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Photo by: Yigal Shem-Tov

Zionism and esthetics: A rocky relationship

By CARL HOFFMAN

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Israel's founding may be epic, but was it pretty?

Many would argue that the story of Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel represents one of the finest moments and greatest achievements in the history of the Jewish people. It is a dramatic story of bravery, heroism, sacrifice and, finally, the still ongoing process of building a dynamic new nation.

As the saying goes, however, no one is perfect. Six Israeli photographers have banded together to form a group they call "P6" in order to demonstrate that while the establishment of Israel and the subsequent ingathering of the exiles may be a saga of epic proportions, it has not always been pretty to look at.

And nowhere has this lack of esthetic consideration been more evident, the group believes, than in the construction of housing in Israel. In a current exhibition at the Rubin Museum in Tel Aviv, called "Building a Place: The P6 Group and Critical Landscape Photography," we see an array of pictures designed to show the compromises made in building housing environments, from the earliest days of the state down to the present moment.

Shira Naftali, co-curator of the show along with museum director Carmela Rubin, recently led *Metro* on a tour of the exhibition, starting with a brief explanation of the P6 group.

"They're six artists of different generations who decided for conceptual reasons to join together as a group. They all have independent careers. They're not a cooperative. There are many cooperatives that operate today mainly to become a power group to deal with the logistics of Israeli art – like getting into galleries, and so on.

"These artists came together for another reason, because they're engaged in the same interests – the environment, the esthetics of the Israeli here and now, and this can be seen throughout their work. So the first project they wanted to do was to look at the housing in Israel."

And what is this group's problem with housing in Israel? Naftali says, "This exhibition mirrors the development of housing in Israel since the 1950s, but it also mirrors Israeli society. People like to talk about a simpler, better past, but I don't know if there ever really was one. I think that the uniform esthetics of the 1950s was just a façade masking the same kind of diversity and divisions in Israeli society that we have today.

"Of course, there were the problems of money and time and the need to settle all of the newly arriving immigrants. But the planners failed to consider the environment, landscape and esthetic conditions that were here before all the new buildings were planned.

"Also, the planners were simply unable to understand – were blind to the identities and needs of the people who were going to be living in the buildings they were planning."

The result, according to Dr. Hadas Shadar, was a landscape full of drab, ugly buildings and alienated people.

An expert in the history of public housing in Israel, Shadar writes in her introduction to the exhibition that a cultural gap between planners and immigrants was largely to blame, especially when a massive wave of Jewish immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East began to arrive.

“These immigrants were categorically different from the established population... the most essential difference was cultural; some of the newer immigrants had not yet encountered the modern Western thinking that formed the basis of the State of Israel.

“The new immigrants faced tremendous difficulties. In the intense pressure of the melting pot, they were forced to give up their language in favor of Hebrew, to trade their traditional dress for the khaki of the young state’s pioneers, to replace their beloved music with new melodies and to shed their cultural codes and adopt the prevailing culture of the ‘sabra.’

“Their landscapes and former style of housing were negated. The small apartments that were characteristic of the public housing developed in the 1920s in Central Europe made up the new living environment: low-density patterns of housing, devoid of history and adrift in a sea of empty space.”

Some of the starkest examples of what Naftali and Shadar are taking about can be seen in the pictures of Yaakov Israel, 36, who photographs the public housing in the Kiryat Hayovel neighborhood of Jerusalem, where he grew up. These gloomy “railroad blocks” and massive, bunker-like concrete buildings were, according to University of Haifa art historian Dr. Jochai Rosen, “beehives for humans that replaced the tin shacks and tents of the transit camps but where the same anonymous and inhuman quality remained.”

In his foreword to the admirably written exhibition catalogue, Rosen observes: “One photograph depicts a group of housing projects atop a ridge, dwarfing a bus stop below. The blocs of buildings take on a life of their own; they look like monsters or gigantic spaceships that come to strike fear in the human heart.”

All kidding aside, the attentive viewer will note that in all of his photographs, Israel’s eye seems to be drawn particularly to the garbage-strewn, neglected spaces between the buildings, each constituting a sort of “no man’s land” utterly devoid of people.

Other P6 photographers are eager to demonstrate that the esthetics vacuum was by no means confined to cities.

Igaël Shemtov, 58, shows a series of photographs taken during summer 1981 of Neveh Amal, a rural neighborhood situated at the very edge of Herzliya. Most of the dwellings we see are “Sochnut houses” built by the Jewish Agency, each consisting of two-and-a-half rooms per family on a lot big enough to allow for later expansion.

Rosen writes, “The photographs stress the wretchedness of the houses and the yards, the lack of a housing culture and the distance prevailing between the residents and the surroundings in which they live.”

Stopping at one of Shemtov’s photographs, Naftali says, “The thing that is most dominant in this picture is the fence. It shows the people trying to make a personal space, but failing in the end. I think this photo is the essence of the exhibition. There’s a fence that fails, showing the person’s inability to make a territory of his own inside the fence.

“You look at this picture and think of two words: detachment and alienation.”

A third word comes to mind: distance. As with Israel’s photographs of Kiryat Hayovel, Shemtov’s photos – like virtually all the others in the exhibition – show an almost unbridgeable distance between the photographer and his subject, both conceptually and physically. Indeed, all the photographers have chosen to take their pictures at a significant physical distance from whatever and whomever they are photographing.

Even when photographing a small house, or a child sitting in a little makeshift succa, it seems that the artist is standing across the street and declining to come any closer. The photographer becomes almost omniscient, able to see farther and more knowingly than the people whom he or she is photographing.

Naftali explains: “These artists are very much influenced by the American “Deadpan” school of photography, with the photographer keeping his distance and detaching himself from any emotion about the subject.”

However, one of that school’s worst offenses has been condescension, sometimes bordering on contempt. As

interesting as Deadpan photography has been, too many of its practitioners have produced pictures that have invited the viewer to laugh with the photographer at the subject. The pictures become, in effect, snobby, elitist jokes that everyone “gets” – except the subject.

Naftali bristles at the suggestion that some of that attitude may be seen in this exhibition.

“The point of view is distant and the attitude is critical. That much is clear. But I think there’s a lot of compassion in these photographs – and an acknowledgement of some definite esthetic presence, as in the sunflower in this picture from Neveh Amal. There’s irony, maybe sarcasm, but also a lot of humor.”

That point quickly becomes evident as we come to the photographs of Yigal Feliks, 31, whose pictures of the massive new apartment building clusters being erected today at the margins of Israeli cities show that rather than going away, our problem with esthetics has simply evolved.

One photograph shows the rows and columns of minuscule verandas at the front of one such new building. Another shows the parking lot, marked off into identical little numbered spaces, with the occasional withered, dying little tree.

“These clusters of apartment buildings are built like fortresses, disconnected both from the urban environment around them and from each other,” Naftali says. “If you look at these huge new apartment tower complexes, you see very little, if any, communal space. Few or no gardens or green spaces in-between the buildings.

“The buildings offer the people living in them the latest in hi-tech, and they’re each trying to create their own little Garden of Eden out on their veranda, each trying to create something intimate in these very un-intimate spaces.”

Naftali continues, “These complexes are not for walking, or sitting, or for interacting with other people. They try to detach themselves from the surrounding city, even from the surrounding neighborhood. People living in one of these huge apartment clusters in, say, Petah Tikva don’t say that they live in the surrounding neighborhood, or even in Petah Tikva. They consider themselves in a separate, distinct place.

“Even when these clusters are built in still open areas, you can see how they almost completely try to detach themselves from the surrounding landscape.”

Thus we look at Feliks’s photographs, see what each building resident has tried to make of his or her little postage-stamp-sized veranda, and we laugh. But what the photographer seems to be asking, however, is: Who exactly are we laughing at?

Naftali thinks she knows: “I live in Caesarea. The new neighborhoods going up there – the golf neighborhoods – are very much the same. This lack of restraint and esthetics is not limited to a certain part of the population, or a certain socioeconomic level. Our problem is that when it comes to dwellings, our approach is to get as much as we can, without regard for the social or environmental consequences.

And it’s not about rich or poor. The more money that’s involved, the worse it gets. It is very much an Israeli phenomenon.”

Building a Place: The P6 Group and Critical Landscape Photography features the works of Yosaif Cohain, Yigal Feliks, Yaakov Israel, Oren Noy, Igael Shemtov and Orit Siman-Tov. The exhibition is showing until September 10 at the Rubin Museum, 14 Bialik Street, Tel Aviv. Mon, Wed, Thurs, Fri, 10 a.m.-3 p.m.; Tuesday 10 a.m.-8 p.m.; Saturday 11 a.m.-2 p.m.; Sunday Closed. Tel. 03-5255961.



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