settled there, tripling the number of its inhabitants by 1939. In their former lives, these educated, often erudite professionals had embraced progressive ideas about culture, society and politics. They brought their beliefs and lifestyles to Tel Aviv, whose already cosmopolitan atmosphere reminded them of what they left behind. Included in this group were recently trained architects: the men and women who would be hired to design residences whose standards would meet the expectations of their countrymen.

Built to house the immigrants, apartment buildings rapidly rose on land that had been reserved for parks and backyard gardens in Tel Aviv's newest neighborhoods, located in the central

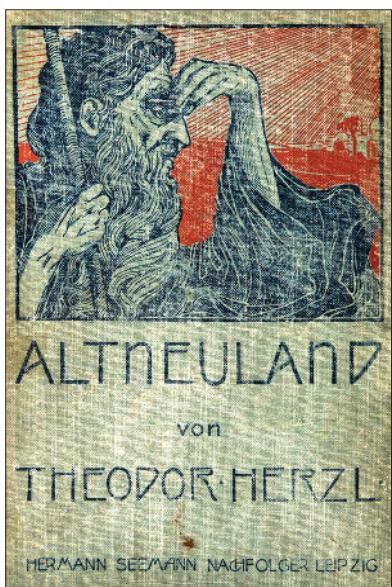


Photo credit: Kestenbaum & Company Auction House, New York

The cover of an early edition of "The Old New Land" by Theodor Herzl.



Architectural traditions from both the East and the West characterize Tel Aviv's eclectic construction during the 1920s. This building was designed in the Secessionist style, popular in Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

"Old North" section. United by their whitewashed exteriors, blocky concrete construction, flat roofs and balconies, their design was rooted in the groundbreaking innovations pioneered at the Bauhaus (translated as "house of building"), the German art school founded in 1919 that continues to define modernism in the 21st century.

When the Nazis shut the doors of the Bauhaus in 1933, teachers and students who left the country spread the Bauhaus style and philosophy to many parts of the world. Using affordable and mass-produced materials like steel and glass, these architects constructed simple, geometric buildings with efficient, hygienic and comfortable living spaces—intended to elevate the quality of life for people of all economic classes. In accordance with Bauhaus thought, their ultimate goal was the radical reinvention of society, similar to the mission espoused by Zionism.

Although only eight of pre-state Israel's 100 practicing architects attended the Bauhaus school, its aesthetic would cast a long and pervasive shadow in Tel Aviv, where more than 4,000 modern buildings were constructed during the 1930s and 1940s, constituting the world's highest concentration of Bauhaus-style architecture. As historian Michael D. Levine wrote: "The architects of the period arrived in this country and immediately started working at the same time as the style came into use all over the world."

Tel Aviv's women architects

Why did Tel Aviv's female architects achieve success? Scholar Sigal Davidi, whose original research is the primary source for this article, suggests: "Although women architects were a minority among the Tel Aviv architectural community, they stood out in the field. They were involved in every type of

architectural planning and in diverse projects on different scales. They planned urban neighborhoods and city squares as well as educational and welfare establishments, family homes and interior design projects. They played an important part in introducing and promoting the idea of modern architecture.... The prizes awarded to women architects reflected confidence in their professional abilities."

Some individuals and organizations refused to hire women architects, but given the demand for new construction, municipal authorities did not have the luxury of discriminating against anyone who was qualified.

Lotte Cohn (1893-1983)

The daughter of a Zionist physician, Israel's first female architect, Lotte Cohn, grew up and studied in Berlin, where she was involved in the renovation of Germany's war-damaged buildings before immigrating to pre-state Israel in 1921. Beginning in the office of the great modern architect Richard Kauffmann, Cohn assisted him in the planning and design of the country's first kibbutz. She shared his patriotic dedication to Zionist values.

Cohn's elemental style was in keeping with both Bauhaus principles and the functional austerity associated with Zionism at this time. Proclaimed "the mother of Israeli architecture" by her biographer Ines Sonder, she had "a mission to fulfill.... She devoted her life to work and architecture. Zionism was like a religion, and she was its nun."

Like Gidoni and Averbuch later on, Cohn operated her own firm in Tel Aviv, where she lived for 50 years. She designed and often managed the construction of numerous public buildings—offices, settlement houses and subsidized apartments,



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Walter Gropius designed the dormitories at the Bauhaus School in Dessau.



Credit: en.wikipedia.org

A 1924 photo of Lotte Cohn.



Cohn's popular Kaete Dan Hotel (demolished in 1960) was the place to see and be seen during the 1930s in Tel Aviv.

an agricultural school, women's and children's health centers, a cafeteria for training restaurant workers and a public housing complex in the Rassco (Rural and Suburban Settlement Company) neighborhood. Most of these municipal and national contracts were awarded by competition.

With her friend and client Kaete Dan, Cohn planned and designed the eponymous hotel (1932), a building that Davidi describes as a pivotal collaboration between the two women and an early modernist landmark. The Kaete Dan was "an important social meeting place in Tel Aviv...rooms were equipped with the latest amenities.... Its European atmosphere attracted British officials and recent immigrants."

To keep the building cool, Cohn kept window size to a minimum—contrasting with the large glass panels typical of Bauhaus design—and fronted the façade with tiered balconies that shaded the hotel's whitewashed exterior. This "tweaking" of the Bauhaus

style may have provided a template that enabled her contemporaries to incorporate changes suitable for a hot climate.

Elsa Mandelstamm Gidoni (1901-1978)

Born in Latvia, Gidoni (her married name) was an interior decorator and furniture maker in Berlin before immigrating to Tel Aviv, where she worked as a pavilion designer for the 1934 Levant Fair, an international showcase of inventions

and products that attracted thousands of tourists to its Yarkon Peninsula [Port of Tel Aviv] site. Delighting visitors with its glass walls, floating domed ceiling and ocean view, Gidoni's futuristic Café Galina, a 1,500-square foot circular restaurant, roof deck and auditorium designed in collaboration with her married colleagues, Genia Averbuch and Shlomo Ginsburg, paved the way for the acceptance of modernism in Tel Aviv and brought recognition to both women.

Gidoni went on to win competitions for the designs of both a King George Street residence for single girls and women, Beit ha-Halutzot (Women Pioneers House, 1936), and the Domestic Science School (1935), an important facility run by the Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO), founded by the wife of Chaim Weizmann, the first president of Israel. Gidoni's L-shaped building is characterized by historian Despina Stratigakos as an ingenious integration of dormitories, administrative



Photo credit: Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Café Galina, the acclaimed modernist dining pavilion designed for Tel Aviv's 1934 Levant Fair by Elsa Gidoni and the husband-wife team, Genia Averbuch and Shlomo Ginsburg.



Photo credit: Bauhaus Center of Tel Aviv

A contemporary photo of the renovated Women's Pioneer Building, located at 35 King George Street, originally designed by Gidoni in 1936.

offices and teaching kitchens equipped with the latest labor-saving appliances. Acquiring the skills necessary for kibbutz life, female enrollees studied everything from the management of the institutional-sized dining halls and the cooking of eggplant and other indigenous foods unknown in Germany, to the operation of agricultural equipment used in the fields and gardens.

Gidoni received high marks for the homes and apartment houses she planned for private clients. Photographs reveal a decidedly horizontal emphasis, underscored by sharp angles and the play of light and shadow emanating from the high-walled porches and balconies.

After four years in Tel Aviv, Gidoni relocated to the United States in 1938. There she submitted designs for the building for the General Motors pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair and later served as project manager in the office of master architect Louis Kahn. Gidoni is credited with the planning of major large-scale buildings, including the Manhattan landmark 1407 Broadway, the interiors of corporate headquarters and department stores in New York, Boston and other cities. In her published articles, Gidoni disavowed what others classified as "the feminine touch" in architecture and continued to insist that her gender made no difference to her perception, working methods or resulting product.



Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org

Genia Averbuch.

Genia Averbuch

(1909-1977)

Born in Russia, Averbuch was raised in Tel Aviv, where she returned in 1930 after studying in Rome and Brussels.

Averbuch's style blends elements derived from the Bauhaus and the more organic "International Style" popular in France and the

United States. Basking in her Levant Fair triumph, the 25-year-old architect competed with seasoned male designers to win the commission for Zina Dizengoff Square (named for the wife of Zionist leader and urban planner Meir Dizengoff, who served as the city's first mayor from 1922-1936), a landmark in the heart of Tel Aviv.

Harkening back to the spherical design of the Galina, Dizengoff Square is conceived as a harmony of concentric circles, which radiate from the central fountain of the traffic roundabout. Averbuch also designed the facades of the surrounding buildings, whose curved, ribbon-like balconies produce a sensual effect.

A few of the numerous apartment houses and large private residences Averbuch designed in Tel Aviv during the 1930s remain; some have been restored. After World War II, she devoted nearly all her time to projects that would serve immigrants and the cause of Zionism. Forging connections with almost all the country's women's agencies, she took on commissions for vocational and religious schools, as well as a number of single women's communal residences. Averbuch became the first woman in Israel to design synagogues. Turning to new projects during the late 1940s, Averbuch specialized in planning children's villages, institutions devoted to the care of children who survived the Holocaust. Among these is the Jerusalem Children's Home founded by B'nai B'rith Women in 1955.

Keeper of the flame: Bauhaus Center Tel Aviv

In the 21st century, discoveries detailing the history and evolution of Tel Aviv's Bauhaus style are ongoing. Exhibitions and catalogues produced by the city's Bauhaus Center on Dizengoff Street focus on a fascinating range of topics, including the contributions of women architects. Just as important, the Center's curators do not only preserve but also advance the living spirit of Bauhaus design by producing installations that showcase multimedia works by contemporary artists inspired by the city's urban landscape. ☈



Photo credit: courtesy of Tel Aviv Bauhaus Center

History comes alive at Tel Aviv's Bauhaus Center, a museum that mounts exhibits and displays contemporary works with a connection to the historic Bauhaus legacy.



Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org

Averbuch conceived her prize-winning design for Dizengoff Square as a total environment, bringing together architectural and landscape elements. This photograph dates from the 1940s.