

A Dialogue Between a New Building and the Existing Historical Environment: A Case Study of the Residential Building at the Historic Heart of Tel Aviv

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Abstract: Preserving the spirit of a historical environment does not necessarily mean a repetition of its language generated by nostalgia. The aim of this article is to present the way I was trying to form a real dialogue between a new modern residential building and the existing historic urban district of the city of Tel Aviv, neither by reconstructing the past nor dissociating from it by enforcing a completely new order. A district that already provided a unique interface between Eastern and Western architecture, being a micro-document of the architectural history of Tel Aviv from 1920 to 1930.

Keywords: Holistic; Architecture; Organic; Residential building; Conservation

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1. Introduction: Architecture is made for people

The holistic-phenomenological worldview in theory and in practice has stood in recent years at the forefront of the scientific discourse in disciplines like cosmology, neurobiology, psychology, particle physics, brain sciences, recent theories of complexity, as well as being in convergence with the fundamentals of Buddhist philosophy that my work is associated with^[1]. The purpose of architecture, as I see it, is first and foremost to create a human environment for human beings. Yet, modern society has lost the value of man and thus created a feeling of alienation between man and the environment. Buildings affect our lives and the fate of the physical environment in which we live over the course of many years; therefore, their real test is the test of time. The great buildings, villages, and temples in which man feels “at home”—the ones we want to return to again and again and thus have timeless relevance—are the ones that touch our hearts and have the power to create a deep emotional experience (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Villages that evoke a deep sense of belonging, The Island of Paros, Greece

An apartment building is much beyond a shelter. As opposed to the common apartment buildings being built today being “copy and paste models,” which normally create an anonymous and uniform environment, a fundamentally different approach was adopted here. The intention was first to create a place where the tenants will really feel at home and a sense of belonging, from the moment they enter the site until they reach their private apartment (**Figure 2**).



Figure 2. The Residential building, Tel Aviv, designed by Nili Portugali

Secondly, to create a building that will contribute significantly to the public space, the street whose boundaries it defines (**Figure 3**).



Figure 3. The Residential building, Tel Aviv, designed by Nili Portugali

As in any organic system, each building has its own uniqueness and power; at the same time, it always functions as part of a larger environment for which its existence and wholeness it is responsible ^[2].

There are different ways to describe buildings that have this timeless quality, buildings that convey an inherent spiritual experience. Frank Lloyd Wright called them “the ones which take you beyond words.”

Quoted Christopher Alexander by Stephen Grabow in his book ^[3]: “*The buildings that have spiritual value are a diagram of the inner universe or the picture of the inner soul.*”

Although this timeless quality exists in buildings rooted in different cultures and traditions (**Figure 4**), the emotional experience they generate is common to all people, no matter where or from what culture they come from.

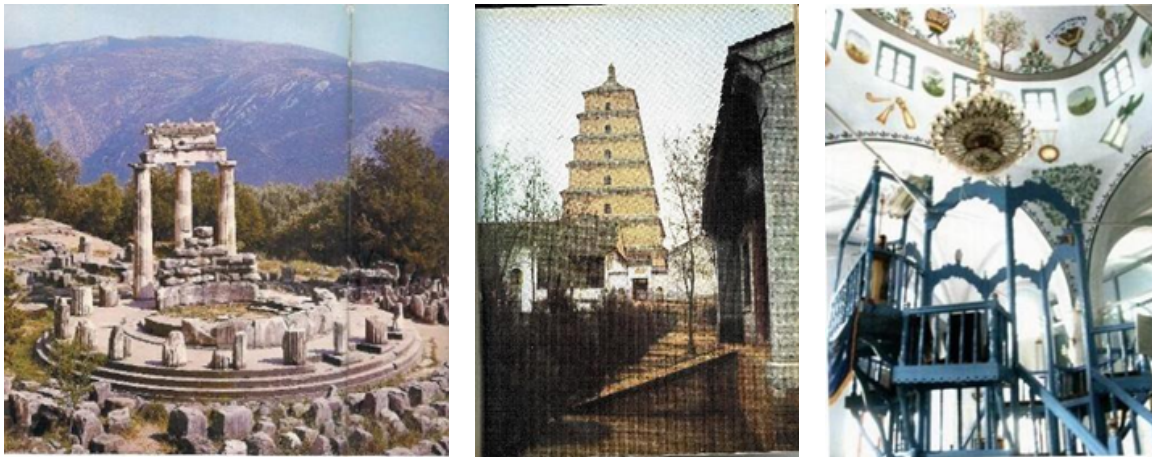


Figure 4. Left to right: Tholos, 4th century, Delphi, Greece; Great Gander Pagoda, 7th–8th century, Hsi-an-Fu, China; Abuhab Synagogue, Safed, Israel

Thus, Christopher Alexander’s basic assumption was that behind human architecture there are universal codes, and that beauty and harmony in architecture and in man-made works of art are objective properties inherent within the structure itself ^[4,5], reflecting the “innate patterns” (used by Noam Chomsky’s terminology in reference to the spoken language) that are already structured in our mind from the outset, thus common to us all as human beings.

Contemporary architecture and art sought to dissociate itself from the world of emotions and connect the design process to the world of ideas, thus creating a rational (intellectual) relation between building and man, devoid of any emotion. The basic argument presented here is that in order to change the feeling of the environment and create places and buildings we really feel “at home,” what is needed is not a change of style or fashion, but a transformation of the mechanistic worldview underlying current thought and approaches to the holistic one.

2. Between two worldviews: The holistic approach vs the mechanistic approach

The difference between the worldview that resulted in dissociating man from his environment and the worldview that considers man to be part of the physical world he lives in (as well as part of nature) emphasizes the difference between the holistic organic school of thought to which my own work belongs and the mechanistic-fragmentary worldview. These are two different sets of orders ^[2].

The mechanistic worldview, which has long dominated Western thought and underpins much of

contemporary architecture, promotes a separation of elements, leading to environments composed of autonomous and mechanically ordered fragments. This fragmented approach is evident in urban developments such as Brasília in Brazil, Chandigarh in India, and the satellite towns of England. In these settings, the structured disconnection between the house and the street, the street and the neighborhood, and the neighborhood and the city contributes to a pervasive sense of detachment and alienation.

The house appears to be a random collection of objects; the street appears to be a random collection (catalogue) of buildings that do not form together a street (often even prefabricated, transported units made in a factory and superimposed on the site); the streets do not form together a neighborhood; and the neighborhoods do not create a city.

In contrast to these fragmented developments are buildings designed by those who recognized that architectural responsibility lies first and foremost in shaping the quality of the street, whose boundaries the buildings help define. These designers understood that urban design does not begin and end with arbitrary sketches drawn at a scale of 1:1000, but rather with a continual sensitivity to the scale of the human experience—the scale of 1:1. This sensitivity is expressed in the view of balcony railings from the street, the detail of an iron bar on a window, and the smell and sight of fruit trees in nearby gardens.

This school of thought bears a close resemblance to the approach embraced by the anonymous craftsmen who created Japanese folk art between the 13th and 19th centuries (**Figure 5**). Soetsu Yanagi, founder of the Museum of Folk Art in Tokyo, documented this unpretentious yet profound tradition in his book ^[6] *The Unknown Craftsman*. He described these artifacts as the embodiment of a worldview in which the boundaries between art, philosophy, and the creator's spiritual or "God-given" state of mind are fluid and inseparable.

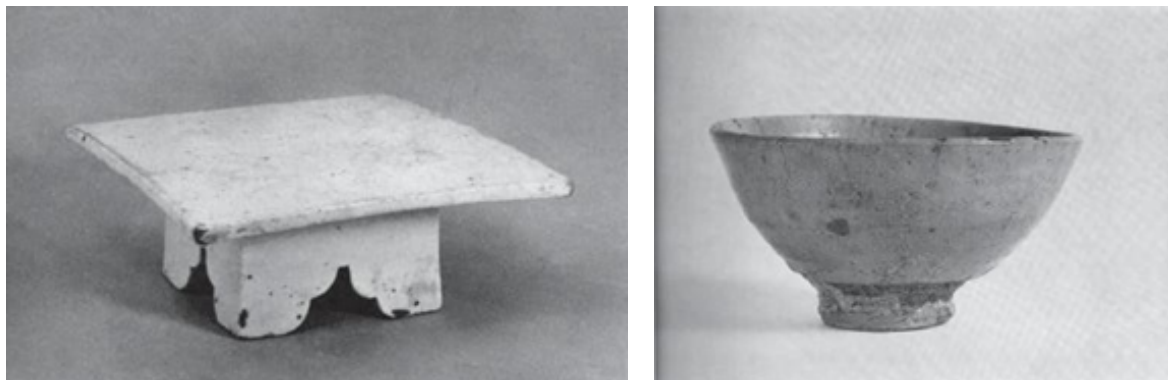


Figure 5. Left to right: Ceremonial stand, porcelain, Yi dynasty (18th century), Korea; Kizaemon Ido tea bowl, Y dynasty (26th century), Korea

This approach was not understood by Le Corbusier, Oscar Nimier, and others around the world, who were part of the mechanistic school of thought, who consciously considered architecture to be no more than icons, environmental sculpture, totally dependent on the arbitrary vision of its creators.

The holistic-organic approach that has been at the forefront of scientific thought for many years, implemented by Alexander in architecture, regards the socio-physical environment as a system, the existence of which depends on the proper, ever-changing interrelations between the parts.

Moreover, the creation and existence of each part depend on the interrelations between that part and the whole. In any organic system, while each element has its own uniqueness and power, it always acts as part of a larger entity to which it belongs and which it complements (**Figure 6**).



Figure 6. Organic system

Within this conceptual framework, urban design, architecture, and interior design are not regarded as separate disciplines, but as components of a continuous and dynamic system. The building and its environment are not perceived as a collection of designed fragments, but as one hierarchical language, in which this historic street, the building, and its interior details are one continuous system ^[2].

Every design detail, at any level of scale, is derived from the larger whole to which it belongs, which it seeks to enhance and for whose existence it is responsible. The overall feeling of inner wholeness and unity, whether in a building, a street, a neighborhood, or a city, eventually evolves from the proper interrelations between its parts. This led to the focus being about the street at first, rather than the building itself. All the decisions regarding the volume of the building, the construction materials, and the color were generated from the spirit of the street, meaning from the larger whole, it had to be integrated with respect and enhancement.

3. The dialogue between the new building and the existing historical environment

The new building is located on a side pedestrian street adjacent to the food market in the Nahalat Binyamin quarter at the historic center of the city of Tel Aviv. A quarter is a micro-document of the architectural history of Tel Aviv from 1920 to 1930. It was in the 1920s when European architecture was brought to Israel, carried out by Jewish refugee architects who immigrated to Israel from Europe, trying to become integrated with the local oriental architecture, thus named the “Eclectic period” (**Figure 7**).



Figure 7. The historic context: Eclectic architecture of the 1920s and 1930s

The nature of their work until the mid-1930s, as opposed to the Bauhaus, which was imported to Israel as a package deal, was a balance between their affinity to the land of Israel and the use of cross-cultural universal patterns of space brought from their European countries of origin. They consciously attempted to create a new “Israeli” architecture by integrating East and West. A reality (social and physical) that was complex and embodied landscapes, architecture, and local lifestyle.

The patterns of space and the beautiful construction details that were used were not wisely considered as a matter of style, but in a most profound way as the fundamentals of harmony in architecture. These were the timeless cross-cultural patterns that underlie the beauty, comfort, and emotional experience in any building that transcends styles.

Evidently, patterns such as an entrance hall, an arch, or a capital in the column can be found in buildings of all periods and cultures (**Figure 8**).



Figure 8. Left to right: Bayzid Pasa, Masya, Turkey, 14th–15th century; Science Museum Haifa, architect Alexander Browald, 1910; The Residential building, Tel Aviv, by Nili Portugali

These patterns were ignored by the modernists (in general), which resulted in the creation of an architecture devoid of any emotions and meaning.

Preserving the spirit of a historical environment is not a matter of nostalgia and does not necessarily mean a fanatic repetition of its language. The key question I asked myself while standing in the street was, what would be the right language that would create a dialogue between the new contemporary building and the historical street? A language that will preserve and enhance the human spirit of the existing street. None of the conventional approaches was adopted. I was not trying to reconstruct the past, nor was I trying to disassociate myself from it by using an architectural language that would impose an entirely new order.

The façade of this building defines the boundaries of the street and therefore determines the feeling it inspires

(**Figure 3**). The human scale of the building was generated out of the wish to be in harmony with that of the street. A good boundary is an entity that both separates and connects two entities at the same time. The cornices that jut out at the façade, being the extension of the periphery beams and the corner columns protruding from the wall (**Figure 3**), clarifying the structural elements of the building, delineate the common boundary of the building and the space next to it, thus uniting them. The dialogue between the building and the street continues through the high windows as well as the balconies overlooking the street (**Figure 9**). The white-washed facade, gradually changing in color from the ground floor up (**Figure 3**), complements the blue of the sky and the gold of the aluminum frames, painting a harmony that inspires peace and serenity in the street.

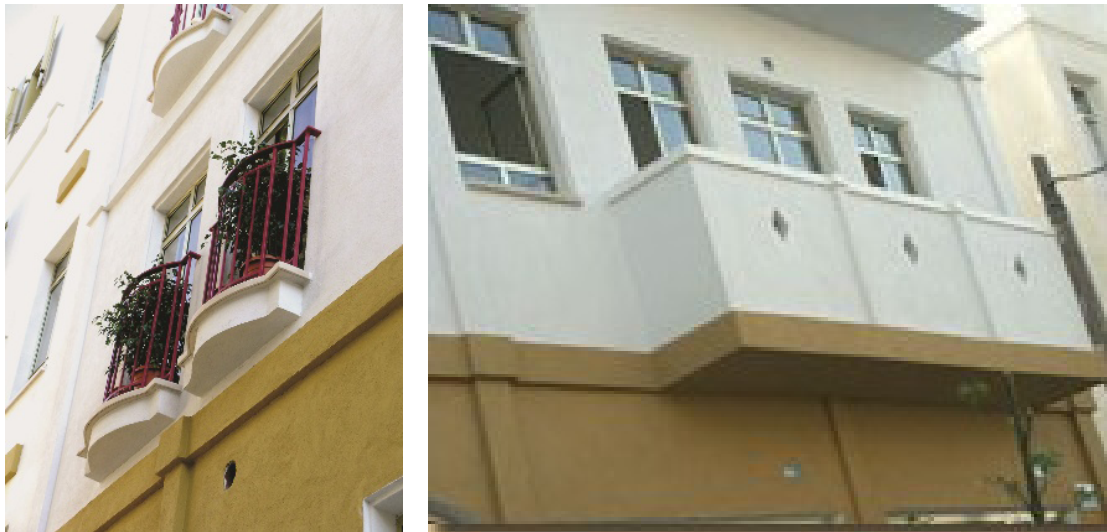


Figure 9. The Residential building, Tel Aviv, designed by Nili Portugali

4. The street, the building, and the interior are one continuous organic whole

The walk from the street to the private apartment is via a sequence of transition areas that open onto each other and bring the residents home gradually.

The semi-private garden along the side of the building is entered via a gate from the sidewalk. Orange trees planted along the path adorn the building's main entrance door. The main entrance door leads to a spacious stairwell that opens on each floor onto a spacious lobby leading to the apartments (**Figure 2**). The high windows offering a view of the garden illuminate that space (**Figure 2**).

The gradual transition from the semi-private lobby to the private apartment is via an entrance hall that both connects and separates them, leading gradually to the living areas and out to the balcony (**Figure 8**).

Each apartment was designed slightly differently, according to its specific location in the building, so that it interlocks either with the street or the garden next to it. At the front of the ground floor, there are shops that open onto the pedestrian street, forming an extension to the arts and crafts fair held there.

The back portion of the ground floor features small studio apartments opening onto private gardens. On the higher floors are one- and two-bedroom apartments. Those at the top level have roof terraces that offer a magnificent view of the Mediterranean Sea in the distance (**Figure 10**).



Figure 10. The Residential building, Tel Aviv, designed by the author

5. The association between the contemporary building and tradition

One of the assumptions that immediately arises regarding this building (as well as with other buildings designed by me) is that the building that was built in early 2020 is not a new one but rather a “preservation” or “reconstruction” of a building of the past that had been there much before.

The fact that it feels as if it has been in the street forever makes me feel good, as this is exactly what I was trying to achieve, to design a building that is organically integrated with the street and not alien to it. This assumption is based without any doubt on what we see around us, new buildings that “bark” at their surroundings and are alien to it. Consequently, it is assumed that if a building gives a pleasant feeling of comfort and is integrated in a natural way with its surroundings, it cannot possibly be new. This reality is the result of the iconic architecture, which has knowingly attempted to dissociate itself from the spirit of the place.

So than the next immediate question I am asked is “to what style does it belong? Am I trying to reconstruct an architectural language from the past? My answer to that is, I do not attempt or aim to reconstruct the past or nostalgically trace any style. The association created between the buildings I design and those we know from the past, and the similar emotional experience they generate originates in using the same fundamental timeless patterns of space ^[4] and the planning process ^[7] that were used in the past, in any culture and tradition where people aspire to do human architecture with soul. The “art of making” has been brutally ignored by contemporary architecture.

The architectural approach that aims at fulfilling timeless values is by no means a reaction against the contemporary movement, as one might think. On the contrary, it is a genuine attempt to fully use the potential inherited in modern technological society available today, but not as an aim or a value in itself, but as a tool to create a human and friendly environment. Especially at a time when unlimited possibilities are open to us, technology should be used in a controlled, value-oriented, and moral way when approaching the design of the physical environment in which we live. Moreover, the “trademarks” which are currently used as “sustainable development,” “green building,” “ecological environment,” and the like, are no more than a list of dogmatic mantras that refer only to the saving of energy, water, and electricity and the recycling of materials. Without diminishing their importance, there is no reference at all in the list to what should be considered as the central environmental resource, the human being ^[7]. This results in buildings that look like AI products to say the least,

alienated from their concrete physical environment.

The terms “sustainable development” and “green building” thus require a broader definition than the one currently in use.

When the human experience is brought to the front of the agenda, saving energy will inevitably follow. In the past, these were the rules of thumb generated from the daily experience that dictated the design processes.

For example, any human being, whether in his house or at work, needs to have the right temperature for his physical and mental well-being.

The use of thick walls to isolate houses from heat and cold and the use of wind balconies to cool down the house reduced the need and cost of heating and air-conditioning, saving energy. Done without “trademarks” or slogans.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is hoped that a holistic worldview will ultimately prevail in the physical and human environment, generating buildings, streets, neighborhoods, cities, and villages that foster a genuine sense of belonging, places where all will feel truly at home. A worldview that crosses cultures, places, and time.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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