



aircraftcarrier.

*American Ideas
and Israeli Architectures
after 1973*

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Dormant Agents

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Israel is the largest American aircraft carrier in the world that cannot be sunk ... and is located in a critical region for American national security. —Alexander Haig, U.S. secretary of state, 1981–82

WORLDLY SYSTEMS

Capitalism is haunted by crisis. A history of capitalism's march "forward" is also the cyclic history of its downturns, failures, and complete meltdowns. For its advocates, this fact simply merits the adjustment of the system in order to avoid or overcome local breakdowns. However, for its adversaries, crisis is an inherent feature of capitalism, prompted by its systemic characteristics. What capitalists would see as overcoming, critics would see as the ongoing attempt to control resistance and assimilate it into the dominant economic and social system. Describing the great crisis of 1929 and the emergence of Keynesian cyclic planning, Antonio Negri writes:

The crisis post-1929 represents a moment of decisive importance in the emergence of the contemporary state. ... Paradoxically, capital turned to Marx, or at least learned to read *Das Kapital*. Working-class political revolution could only be avoided by recognizing and accepting the new relation of class forces, while making the working class function within an overall mechanism that would "sublimate" its continuous struggle for power into a dynamic element within the system ... the new "material basis of the constitution" became the state as planner, or better still, the state as the plan.¹

¹ Antonio Negri, "Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State Post-1929," *Revolution Retrieved* (London, 1988).

In that sense, statements made around 1973 bear striking resemblance to statements made in 2008, or for that matter, in 1929. The system's cyclic failures were often camouflaged by a pervasive use of terminology. As one acute observer noted in 1975:

Originally the word "recession" was used to describe one of the four phases of the business cycle. ... Then, in the age after Keynes, we ceased to have old-fashioned depressions. But we still did have periods of greater unemployment and of negative real growth in the economy. We needed a euphemism for these unpleasant punctuations of the economy's advance. The word "recession" served nicely for this purpose ... now that we seem to be in the worst recession of the post-World War II period, the time has come to dust out the old word "depression."

To say that we may be in a depression is not the same thing as to give an affirmative answer to the question: "Will we have a great depression like that of the nineteen-thirties?" The nineteen-thirties depression was the depression to end all depressions. The U.S. in 1975 could go into a depression like that of 1973 or 1893 without going into a Hoover depression like 1932.²

² Samuelson, "A Burns Depression?" *Newsweek*, March 3, 1975.

The landscape of ideas with which this book is engaged is bracketed between two crises, or, if one likes to dwell in Marxist terminology, between two moments of restructuring. The first is defined around the eventful period of the energy shock in the nineteen-seventies and the theoretical transition into an advanced stage of capitalism, announced with Ernst Mandel's canonic text.³ The second is, in many ways, still unfolding. But regardless of its final outcomes, the fiscal crisis that began in 2008 presents fundamental challenges to the core values of the American economic system. However similar these crises may seem, some important differences between them do exist. Most importantly, back in 1973, the odds were not so clearly leaning toward capitalism as the only economic system that could support political powers on a worldly scale. On the real political chessboard, the struggle was on, with the First and Second Worlds constantly interacting and shaping each other.

REGIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

In that context, the Middle East was for several decades only in the peripheral vision of Cold War strategists. Henry Kissinger, for one, did not consider the region to be an area of much importance before 1973, referring to it as "an empty chessboard, where the Soviets and the U.S. are moving the pieces."⁴ This detached and relaxed position presented an American blind spot in recognizing the close association between the interests of oil-producing countries and Arab nationalism. Soon enough, the Middle East was transformed into a major arena of bilateral struggle, and confronted American world politics with some of its greatest challenges.

On October 6, 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a coordinated surprise attack on Israel. When the Soviet Union began to supply both Arab armies by air and sea, the regional conflict escalated. As the war took a global turn, the United States recognized an opportunity to counter Soviet influence in the region with direct policy moves. On October 9, 1973, U.S. President Richard Nixon ordered the largest airlift in history to aid Israel in its struggle. This directive shifted the balance of power in favor of the Israeli troops.

³ In this book, Mandel theorizes a new stage of development, aligned with uninterrupted flows of international capital. See Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, rev. ed. (London, 1975).

⁴ Alistair Horne, *Kissinger: 1973, the Crucial Year* (New York, 2009), p. 126.

⁵ Discussing the oil crisis and its implications on all aspects of life in the United States is beyond the scope of this work. For a very selective overview of the oil crisis's impact on architectural culture in North America, see Mirko Zardini and Giovanna Borasi, *Sorry, Out of Gas: Architecture's Response to the 1973 Oil Crisis* (Mantua, 2007).

With this, the Mideast ceased to be an empty chessboard. The OAPEC (Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries) embargo, initiated in response to American intervention, and the oil crisis that followed, ⁵ made clear that what was happening there was inextricably linked to the domestic interest of all Americans. This moment signaled developments that not only changed the Middle East, but also transformed capitalism's home front. Middle-class Americans, immersed for more than two decades in a culture of consumption and excess, now had to reconsider some of the basic premises of their way of living.

This duality—the inextricable pairing of changes within the United States and their refractions in the Middle East—is a key feature of American–Israeli relations, enshrined during this period in the nineteen-seventies. This dynamic can account for the peculiar equations of the Big Satan (United States) and the Little Satan (Israel), preached by Muslim fundamentalists; the many curious intricacies of American politics in regard to the Israeli–Palestinian question; and the semi-ironic saying of a U. S. secretary of state, quoted above. By so framing the migration of ideas, expertise, capital, and cultural concepts, one can begin to discuss Israeli architecture, or rather, the far-reaching transformation of the Israeli built environment.

LOCAL CONDITION

The availability of American models reinforced processes that were already under way within Israeli society. The nineteen-seventies brought about unrest and demonstrations, which challenged the image of a monolithic melting pot that dominated Israel's self-conception up to this point. For example, inspired by its American counterpart, the Israeli Black Panther Party expressed the frustration of a generation of Mizrahi Jews who were facing discrimination and inequality. The Israeli middle-class protested against the cost of living. And veterans, returning from the Yom Kippur War, demonstrated and pronounced, for the first time in Israeli history, an explicit mistrust of government and a demand for political reform.

Regardless of whether these demonstrations achieved their goals in real time—which remains an open question for social scientists

⁶ In American terms, the ideas promoted by Israeli liberals could be positioned around the avid debates of American liberalism circa the nineteen-sixties and the emergence of the neoconservative approach. Liberalism, nevertheless, provided a stark ideological statement in a centralized, state-controlled country such as Israel.

⁷ While this plan was frequently associated with Milton Friedman's theories, Simcha Ehrlich insisted that it was his own invention, even though he was not a trained economist. See Yesha'yahu Ben Porat, "Simcha Erlich," *Sihot* (Jerusalem, 1981).

⁸ A careful analysis of the economic liberalization plan reveals that some structural and political difficulties did indeed prevent the plan from being implemented completely. See, for instance, a report by MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) Economist Stanley Fischer, who later became the governor of the Bank of Israel. Stanley Fischer, "The Israeli Stabilization Program, 1985–86," *The American Economic Review* (May 1987).

and historians—certain social and political hypotheses emerged from them, either directly or indirectly. The first change was a move toward liberalism, which antagonized state socialism. ⁶ It promoted individual entrepreneurship as a new form of Zionism, and crystalized its political agenda around ideas similar to those of American liberals at the time. The second change was a dramatic shift in power from the left to the new political right. In 1977, after decades in power, the Labor government lost it to the Likud.

American ideas inspired a radical transformation in Israel's economy, and this, perhaps more than any other single event, had a far-reaching impact on the nation's architecture. Milton Friedman, the Nobel Prize-winning American economist and propagator of free markets, arrived in Israel as a guest of the new Likud government. In his view, Israel's socialistic nature was but an episode in the history of the Jewish people, who were more essentially aligned with capitalist self-organization. Soon after Friedman's visit, Simcha Ehrlich, the minister of finance, eager to curtail the country's rising inflation, followed Friedman's principles and devised a monetarist-oriented reform known as "the economic liberalization plan." ⁷ Through the plan, Israel became an experimental ground for monetary economics, before either the United States or Britain transformed their economies according to similar principles. During this period, the reciprocity of ideas and policies between Israel and the United States reached a new level.

The experiment, however, failed miserably. The resulting economic debacle came to an end only in 1985, after a period of hyperinflation, four finance ministers, and aggressive involvement by the American administration, which made adoption of the "stabilization plan" a condition for further financial support. Notwithstanding this failure (which, according to Friedman, was due largely to flawed application), ⁸ a new economic paradigm was formed in Israel. Israeli sociologists Daniel Maman and Ze'ev Rosenhek write:

The stabilization plan [of 1985] signals indeed the beginning of a gradual, yet deep and extensive, transformation of Israel's political economy, especially in relation to state involvement in the economic realm ... the modern history of the Israeli economy [according to some] begins with the

weakening of the developer country model, which was at its crux up to that point, and the adoption and institutionalization of the neo-liberal paradigm.⁹

⁹ Daniel Maman and Zeev Rosenhek, *The Israeli Central Bank: Political Economy, Global Logics and Local Actors*. (London–New York, 2011).

¹⁰ Zvi Efrat, *Ha-Proyekt Ha-Israeli: Bniya Va-Adrihalut 1948–1973 [The Israeli Project]*, (Tel Aviv, 2005).

In hindsight, Ehrlich's economic liberalization plan not only marked most of the decade that followed the Likud's rise to power, but also provided the backdrop for slower structural changes that were taking place in governmental agencies and the emergence of the private, entrepreneurial sector as a driving force in Israel's economy. With these transformations, architecture was not to remain unchanged.

THE STATE OF ISRAELI ARCHITECTURE

As the state ceased to be the central developer and promoter of spatial experimentation, the *Israeli Project* came to an end. It is not surprising that Zvi Efrat's account of Israeli architecture, which remains the most extensive to date, limits its gaze to the years between 1948 and 1973.¹⁰ In the face of the disintegration of Israeli society into segregated groups, each advancing competing understandings of Zionism and contrasting political ideologies, Efrat's narrative of a monumental, modernist project loses its meaning.

The architecture that emerges from the nineteen-seventies on does not simply materialize political or social ideals. Rather, it serves as an expression and as an enabling vehicle in the battle for political control. As such, it cannot be separated from the continuum of ideological assertions, capital flows, economic transactions, and cultural operations in which it operates. The understanding of architecture as a sequence of designed objects is substituted by its deciphering as an ecology of sociomaterial constructs. Through this lens, sites, power struggles, and architectural expressions act as dynamic elements of a system in constant disequilibrium.

Accordingly, tracing the United States' influence on the evolution of Israeli architecture cannot be limited to technological or stylistic innovations. Commercial, historicist postmodernism in the manner of Philip Johnson and John Burgee, for instance, was a route followed by several Israeli architects, working for certain companies or individual developers, but the incorporation

processes of architectural firms, or the employment of public–private partnerships as a development model, served as much to account for the presence of American influence on the architectural realm.

The attempt to sort through this complex, multifaceted, dynamic environment presents a challenge to received notions of architectural history, as practiced by modernists such as Sigfried Giedion and Nikolaus Pevsner. Such practices, focusing on the selected few in order to expose, by induction, the general laws of architectural culture, cannot hold given the messy realities in question. That is, of course, not a novel observation: it was made before by those entrenched in the fields of history and theory, from Reyner Banham to Reinhold Martin. However, it serves here as a reference for a way of understanding architecture not as a succession of projects, but rather as clusters of associations, influences, and innovations that circumscribe spatiocultural phenomena.

Most importantly, phenomena are not, in themselves, narratives in the postmodern sense of being relativist versions of reality. These phenomena, as understood here, are defined through massive change and by the characteristic of being a mix of empirical and impressional inputs. Under these terms, even as this book links certain phenomena with attempts to structure narratives of Israeli space, they can still be identified as holding discrete and well-defined architectural content.

This book uses four such phenomena as its thematic infrastructure. They become the chapters and containers of different comments and provocations. The chapters are “Signals,” which deals with attempts by private companies and individuals to announce their social and political power through built projects; “Emporiums,” which looks at the rise of the free-market theorem and the rapid transformation of Israeli society from socialist austerity to hyperconsumerism; “Allies,” which traces the state capitalization of private development models and ambition as a means of promoting national goals; and “Flotillas,” which charts the segregation of Israeli space into discrete environments with parallel architectures, built for different subsocieties. These

chapters are preceded by a visual narrative created by the graphic design firm Post-Typography. The narrative introduces the complex cultural, economic, and social interactions between the United States and Israel in the given time period—and is complemented by Architectural Photographer Fernando Guerra’s contemporary, sober cross-section of Israeli architecture.

RESISTANCE IS FUTILE

In Israel, as in various places around the world, the preconceptions of contemporary capitalism are currently being questioned in the face of its inadequate response to social challenges. As the European Union began melting, and as Americans gradually became conscious of the ninety-nine percent debate, Israelis went out week after week to take part in demonstrations that resembled, in mass and atmosphere, the protest movements of the nineteen-seventies.

However, the architecture that served as the background for these gatherings alludes quietly to the complete transformation of Israeli space by private interest. For those willing to listen, this built environment also makes certain popular proposals to return to a socialist state of nature seem anachronistic.

If anything, capitalism in its current neoliberal version, as followed and practiced by many governments, has shown tremendous resilience, anchored in its ability to assimilate primitive forms of antagonism. Perhaps, instead of rereading *Das Kapital*, which capital learned to read a long time ago, one should turn to capitalism’s own methods.

If all resistance is doomed to be absorbed and adapted by the cycles of capitalist development, and if a complete antagonizing worldview, such as state socialism was in the twentieth century, cannot be currently imagined, perhaps architecture’s role is to be found in implanting dormant agents in the heart of capitalism. While this course of action may be less heroic than a revolution, its pragmatism might just make it worthwhile. More importantly, it will allow one to look at architectural phenomena beyond the game of mirrors, propagated by postmodernity. It would also force us, once again, to take architecture seriously.