

# Alvar Aalto and the design for the Israel Conservatory of Music in Tel Aviv, Israel – A footnote in Aalto scholarship

*Gareth Griffiths*

Architect, editor, lecturer, researcher and translator  
Editor-in-chief of *Datutop* journal of architecture theory at  
Tampere University of Technology  
Telephone: 045 1740022  
E-mail: [elliott@kolumbus.fi](mailto:elliott@kolumbus.fi)

**Gareth Griffiths**

Tampere University of Technology

## **Alvar Aalto and the design of the Israel Conservatory of Music in Tel Aviv, Israel: A footnote in the Aalto scholarship**

There are no buildings by Alvar Aalto in Israel, but if things had worked out there would have been, because in spring 1973 Aalto was invited to design new premises for the Israel Conservatory of Music in Tel Aviv. A major reason Aalto's project in Tel Aviv never advanced was due to the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in Israel in October 1973, in the aftermath of which the project was put on hold by the clients. They attempted to revive the project in 1975, beginning, they hoped, with Aalto travelling to Israel to visit the site. Aalto died on May 11, 1976, aged 78, before having made any drawings for the project and without making the trip to Israel, though plane tickets had been reserved.

With no Aalto sketches, design drawings or completed building to discuss, the following article is first a footnote in the Aalto scholarship. There is nevertheless the matter of the context within which Aalto was being invited to design a new building in Tel Aviv – the radically modern European secular “Zionist” city. The site where Aalto's building would have been built, a civic-cultural centre comprised of several free-standing object-buildings, has its own fascinating history, including theorisations from, for instance, Bruno Zevi about the normative planning guides for the site. And though local architects have been unaware of the invitation to Aalto to design a building there, the planning of the site after Aalto was partly inspired by Aaltoesque principles – as Kenneth Frampton and others have argued, the significance of Aalto's mature heterotopic strategy resided in its categorical antipathy to building as a proliferation of free-standing objects.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Aalto-Meir correspondence**

On May 14, 1973, Menahem Meir, Director of the Israel Conservatory of Music in Tel Aviv, wrote to Alvar Aalto about a proposed plan for a major building programme for the Conservatory, including a school of music and two concert halls. He asked Aalto whether a project of such scope would be of interest to him and whether he would be “willing to participate either in the overall planning or in the guidance” of the project. In encouragement of a positive reply, Meir added: “I personally feel that apart from the specific benefit to our school, your planning may also serve as an aesthetic model of architecture to the young city of Tel Aviv.”

Since its foundation in 1943 the Conservatory had been based in several locations in Tel Aviv, but now it was being offered the opportunity to design its own building. Meir attached to his letter a basic building programme and a street map indicating the proposed site, measuring 70 x 120 metres, in the centre of Tel Aviv as allocated by the Municipality of Tel Aviv. In addition to a school of music for 1130 students, there would also be two concert halls, an auditorium with a capacity of 900-1100 seats and a recital hall with 300-350 seats. Furthermore, the building programme included a dance department as well as a museum of musical instruments. It was initially hoped that the project would be realised in two stages, with the larger concert hall and museum built in the second stage.

Aalto replied to Meir on June 12, 1973, in the affirmative: “My answer would be that just a project like yours is a first class project for me in spite of that my working program is big enough. My suggestion is that I could do a preliminary project and then we could see if it is right for you and after that confer of further development in a final project.”

Thus began a series of correspondence between Meir and Aalto.<sup>2</sup> The Aalto archives in Helsinki holds a total of seventeen letters and two telegrams from Meir plus copies of nine letters and two telegrams from Aalto. Aalto also received a letter from the then mayor of Tel Aviv, Shlomo Lahat, encouraging him to accept the commission. The following paper is based significantly on those letters as well as a few short replies I received in 2014 from Menahem Meir.

Meir replied to Aalto's first letter on June 25, 1973, delighted with Aalto's response, but candidly admitting that he has never seen any of Aalto's works in person, only in architectural magazines, but that he himself wished to make a trip to Finland in order to give first-hand information on the project, adding that: “Of course it may be a bit too early to mention this, but I am sure you are aware of the extremely different climatic conditions of our two countries.” He also emphasises how it would be “very befitting that one of your works should also be represented in the Holy Land, and particularly in the form of an Institute of Music, which is a language understood by all.”

Meir travelled to Helsinki at the end of August, 1973, together with Shimon Horn, Chairman of the Executive Board of the Conservatory. In terms of relevant projects, during their visit to Aalto's office they would have visited at least the Finlandia Hall concert hall in Helsinki, which had been completed two years earlier, and made aware that Aalto was then working on its congress hall extension, as well as the Lappia concert hall in Rovaniemi, and the opera house in Essen. And no doubt Aalto would have told his guests about his other projects for the Middle East and his travels there.

The next letter in the correspondence is from Meir, dated October 16, 1973, during the Yom Kippur War (October 6-25, 1973), fought between Israel and a coalition of Arab states: “Needless to say, the planning and scheduling for the Institute of Music will, for the time being, have to remain flexible. (...) As we do believe that peace must come to this area,

so we know that the needs for cultural activities in Israel will continue to prosper.” The next correspondence is dated January 6, 1974, in which Meir writes: “Now that the [Israeli] elections are over, the Geneva talks in progress... I hope that we will be able to progress.” But the following letter is dated April 9, 1975 – over a year later – and Meir is well aware of the passing of time: “Of course the war temporarily stopped all plans and now we feel that we can resume our work. As in September 1973, I still feel that your design could give our Institute a very special cultural atmosphere.” He mentions how during his trip to Helsinki it had been agreed that the architect Elissa Aalto, Aalto’s wife, would visit Israel for a week for a preliminary tour and “to examine local building materials”.

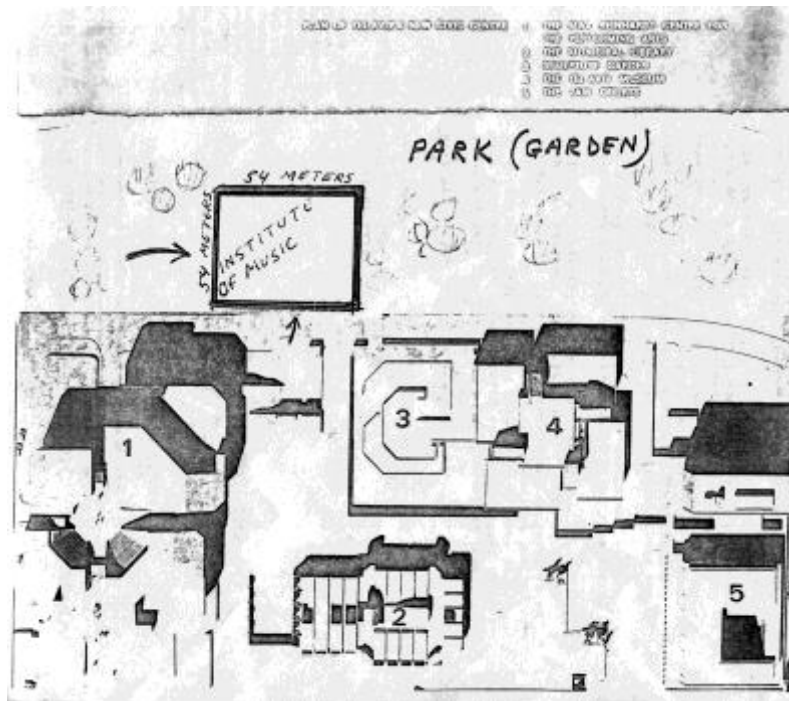


Fig 1. Town plan of the Civic and Cultural Centre in Tel Aviv, with the outline for site of the “Institute of Music”, as sent to Alvar Aalto in April 1975. 1. Max Reinhardt Centre for the Performing Arts (Salo Hershman, 1969, never built); 2. Beit Ariela and Sha’ar Zion Library (Luphenfeld-Gammerman Architects, 1974); 3. Sculpture Garden; 4. Tel Aviv Museum of Art (Yitzhak Yashar and Dan Eytan, 1964-1971); 5. Palace of Justice (Ya’akov Rechter, 1965). (Alvar Aalto Museum)

Aalto replied in a letter dated April 15, 1975, asking about travelling to Tel Aviv to visit the site. There were difficulties with the original site, and in a letter dated April 22, 1975, Meir mentions how the Institute has now received a more favourable site in the midst of the new Civic and Cultural Centre in Tel Aviv along Sha’ul Hamelech Boulevard. Meir enclosed a site plan (Fig.1) showing the position of the new site, set in a park, but next to a city block reserved for various public buildings – a law courts, art museum, library, and centre for performing arts, the first three of which had already been built. In the following letter, dated August 10, 1975, Meir states that “the land for the building... has been confirmed by the City of Tel-Aviv, and that we are ready finally so start planning.” He yet again voices his concern about the climatic conditions, but adds, somewhat reassuringly “Of course such things as our strong light and sun, local building material and the general mood of the people and country, I believe, can be learned by visiting us.”

Aalto replied in a letter dated August 19, 1975, in which he stated that he understood the previous letter to be “definitive acceptance” of the work. Somewhat cryptically he adds: “There are many things suggested for me but would leave other things which are probably politically not in friendship with the Israel work. I accept with pleasure your suggestion and leave out things which are not probably good to continue with that (Saudi-Arabian etc.)”<sup>3</sup> It was during 1975 that Aalto and his office had started on an urban centre for Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, including an auditorium, art museum, mosque, planetarium and aquarium. Preparatory studies were made during 1975 and 1976 but the project was then halted by the client and never taken further. The implication from Aalto’s clumsy English seems to be that in agreeing to take on the project in Israel he was prepared to drop the project in Saudi Arabia, either because the Israeli clients wished it or due to his own convictions.

In the letter of August 19, 1975 Aalto also sets out specific details: the original idea to execute the project in two stages would no longer stand and it would be built in a single stage: “Otherwise it is impossible to get the good totality. (This is for my part a sine qua non).” Aalto would prepare drawings as soon as he has visited the site. Meir (letter dated August 31, 1975) agreed to Aalto’s suggestions regarding completing the building in a single stage, and was eager to know when Aalto, accompanied by his wife, would be arriving in Israel.

A number of letters were then sent between Aalto and Meir discussing travel issues and practicalities. A flight was even booked, arriving in Israel on Tuesday March 2, 1976, via Zurich. The further correspondence became detailed and Aalto was asked, for instance, about travelling around the country: “I presume Jerusalem will be of great interest to you, as well as Bethlehem, Nazareth and a Kibbutz” (Meir letter dated February 10, 1976). Aalto replied: “I would not travel very much inside the country... I would concentrate on the work itself and get so far that I can start with the first project (sketches).”<sup>4</sup> That was not the first time that Aalto had spurned the opportunity for “sightseeing” while visiting a site abroad – for instance in Iran in 1969 – and this was not a matter of indifference but, as he stated, he preferred to spend the time familiarising himself with the site, confident on his own ability to reach a solution.

A letter from Aalto’s office to Meir dated April 29, 1976, informing him that Aalto was ill is the last recorded letter sent from Aalto’s office to Meir. There is one final letter from Meir, dated May 7, 1976, in which Meir again makes suggestions for possible travel dates. Aalto died on May 11, 1976, quite probably before the letter arrived. There is no record of Aalto’s office informing Meir about Aalto’s death or even of Aalto’s office receiving a letter of condolence from Meir or the Conservatory.

There are no known sketches, notes or design drawings for the Israel Conservatory of Music in Tel Aviv,<sup>5</sup> and the project is not even mentioned in *Alvar Aalto. A Life’s Work. Architecture, Design and Art*, the complete catalogue of Aalto’s works edited by Göran Schildt and published in 1984. However, Schildt does mention a project for Israel in the third volume of his biography on Aalto,<sup>6</sup> though his account does not agree with the information I have found in the Aalto archives. He states that the commission was for a “concert hall” in Jerusalem, rather than a music conservatory (including a concert hall) in Tel Aviv, but I have found no evidence for his claim. However, he mentions the “political circles” that would have brought about such a commission, stating that it “stemmed from Golda Meir’s circle” – Meir was prime minister of Israel from 1969 to 1974 – which is certainly true in that Menahem Meir was her son! Schildt does not mention Menahem Meir, but states that Golda Meir herself wrote to Aalto to ask him “to come to Israel for discussions.” Again, I found no such letter in the Aalto archives, and it is probable that he has confused Menahem Meir for his mother. All the same, Schildt pictures the potential project in glowing terms, “the work that enticed Aalto most,” and “the concert hall project became a *fata morgana* for him, a goal that always seemed in reach but stubbornly eluded his grasp.”<sup>7</sup>

## The selection of Aalto as architect of the Israel Conservatory of Music

So how did the Israel Conservatory of Music in Tel Aviv and its director Menahem Meir (1924-2014) come to choose Aalto to design their new building? For Meir a key factor in selecting Aalto had been his design of cultural centres and concert halls in Finland.<sup>8</sup> But as regards to his knowledge of architecture, in fact Meir’s wife, Ayala Meir (1925-2008), was the daughter of a Polish-born Israeli architect Yaakov Pinkerfeld (1897-1956), who had studied in Vienna. But the recommendation to choose Aalto had specifically come from two friends of the Meirs, the architect couple Gideon Ziv (1926-2015) and Tova Ziv (1929-).<sup>9</sup> Gideon Ziv had worked with Philip Johnson on the design of the Nuclear Research Center in Sorek in 1956-59, a monolithic concrete structure – the sort of building later labelled as “Brutalist” after the later Corbusian *béton brut* concrete works – though with an overall form, interior courtyards and columns reminiscent of archaic forms. The Zivs’ own works were more rational, combining themes associated with the Bauhaus and its legacy in Israel and Tel Aviv in particular. According to Tova Ziv, however, their own viewpoint did not prevent them from very much admiring Aalto’s work, and indeed they journeyed to Finland in 1970 to visit his buildings. Menahem Meir then accepted their recommendation for Aalto as a potential architect of the new conservatory building, and the invitation to him was sent off, dated May 14, 1973.

Though there is no design to analyse, it is still worthwhile discussing, albeit rather briefly, the architectural context into which Aalto would have been entering in the mid-1960s. The major factor to consider is the role of modernist architecture and its relation to the consolidation of the state of Israel – just as Aalto had been central to the physical planning of the post-war Finnish state. But crucially, Aalto was being invited to design a building for Tel Aviv – not some abstract idea of Israel – which modelled itself on European culture and thinking. From the vantage point of a pastoral historical distance, Tel Aviv’s modernist architectural-historical discourse often begins in recent histories of modernism with its status as the “White City” – the world’s largest concentration of International Style modernist architecture built in the late 1920s and 1930s, though in fact the term “White City” was coined only in 1984 with a revival in interest in the architecture. The term would belatedly become integral to its identity with its inclusion in 2003 in the UNESCO World Heritage List as “The White City of Tel Aviv”.<sup>10</sup>

Keeping in mind Meir’s possibly flattering comment to Aalto that “your planning may also serve as an esthetic model of architecture to the young city of Tel Aviv”, to what might Aalto’s outlook on architecture be contrasted? Aalto, of course, would not have been faced by the often raised question of the relation between building, architecture and Zionism. The question, rather, would be of how Aalto’s regionalism would apply to the widely differing context. The expressionistic curved corners seen as somewhat emblematic of Tel Aviv’s International Style architecture are often said to have been inspired by the works of Eric Mendelsohn, who indeed designed a number of buildings in Palestine during the British Mandate, and lived there between 1939 and 1941 before emigrating to the USA. He argued, nevertheless, that the International-style modernism of Tel Aviv was a failure: “Their architects built with cement and glass because they had

neither the time nor the understanding to study the conditions of the oriental climate. They were excited, as imitators invariably are, at the new signs visible on the architectural horizon, they were anxious to join forces with the leaders of the new movement. ... the longing to typify the new world and to be modern, hence glass. As a result there arose the Jewish city of Tel Aviv... wild colonial vegetation without properly organised planning.”<sup>11</sup> Mendelsohn ended up somewhat in opposition to the modernist architects in Palestine epitomised by the members of the so-called Chug (“Circle”), who sought for their new hoped for state a new functionalist architecture that rejected historical-cultural contingencies and “Orientalism”, while Mendelsohn himself sought inspiration from a Semitic architectural tradition, even hoping for a new Renaissance.<sup>12</sup>

Still, it would be far more accurate to see Aalto as arriving into an architectural scene in Tel Aviv in the mid-70s defined not by “white Modernism” but rather by “a hard architecture of stern materials – concrete and stone – and of uncompromising forms, geometric, massive, sharp-edged. It is an architecture where the wall surface is dominant and the sun the main creator of pattern.”<sup>13</sup> Still, already during the 1950s and 1960s, various modernist Israeli architects began searching for a sense of place within the modernist order – as opposed to others who turned to the Palestine vernacular to best represent their idea of locality – in order to create an experience of containment and to highlight the materials and construction. “Brutalism”, with its origins in Le Corbusier’s later *béton brut* works with exposed concrete, was embraced by various architects in Israel, some specifically in terms of native intimacy with the landscape and the climate and even the local Arab vernacular.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Tel Aviv attempted to distinguish itself materially from Jerusalem, where there were even regulations about using local stone: in fact there was also a different local stone in Tel Aviv, but architects then preferred to see the city as built from concrete. However, the use of exposed concrete and a celebration of “brutalism” and heaviness would have been at odds with Aalto’s own outlook; indeed, despite the influences from Le Corbusier, the only ostensibly public building where Aalto used fair-faced concrete on a large scale was the perimeter wall of the Police Headquarters in Jyväskylä (1967).

“Brutalism” as an architectural-historical definition is rather imprecise. While Reyner Banham saw it as an ethical stance against the post-war meekness of the “New Empiricism”, fixated on the Nordic Countries, Anthony Vidler has seen it as part of the post-war response to the call for a “new monumentality” as advocated by Sigfried Giedion and others.<sup>15</sup> In Finland by the 1960s Aalto was very much seen as an idiosyncratic opposition to the rationalist school typified by Aulis Blomstedt, and which received its most “Brutalist” expression in the fair-faced concrete works of Aarno Ruusuvuori. However, it should be recalled that arch-Brutalists Peter and Alison Smithson argued that the first ever Brutalist building was Aalto’s Baker House Dormitory (1949).<sup>16</sup> While the white-rendered-brick facades of early Modernism were merely a matter of expediency, denoting an idea of plasticity over materiality that would realise the full potential of concrete when the technology was available and cost-effective, it was Brutalism that would reintroduce the earthen aesthetic of the concrete material itself.

Still, Aalto’s declaration at the outset that Elissa Aalto would travel to Israel “to examine local building materials” has great poignancy. To give a comparative example, for the design of the Museum of Art in Shiraz (1969, unbuilt) in Iran, Aalto had visited the location, after which he chose to use brick because “in the history of architecture brick is a product of Iran and its use marks the tradition of the country. It is also a material well-suited to the climate and the variations of temperature in the region.”<sup>17</sup> If not ready to use fair-faced concrete, then an obvious choice would have been the local Tel-Aviv stone, already used partly in conjunction with heavy concrete in some of the buildings on the site. At that period of his career, Aalto was interested in the question of the “civicness” of building materials, his most controversial choice being Carrara marble and his most ingenious his patented cobalt blue tiles.

Among the notable monuments clad in Carrara marble was the Finlandia Hall concert hall (1971) in Helsinki – *marble, Italy* and the *Mediterranean* here conveying the idea of enculturation – and which would have been the prime site for Aalto to show to Meir during his visit.<sup>18</sup> What Meir would not have known was that Aalto at that time was already a somewhat marginalised figure in Finnish architecture and his architecture and his use of marble were heavily criticised by the public and the young generation of architects for its elitism.<sup>19</sup>

The exact origin of Aalto’s use of cobalt blue tiles is not known for certain. He visited Spain twice in 1951, including Granada, as well as North Africa in 1954. His first significant use externally of tiles was in the Seinäjoki Town Hall (1958-65). However, his drawings for the Museum of Art in Baghdad (1957) also show the exterior facades clad in cobalt-blue tiles, and though no explanation for this is known, Mina Marefat states in her account of Aalto’s key works in the Middle East that the cobalt blue ceramic is an indigenous material.<sup>20</sup> So a motif significant in Aalto’s mature works in Finland may well have had its origins in the Middle East and/or Islamic culture, and just like his distinct fan motifs derived from classical Greece and reemployed in all scales – from theatre plans and cross-sections to chair legs – it was yet another loan from the “South”, thus was “repatriating” a material that would also have been Aalto’s own signature “civic material”.

### **The Civic-Cultural Centre and the plot offered to Aalto**

The plot measuring 54 metres x 54 metres offered to Aalto in 1975 for the new building was part of a site that had been set out already during the 1950s as a Civic-Cultural Centre in the Tel Aviv City Building Plan (Fig. 1). Three of the scheduled buildings were at that time already completed. Aalto was essentially being offered a square plot to design a free-standing object amongst other totally unrelated free-standing objects, the unbuilt space between regarded as a plaza. Strictly speaking,

Aalto's plot is not part of the city block, measuring approximately 300 metres x 150 metres, reserved for various buildings comprising the Civic-Cultural Centre, but rather lies immediately north of it, in an area extending east from the Dubnov Gardens. Today on Aalto's site stands an apartment block, "Golda on the Park" (1994) by Rechter Architects.

It was rare for Aalto to be offered a precisely square-shaped plot in park surroundings; examples of more-or-less square forms set within a park include Baghdad Art Museum (1957) (Fig. 2) and North Jutland Art Museum (1959), but even in these he "deconstructed" the perimeter and massing, breaking them up into distinct volumes so as to make them into cityscapes-in-miniature. This would even be axiomatic in the design of the Tel Aviv conservatory building when contemplating the positioning within the whole of the 1000-seat concert hall and 300-seat recital hall. A similar relevant example would then be Aalto's Cultural Centre in Wolfsburg (1962) (Fig.3) where, in the words of Robert Venturi, "the rectangular configuration of the whole composition is barely maintained as he [Aalto] organizes the necessarily diagonal shapes of the auditorium."<sup>21</sup> So one can well imagine that he would have requested to change the borders by extending out into the garden and perhaps requesting to design a piazza plan to better integrate the existing buildings with his own. But in his design for the Museum of Art in Shiraz (1969) in Iran he attached himself not to a known typological urban lifeworld but to an abstraction of a specific cultural landscape.



Fig. 2. Alvar Aalto, Baghdad Art Museum (1957); draft of the roof and open-air auditorium. (Alvar Aalto Museum)

The site plan for the Civic-Cultural Centre in Tel Aviv presented to Aalto comprised four distinct buildings, each designed by a different architect, set out on a public plaza. At that time three of the buildings had already been completed: the Tel Aviv Palace of Justice (Ya'akov Rechter, 1965) – described by its architect as "soft Brutalism"<sup>22</sup> – the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (Yitzhak Yashar and Dan Eytan, 1964-1971), and the Beit Ariela and Sha'ar Zion Library (Luphenfeld-Gammerman Architects, 1974). The fourth building reservation in the plan was for the Max Reinhardt Centre for the Performing Arts (Salo Hershman, 1969) but it was never built, and eventually built in its place was the Golda Center for the Performing Arts (1994), also designed by Ya'akov Rechter, consisting of the Performing Arts Center, which includes the Israeli Opera, and two office buildings grouped around a rectangular plaza (Fig. 3).<sup>23</sup> The Rechter office was also responsible for the overall town planning, designing the open spaces and many of the significant buildings, and which included drawing the luxury "Golda on the Park" apartment block (1994) into the space, in terms of its alignment referencing the other buildings and providing views over the public plaza, as well as coming up with the initial guidelines for the extension to the Tel Aviv Museum. The theatre block finally culminated in the Cameri Theater (2003) designed by Amnon Rechter, Rechter's son, the block ending in what the architect himself calls a "Corbusian" element, the white free-form Café Theatre, though in explaining the work he also states that Aalto is his "favourite architect".<sup>24</sup>

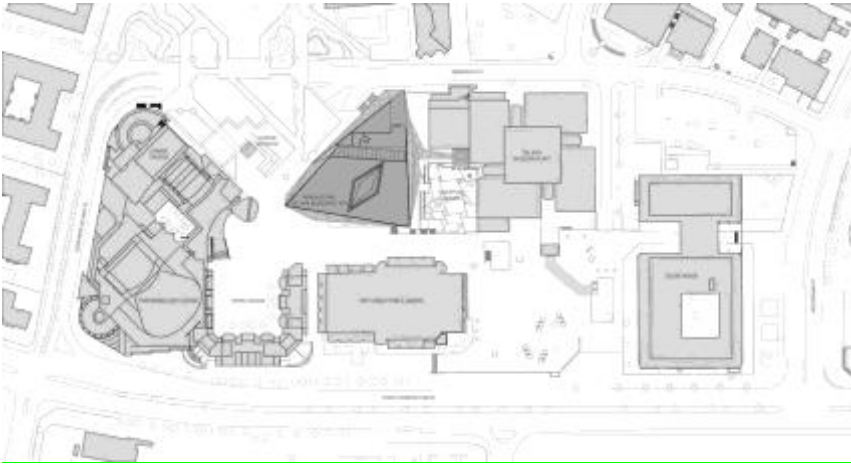


Fig. 3. Site plan of the Herta and Paul Amir building (Preston Scott Cohen, 2011) extension to the Tel Aviv Museum of Art; to the left, the Golda Center (Ya'akov Rechter, 1994) and Cameri Theater (Amnon Rechter, 2003). Immediately north of the art museum is seen part of the "Golda On The Park" apartment block (Ya'akov Rechter, 1994). (Preston Scott Cohen Inc)

In Rechter's case, through the delineation of the building and how it turns its back from the surrounding city, as well as the use of civic-minded corner arched portals, a scenographic bridge faintly closing the fourth side of the square – reminiscent of the long canopy closing the fourth side of Aalto's House of Culture (1958) – and natural stone and red-ceramic ground and even curtain walling, the Rechters were clearly employing a repertoire of elements that appeal to recognisable understandings of urban public space. In his history of the site, Zvi Elhyani summarises this development as the interface between two urban paradigms, the modernist grid of the first buildings and a later 1980s postmodernist superposition, which included the introduction of a diagonal on the plot, even going as far as to say that such a postmodernist act "diminished the Museum of Art's possibilities of rational extension ... in effect detracting from the civic and public interests in the complex in favour of the interests of other, private users."<sup>25</sup>

Judging by Aalto's attitude to the design of cultural sites and even individual buildings, one could speculate about how he might have attempted to see his design for the Conservatory not as one more fragment of the larger whole but as something that would build the urban character of the site, seizing a feeling of the spontaneity of the situation (much as his Town Centre of Avesta [1944], the Cultural Centre for Wolfsburg [1962], Jyväskylä Civic Centre [1964], the Urban Centre of Montreal [1965] or the Urban Centre for Castrop-Rauxel [1965] had suggested), while still leaving opportunities for other future activities. In inheriting existing contexts, Aalto's insertions would even take on irregular shapes, as for instance in the "apogean" elements proposed for the civic centres of Jyväskylä (Fig. 4) and Rovaniemi.

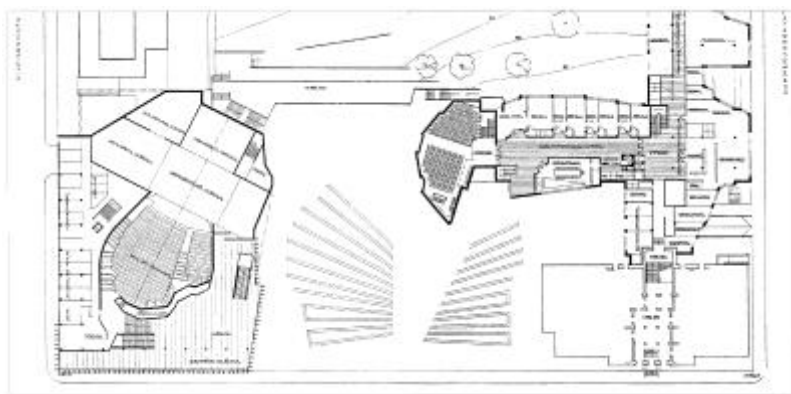


Fig. 4. Alvar Aalto, Jyväskylä Administrative and Cultural Centre, 1964; old town hall front right, new administration buildings and assemble hall behind it, and theatre (completed 1982) to the left. (Alvar Aalto Museum)

These even share a family resemblance with one of the most recent additions to the site, the extension to the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (2011) (Fig. 5), the so-called Herta and Paul Amir building, designed by American architect Preston Scott Cohen. In the discussions of that project a viewpoint on alternative approaches to the site has been preserved in texts by Bruno Zevi, who was a judge in the first competition for the Museum of Art in 1964. Zevi was a well-known champion of the works of Wright, Mendelsohn, Aalto and other exponents of what he regarded as “organic architecture”, but based on the idea of human interaction rather than metaphor and mimicking natural forms.<sup>26</sup> Attending the inauguration ceremony on the opening of the new museum in 1972, Zevi gave thought to the new building, resignedly accepting of the final effort yet critical of the lost opportunity. He then imagines about twenty alternatives for the actual building, including Wright’s Guggenheim Museum in New York and Mies van der Rohe’s Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. Looking at the overall site, he dismisses the idea of breaking up a site into parts, each one solved separately, a “method of the thirties... acceptable and nevertheless mechanical”.<sup>27</sup> His preferred solution was an “organic vision that integrates the parts as multifunctional complexes, an urban continuity”. His ultimate example of the latter is Wright’s Guggenheim Museum in New York, “a vital organism”, and concludes: “the cultural centre of Tel Aviv must be inspired by the Guggenheim Museum; it must go up into the context of the city and not restrict itself to constituting a compensatory factor.”

Now, with the last site reserve being a triangular-shaped plot, Cohen referred to a “Michelangelo approach” – a reference to his resolving of the given asymmetries and site difficulties of the Capitoline Hill in Rome, resulting in a masterpiece of Renaissance urban design – in “transforming difficult conditions in order to create new architectural forms.”<sup>28</sup> The analogy is fascinating because in his mature works Aalto could be said to be creating “difficult conditions”, natural “cityscapes” in miniature, in the interior just as well as the exterior, in a sense mimicking slow-paced urban growth. But this “organicness” was not scenography but a consequence he felt of the user-centredness of the layout. Cohen in turn “resolved” the conflict between the triangular site and the need for rectangular galleries with hyperbolic parabolas, creating a 25-metre deep spiralling atrium – and providing the building with a central motif and a new name, Lightfall. But a product of an altogether different time than Aalto, Cohen stated that it also represented a synthesis between a museum as a container of neutral white boxes and the museum as “architectural spectacle”.<sup>29</sup> Would Cohen’s building have been equally as original if, like Aalto, he had been given a square site?



Fig. 5. Herta and Paul Amir building, Tel Aviv Museum of Art (Preston Scott Cohen, 2011) and (right) the Golda Center (Ya’akov Rechter, 1994) and Cameri Theater (Amnon Rechter, 2003).

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Frampton, “The Legacy of Alvar Aalto: Evolution and Influence”, in Peter Reed (ed), *Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism*. The Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1998, p.137.

<sup>2</sup> The main material for this essay was provided by letters at Aalto archives in Tiilimäki, Helsinki. This material is supplemented by short replies I received from the chief representative of the Israeli client, Menahem Meir (1924-2014), to whom I wrote in early 2008. Later that same year, on my behalf, Israeli architect Mr. Ze’ev Lipan phoned him and based on my list of questions managed to get some details about the project and commission, which are discussed here. I gratefully thank him for communicating with Menahem Meir on my behalf. Due to a mishap, however, I received Meir’s responses from him only in 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Aalto had undertaken other design projects in the Middle East: an invitational competition for the design of the National Bank of Iraq head office, Baghdad, in 1955, in which Aalto’s scheme received no attention from the jury; an art museum in Baghdad, Iraq, in 1957; the General Post Office, Baghdad, in 1957, for which Aalto completed the designs, but was not built; the Sabbagh Urban Centre, Beirut, Lebanon, in 1964, comprising housing and commercial spaces, undertaken in collaboration with Swiss architect Alfred Roth but, according to Schildt, Roth completed the building on his own; a Museum of Modern Art in Shiraz, Iran, 1969, unbuilt; an urban centre for Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, 1975-76. See Schildt, *Alvar Aalto. A Life’s Work*, p.38.

<sup>4</sup> This issue of Aalto preferring to get on with the design rather than architectural tourism is raised by Göran Schildt; for instance, starting the first sketch designs of the Museum of Modern Art in Shiraz, Iran, while there in October 1969. In Schildt’s words, “The hosts wanted to take him sightseeing, but he was completely uninterested. Only out of politeness did he go to see some mosques, contenting himself with viewing them from the outside.” Göran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto. The Mature Years*. Rizzoli: New York, 1991, pp. 315-316.

<sup>5</sup> It was not until 2012 that the Conservatory would finally receive purpose-built premises, designed by architects Edna and Rafi Lerman, situated on Stricker Street.



- <sup>6</sup> Göran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto. The Mature Years*, pp. 315-316. The Tel Aviv project – nor for that matter Aalto's projects for Lebanon or Saudi Arabia – gets no mention in Mina Mareft's article "Alvar Aalto and Modernism in the Middle East", in Mateo Kries and Jochen Eisenbrand (eds.), *Alvar Aalto – Second Nature*. Vitra Design Museum: Weil am Rhein, 2015.
- <sup>7</sup> Schildt, *Alvar Aalto. The Mature Years*, *ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> Meir communication, 2008/2014. In the communication, he was unable to name any of these projects. The implication, however, is that he visited the Finlandia Hall (first part completed 1971) during his trip.
- <sup>9</sup> Encouraged by Mr. Meir, this information and picture material on the works of Gideon and Tova Ziv were provided by Dr. Amalia Ziv, their daughter (in a personal communication, September 2015), and to whom I express my deep gratitude.
- <sup>10</sup> The "Tel Aviv revival" is said to have started in the early 1980s with the exhibition "White City. International Style Architecture in Israel", curated by Michael D. Levin, accompanied by the book Michael D. Levin, *White City: International Style Architecture in Israel, A Portrait of an Era*, Tel Aviv Museum: Tel Aviv, 1984. The travelling exhibition "The White City of Tel Aviv" visited the Museum of Finnish Architecture, 12.2.-30.3.2014. For a critique of the construction of the "White City" narrative see Sharon Rotbard, *White City Black City: Architecture and War in Tel Aviv and Jaffa*. Pluto Press: London, 2015.
- <sup>11</sup> Mendelsohn cited in Arnold Whittick, *Eric Mendelsohn*. Leonard Hill: London, 1956, p. 113.
- <sup>12</sup> Alona Nitzan-Shifan, "Contested Zionism – Alternative Modernism: Erich Mendelsohn and the Tel Aviv Chug in Mandate Palestine", in Haim Yacobi (ed) *Constructing a Sense of Place – Architecture and the Zionist Discourse*, Ashgate: Aldershot, 2004, p. 41.
- <sup>13</sup> Gilbert Herbert, "Amiram Harlap", *New Israeli Architecture*, *JSAH*, XLIII:4, Dec. 1984, p. 376.
- <sup>14</sup> Alona Nitzan-Shifan and Shira Sprecher-Segalovitz, "The Monumentality of the Everyday", in Yasha J. Grobman and Arielle Blonder (eds), *Five Moments: Trajectories in the Architecture of the Tel Aviv Museum*. Tel Aviv Museum of Art: Tel Aviv, 2011, E62-63.
- <sup>15</sup> Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic*. Architectural Press: London, 1966. Anthony Vidler, "Troubles in Theory V: The Brutalist Moment(s)", *Architectural Review*, Feb. 2014, p. 96.
- <sup>16</sup> Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, "Banham's Bumper Book on Brutalism", *Architects' Journal*, 28 December 1966, p. 1591.
- <sup>17</sup> Aalto's undated comments cited in Mina Mareft, "Alvar Aalto and Modernism in the Middle East", *Alvar Aalto – Second Nature*, p. 375.
- <sup>18</sup> This issue of the reference of Finnish architects to the "south" I have discussed elsewhere. See G. Griffiths, "Finlandia: El sur y los símbolos de enculturación", in *Nórdicos*, *DPA* 26, UPC: Barcelona, 2010, pp. 34-41.
- <sup>19</sup> See G. Griffiths, *The Polemical Aalto – Alvar Aalto's Enso-Gutzeit Building*, Datutop 19, Tampere University of Technology: Tampere, 1997, p. 34.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.368.
- <sup>21</sup> Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. MOMA: New York, 1966, p. 50.
- <sup>22</sup> Ram Karmi, "Israeli Brutalism", in Zvi Efrat (ed.), *The Israeli Project: Building and Architecture 1948-1973*. Transl. Daphna Raz. Exhibition at Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2004, <http://www.efrat-kowalsky.co.il/texts/the-israeli-project/> (accessed 1.9.2016).
- <sup>23</sup> Zvi Elhyani, "Tel Aviv, Block 6111, Lots 819, 820, 827 (Parts): A critical chronicle", in Meira Yagid-Haimovici (ed), *A New Building: Tel Aviv Museum of Art. The Herta and Paul Amir Architectural Competition*. Tel Aviv Museum of Art: Tel Aviv, 2004, p. 76.
- <sup>24</sup> Amnon Rechter, "My Tel-Aviv. The Cameri Theater". *Architectural Record*, February 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwZAPO9RIR4> [accessed, 1.9.2016].
- <sup>25</sup> Elhyani, "Tel Aviv, Block 6111", pp.76-77.
- <sup>26</sup> Bruno Zevi, *Towards an Organic Architecture*, Faber & Faber: London, 1950, pp. 60, 72-75.
- <sup>27</sup> Bruno Zevi, "The architecture of the museum", *Ariel* 25, 1972, pp. 27-30. Reproduced in Yagid-Haimovici (ed.), *A New Building*, pp. 87-89.
- <sup>28</sup> Preston Scott Cohen, "The route to a building", in Yagid-Haimovici (ed.), pp. E18-19.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

## References

Unpublished sources:

Correspondence between Alvar Aalto and Menahem Meir, 1973-1976, Alvar Aalto Archives, Helsinki, AAA.

Letter from Shlomo Lahat to Alvar Aalto, 1975, Alvar Aalto Archives, Helsinki, AAA.

Correspondence between the author and Menahem Meir (mediated by Mr. Ze'ev Lipan), 2008/2014.

Correspondence between the author and Dr. Amalia Ziv, 2015.

Published sources:

Banham, Reyner (1966), *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic*. Architectural Press: London.

Cohen, Preston Scott (2011), "The route to a building", in Yagid-Haimovici (ed.), *op.cit.*

Frampton, Kenneth (1998), "The Legacy of Alvar Aalto: Evolution and Influence", in Peter Reed (ed.), *Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism*. The Museum of Modern Art: New York.

Griffiths, Gareth (2010), "Finlandia: El sur y los símbolos de enculturación", *Nórdicos*, *DPA* 26, UPC: Barcelona.

Herbert, Gilbert (1984), "Amiram Harlap", *New Israeli Architecture*, *JSAH*, XLIII:4, Dec/1984.

Levin, Michael D. (1984), *White City: International Style Architecture in Israel, A Portrait of an Era*. Tel Aviv Museum: Tel Aviv.

Mareft, Mina (2015), "Alvar Aalto and Modernism in the Middle East", in Kries, Mateo and Eisenbrand, Jochen (eds.) (2015), *Alvar Aalto – Second Nature*. Vitra Design Museum: Weil am Rhein.

Nitzan-Shifan, Alona (2004), "Contested Zionism – Alternative Modernism: Erich Mendelsohn and the Tel Aviv Chug in Mandate Palestine", in Yacobi, Haim (ed.) *Constructing a Sense of Place – Architecture and the Zionist Discourse*, Ashgate: Aldershot.

Nitzan-Shifan, Alona and Sprecher-Segalovitz, Shira (2011), "The Monumentality of the Everyday", in Grobman, Yasha J. and Blonder, Arielle (eds.), *Five Moments: Trajectories in the Architecture of the Tel Aviv Museum*. Tel Aviv Museum of Art: Tel Aviv.

Rotbard, Sharon (2015), *White City Black City: Architecture and War in Tel Aviv and Jaffa*. Pluto Press: London.

Schildt, Göran (ed.) (1994), *Alvar Aalto. A Life's Work. Architecture, Design and Art*. Otava: Keuruu.

- 
- Schildt, Göran (1991), *Alvar Aalto. The Mature Years*. Rizzoli: New York.
- Smithson, Alison & Smithson, Peter (1966), "Banham's Bumper Book on Brutalism", *Architects' Journal*, 28 December, 1966.
- Venturi, Robert (1966), *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. MOMA: New York.
- Vidler, Anthony (2014), "Troubles in Theory V: The Brutalist Moment(s)", *Architectural Review*, Feb. 2014.
- Whittick, Arnold (1956), *Eric Mendelsohn*. Leonard Hill: London.
- Yagid-Haimovici, Meira (ed.) (2004), *A New Building: Tel Aviv Museum of Art. The Herta and Paul Amir Architectural Competition*. Tel Aviv Museum of Art: Tel Aviv.
- Zevi, Bruno (1950), *Towards an Organic Architecture*, Faber & Faber: London.
- Zevi, Bruno (1972), "The architecture of the museum", *Ariel* 25, 1972, reproduced in Yagid-Haimovici (ed.), op.cit.
- Web links:
- Efrat, Zvi (ed.), *The Israeli Project: Building and Architecture 1948-1973*. Transl. Daphna Raz. Exhibition at Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2004: <http://www.efrat-kowalsky.co.il/texts/the-israeli-project/> (accessed 1.9.2016).
- Rechter, Amnon (2016). "My Tel-Aviv. The Cameri Theater". *Architectural Record*, February 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwZAPO9RIR4> [accessed, 1.9.2016].