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Magic carpet

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הצטרפו עכשיו > - הארץ בפייסבוק

As you stroll along Mishol Girit (Girit Pathway), you can take in almost simultaneously what is happening in each house. A strong aroma of frying onion wafts from one window; from another direction, you hear MK Benny Begin pontificating loudly on the radio; teenagers sitting on a shady bench in the inner courtyard chat excitedly about what they did that day; and at the end of the alleyway, the nursery school teacher takes her charges out to play.

The Mishol is an unconventional space in the Israeli residential landscape - a long, narrow pathway striped with neat lines of light and shade created by the homes situated above. Residents have attached climbing plants to the walls to cover up the gray concrete, and patios create a green corner for every home. The pathways are the vital organs of this Be'er Sheva neighborhood, built in the late 1950s. It was an ambitious project promoted by the Housing Department of the Construction and Housing Ministry, and over the years it became an Israeli architectural legend. This was the first attempt to propose a significant alternative to the construction of public housing projects in Israel. "We knew we were doing something experimental, that it was something unusual," architect Nahum Zolotov, 83, recalled this week. Zolotov was part of the steering committee for the model neighborhood and responsible, along with Daniel Havkin, for planning the so-called carpet buildings of Be'er Sheva's Heh neighborhood, hence referred to as the Hashatiah ("The Carpet") neighborhood.

"The Housing Ministry trusted us on this even though we were really just kids," Zolotov says. "It was the kind of planning that architects are supposed to do - rather than applying a standard design - creating a project that's suited to the location, the climate and the conditions." Be'er Sheva has always been the national architectural laboratory (consider the buildings of Ben-Gurion University, for example), and Hashatiah, also known as the Model Neighborhood (shekhuna ledugma), fit in well with the pioneer narrative of fantastic construction in the heart of the desert. For a time, it was the hottest thing around - garnering write-ups in international magazines from Japan to the United States in the 1960s and near-immediate acclaim from members of the profession.

From the very start, the neighborhood attracted the middle classes, and surveys conducted by the Housing Ministry over the years show that it has maintained its great popularity despite the houses' modest dimensions. Even now, while surrounding buildings are growing ever more neglected, the patio houses continue to be attractive. Hashatiah was and remains the most sought-after of the city's old neighborhoods. A townhouse here sells for up to \$200,000 - just as much as a private home in the city's Tet and Ramot neighborhoods.

We meet singer and composer Yossi Moustaki, a familiar figure in Be'er Sheva, in front of the Hakippah ("Skullcap" or "Dome") Synagogue, which got its name from its distinctive shape. Moustaki's house is across from the synagogue and is therefore in high demand among religious Zionist families who have been moving into the neighborhood in large numbers. "Every week, at least one person knocks on my door and asks if I'm interested in selling," he says.

The synagogue is a modernist icon built as part of the overall neighborhood experiment, though today it is largely obscured by extensions that include unattractive stone facing that is alien to the place - further evidence of the Be'er Sheva municipality's inability to preserve its architectural gems. But this bit of architectural chaos isn't hurting real estate deals in the surrounding area, as these houses continue to sell.

"It always reminds me of a Greek village here," says Moustaki as he guides us along the neighborhood's pathways. "My parents were among the first 500 families in Be'er Sheva. We moved to the neighborhood shortly after it was built. We knew it was a model neighborhood and from the beginning there was a very good population here of the city's old-timers. The people here formed very special connections. It doesn't look like Be'er Sheva here. If you take pictures, people won't believe you when you tell them it's the Negev."

On the bridge that connects Hashatiah with the Reva Hakilometer ("Quarter-Kilometer") apartment block, we meet Haim Adiri, the chairman of the neighborhood committee. This block is another striking modernist icon, inspired by the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier. Over the years, it became something of a sad urban legend, eventually being converted into an absorption center for new immigrants - a move that ended up detracting from its original architectural qualities. Adiri and Moustaki point with pride to the Reva Hakilometer housing block.

"This is the biggest building in Be'er Sheva," says Adiri. "In Israel," Moustaki corrects him. "In the whole Middle East - 250 meters," says Adiri. "We always knew we were living in a model place. The advantage of this neighborhood is unusually good planning - with wide streets, parks and street lighting. For many years, we were the top neighborhood in the country in terms of higher education, housing and per capita income," he boasts.

Designing for climate conditions

Be'er Sheva's Heh neighborhood was born out of the international Interbau exposition that took place in the Hansa district of Berlin in 1957. The purpose of the expo was to present new and progressive ideas in housing, and it attracted almost a million and a half visitors. The world's top modernist architects, such as Le Corbusier, Oscar Niemeyer, Walter Gropius, Arne Jacobsen and others, built experimental neighborhoods in a variety of housing styles meant to represent the future of residential construction. Among the many visitors to Interbau was David Tanen, "Mr. Housing Project," who was head of the ministry's housing branch. He was very impressed by the model neighborhood presented at Interbau and wished to develop local versions in Israel. The two sites chosen for the experiment were Ramat Aviv and the Heh neighborhood in Be'er Sheva - locations that diverged sharply in the type of populations they served and in their climate conditions.

In the second stage, there was a lottery for the planning areas, and Yaski got the northern block - the "Quarter-Kilometer" one; the buildings inside the framework went to two other architects, while Ram Carmi and his father Dov worked on a tower that was never built in the end. Hashatiah, "the most interesting part," fell to Zolotov and Havkin.

One such experimental structure had already been built then in Israel, in Sde Boker, but it failed due to problems related to lack of privacy. This time, the architects were given almost unlimited freedom in terms of the planning, despite the modest budget. "The idea of the carpet-style construction was already around then, I don't remember exactly where we saw it but it seemed very suitable," says Zolotov. "We thought that the design had to protect residents from the climate and create streets and alleyways that were shielded from the sun's rays. The yard in the back was supposed to increase the living space, to create a little privacy with a little greenery. We weren't that familiar with the Be'er Sheva climate, but we already knew that it wasn't good for large gardens, so we opted to pave over and build as much as possible on the open areas."

The buildings in Hashatiah were either one or two stories and ranged from 50 to 100 square meters in size. Each home has a small service area in front and a yard in back. In the single-level townhouses, the bathroom and kitchen were placed in the center, with the bedrooms, living room and "sleeping nook for Grandma" - which Zolotov says was inspired by consideration of the needs of the new immigrant population - arranged around that. The two-story buildings were more spacious and open in terms of design, and divided into three levels: - with the entryway, bathroom and kitchen on the first level, living room and exit to the garden on the second level, and the bedrooms on the third level, which stretched over the neighborhood's internal pathway. Thus was created a crisscross of houses that formed a geometric carpet of unique private and public spaces. In keeping with the modern planning theories of the time, vehicle traffic was separated from pedestrian traffic. A wide bridge connected Hashatiah to the Reva Hakilometer apartment block, and created a central artery in which social and public activity was concentrated.

An instant success

The first buildings were completed in the early 1960s and were marketed almost immediately. This was essentially the city's first neighborhood of low-rise houses, and although the project was intended for new immigrants (who were arriving en masse from North Africa at the time), Be'er Sheva's middle class flocked to the place. Senior military officers - like Shaike Gavish, the GOC Southern Command at the time - government bureaucrats, white-collar professionals and longtime city residents purchased the patio home there, instantly lending prestige to the neighborhood.

In Shadar's view, the biggest plus of the homes in the neighborhood is the possibility to expand into the front and back yards as needed. "The architecture allows for organic growth. This may not have been the planners' intention, but it's the reason why this neighborhood is still popular today."

"That was a test of courage. The first and last time I got a punishment from my parents was when I climbed on the dome and my father saw me and was furious. He said it was very dangerous and also disrespectful to climb on the synagogue. So I was grounded for one afternoon."

In retrospect, the local Arab context may be one of the biggest missed opportunities for carpet-style building in Be'er Sheva. While Zolotov talks about international influences, just a few hundred meters away from the neighborhood was Be'er Sheva's Old City, built by the Ottomans starting in 1900. Like Casablanca and Algiers, there, too, one finds streets laid out in a crisscross pattern in a bow to the winds and the sun, and patio houses with inner courtyards surrounded by high walls. But the young team of architects that planned the experiment in Be'er Sheva was naturally dazzled by European modern design and didn't pay attention to what was right under their noses.

Nostalgia for community

Like other modernist icons in Be'er Sheva, the Model Neighborhood isn't being given any special attention. In the absence of sufficient oversight, the yards are gradually shrinking due to building extensions, marble and stone facades are being tacked on and the main paths are becoming quite dirty and neglected. What was supposed to be a pilgrimage site, like the Hansa quarter of Berlin, is in danger of becoming just a dusty excuse for a failed utopian dream. Nahum Zolotov is very disappointed by the municipality's lack of care for the neighborhood, but when he comes by periodically to see what has changed, he always comes away with a feeling that the experiment was a success.

The Be'er Sheva municipality responds that claims about neglect of the neighborhood have no basis in fact. According to City Hall, in recent years there has been much investment in infrastructure, and the municipality says it intends to continue to invest in ongoing maintenance in the future.

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