

A matter of manners

Does the future of veteran Israeli neighborhoods lie in the strict adherence to standards of preservation and renovation, or in the freedom to create a new urban idiom? Esther Zandberg reports

Architecture is manners, declared architect Saadia Mandl in his summing up of the symposium on "Future and Heritage in Architecture" which took place at the end of January at the Einav center in Tel Aviv. "An architect must look around him before he sets his toy down in the street. Talk about heritage and the future, about preservation and nostalgia, is not relevant. It is very simply a matter of good manners."

It has been ages since a member of the guild has (if ever) defined Israeli architecture as clearly and directly as Mandl has.

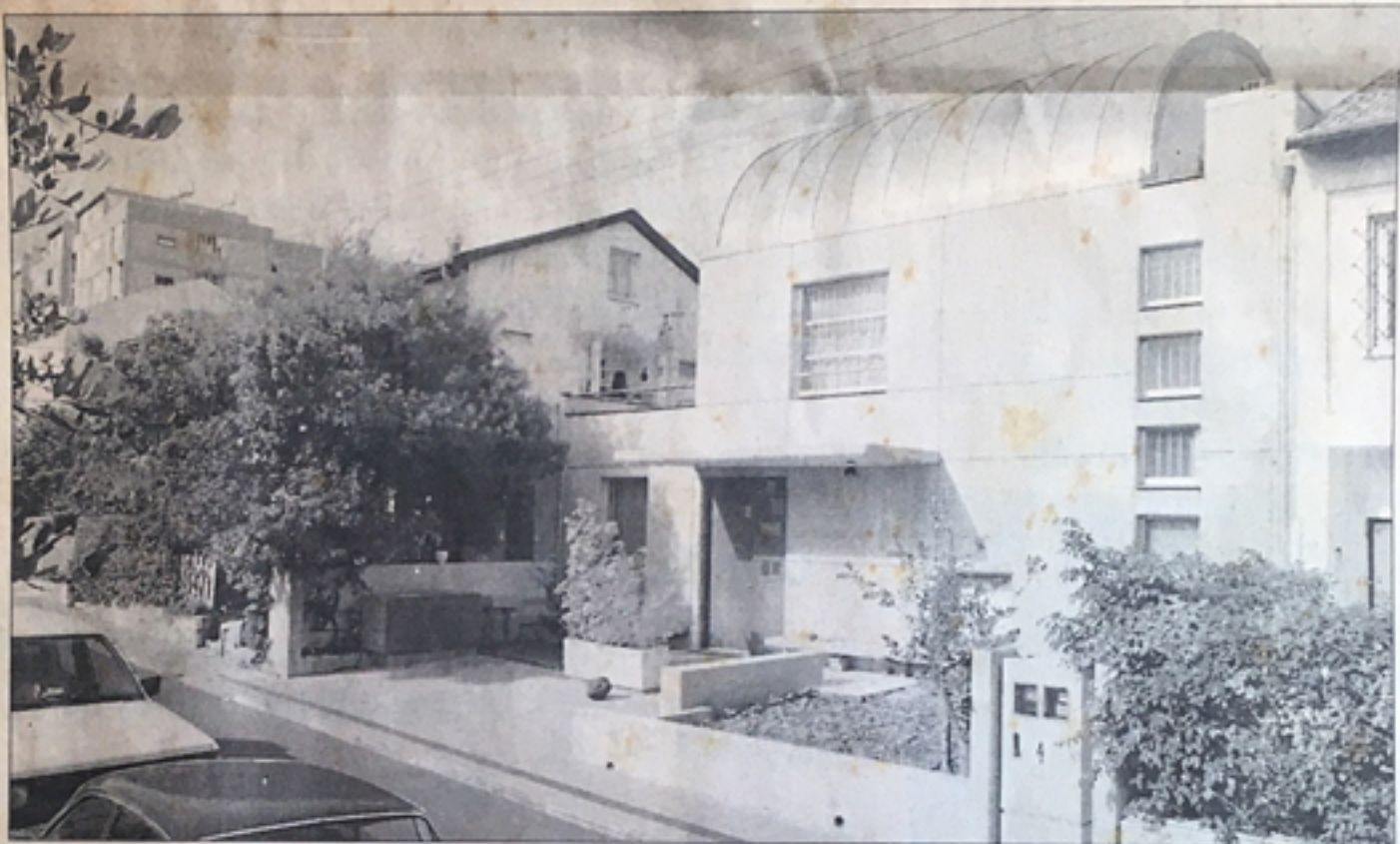
Proof of the bad manners of designers of the built environment here may be found everywhere, from the "Build Your Own Home" neighborhoods bursting with a surfeit of toys people have strewn about the streets, to the street itself, where every 50 meters the wheel is reinvented: a different style, a different paving material, a different color, a different street lamp, a different bench.

Take, for example, a neighborhood which is neither a slum nor a Build Your Own Home development — the veteran and exclusive Officers' Quarter in Tel Aviv, one of the most sympathetic neighborhoods of any Israeli city, which has recently become something of a lodestone for polite architectural pop politics.

The quarter lies between Szold Street and Dafna Street, and consists of several dead-end streets, the mere names of which can envelop Israelis of the right generation in waves of nostalgia: Hata-mar, Harimon, Hagefen, Hazayit and Hate'ena. Along these streets are rows of alternating one and two storey houses topped with red tile roofs. The quarter was planned at the end of the 1940s for World War II British Army veterans. It was the height of the period of economic austerity, and modesty was even more necessary than it was ideological. Out of this necessity grew a residential area uniform in its facade, pleasant and free of ostentation.

In centers of various cities around the world, such neighborhoods have become desirable areas, like the London mews, formerly servants' and grooms' quarters. Neither the mews nor the Officers' Quarter is a case of great architecture, but rather of an urban creation which grew from of the ordinary and the unpretentious.

The grooms' quarters in London have not changed their facades much with their increase in prestige. The whims of inhabitants and their architects are reined in by municipal by-laws and the cooperation of veteran residents. Is-



The home of Tula Amir and Ron Pundik in the Officers' Quarter, Tel Aviv, openly rebels against its surroundings.

raeli architects working in European cities are report of constant battles between architects on one hand, and the municipalities together with the veteran tenants on the other, with stringent regulation to ensure that the new will not deviate from the old and that manners will be preserved.

In the absence of such external and internal restraints, it seems that in Israel, a gap has opened through which has tumbled a huge variety of styles and caprices, shapes and heights, finishes and even evasions of the law. There is nothing to be said about identity and uniformity any more.

The most recent and eye-catching "toy" in the Officers' Quarter is the home of architect Tula Amir and Ron Pundik. This is a structure of exposed concrete and a tin-covered vaulted roof, which succeeds in deviating from the neighborhood's profile, even compared to all the other exaggerations: beginning with the roof, through the exposed grey concrete and the reference to contemporary architecture in Japan, and ending with the lack of the traditional fence between the front yard and the street that all the other houses have.

All this does not make the house Amir planned less worthy than the others. To my mind, it is the most successful and appealing of all the new designs in the neighborhood. It expresses perfect taste (though "good taste" is term that

Amir refuses to admit to her lexicon of architectural terms). The house is extremely good-looking from the outside, and very beautiful inside, perfectly put together for family life and suited to the light and the climate of Israel. The flexible internal division of the house is excellently conceived, and the planning does everything architecture is supposed to do: it supplies a suitable and beautiful package of space and light for human use.

The intelligent planning, though, does not conceal the house's alienation from its environment. The house sends out vibes of protest, not of agreement. It draws attention to itself and it is not polite. It visibly rebels against its environment, and perhaps against Israeli-ness in general, which it appears to put on public trial. This is not a friendly conversation with its architectural neighbors (some of whom are indeed not worth talking to), but an attempt to speak in another language.

To take issue with the Amir-Pundik house borders perhaps on nit-picking, and it is also more difficult than the character assassination of a Build Your Own Home villa. In the light of Mandl's call, perhaps the Amir-Pundik house affords an excellent opportunity to explore some of the less obvious aspects of good manners.

Amir, who says that she intended no harm, but rather to express

herself as best she could within the limitations imposed by the by-laws and regulations, does not believe that it is necessary to preserve at any price "the bourgeois values of the Officers' Quarter and the characteristic building style of the urban English row house, which in spirit was built in the 1940s."

Uniformity, she says, "is not an ultimate value. No one would even think that an artist or a writer be required to follow the rules of uniformity. Uniforms are just something with which we find it convenient to cover ourselves, but they are not really what we are looking for here."

In settlements like Re'ut, for example, says Amir, "All the houses are the same. The residents put on their uniforms in the morning, climb into identical cars and go to the same workplaces — is this the land of our dreams? If we have good architecture here, that springs from the internal truth of the building and its central idea, rather than from style, then the pluralism will only strengthen the common background."

The flip side of the politeness of the London package deal, says Amir, "is a conservative and class-bound society — and I'm not sure that this is what we want to be."

Ron Pundik's father, journalist Herbert (Nachum) Pundik, a native of Denmark and a veteran resident of the Officers' Quarter, takes a

similar stance. He lives just a block away from his son's family home, and acknowledges its deviation from the norm. "However," he says, "the question is whether we really need and want to preserve the standard buildings from the austerity period and ignore the changes that are happening in every area of our lives. As a society, I prefer to pay the price demanded by the extraordinary, because that is what stimulates the individual and society to develop."

Among the participants in the symposium on "Future and Heritage in Architecture," there was no agreement on any subject: not on manners, not on what the past is, not on what the future is and not on the points at which they meet. Architect Ram Carmi argued that our heritage is modern architecture; architect Yaron Turel believes that the past is Palestinian architecture, and architect Eli Lachiani sees the future as a legitimate source of inspiration.

Between Amir's demand for excellence and a classless society, and the price that Nachum Pundik is prepared to pay for individual freedom, and the lack of agreement between the participants in the symposium and what is happening on the ground, Saadia Mandl's call for good manners sounds like a broadcast from a spaceship that cannot be either received or deciphered, and perhaps is not even directed at us.