

to delft and back

chatting with uri cohen

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Over the twentieth century Dutch architects played a central role in modern architecture. Suffice to mention Aldo van Eyck and Jacob Berend Bakema; Herman Hertzberger of Team10; Rem Koolhaas who became a world star thanks to his intelligent structures; and the architecture group MVRDV whose sophisticated architecture has placed its members Winy Maas, Jacob van Rijs and Nathalie de Vries at the forefront of world architecture.

Characterized by experimental innovation, the schools where they studied or taught have become world renown. Committed to the avant-garde message that advanced them, the schools had to promote experimentalism, which often raises questions regarding functionality and relevancy to the user (see also article on the subject in this issue).

Architect Uri Cohen returned to Israel after spending about 20 years in Holland, during which time he worked at the offices of Steven Holl and Herman Hertzberger, completed his Masters and acquired experience teaching at the Delft University Faculty of Architecture. The first two homes he planned in Israel have already been completed. Though searching for connection to the place, they also attempt to disengage from it.

What do you have against the Israeli architecture? Doesn't it reflect our restless pace of life... and the lack of taste that most of us were educated upon?

I'm most disturbed by the dancing porches and the closed shutters between them. It indicates a contradiction between the possibilities that Mediterranean climate offers, and building laws that the residents have to compromise with. After all, it's hard to separate here between life inside and life outside most of the year.

With environmental organizations trying to advance issues they know nothing about, and the computer programs which baffle all of us, could the problem be not only ours? What is the difference between the Technion and Delft University, other than that they are sitting in a pastoral town that can afford some whims?

From my experience - as a student and as a teacher - both enjoy some healthy anarchy. The difference is that in Delft the openness is built into the lessons, almost as a political manifesto - whereas in the Technion it's fluid and diffuse. It's possible that the Dutch can afford to be even crazier, but they still stick to their saying "Do it in a regular way, it'll come out crazy enough".

Are you trying to justify the academic anarchy prevailing everywhere?

I believe in a clear declaration of intentions. When there's a regulated curriculum, it serves as a security net for experimentation.

Are you hinting that in Delft all is well and in the Technion not?

Definitely not. Since I arrived in Delft in the mid 80s, the curriculum has changed radically four times already, including the number of school years, to say nothing of on-again off-again experimentation. Delft's advantage is that alongside the structured basis of accumulated disciplinary knowledge, the students acquire planning skills through about 20 short exercises that expose them to a broad variety of subjects.

...and at the Technion?

Over the last two years I've been involved in re-organizing the curriculum there. I was surprised that one of the conclusions was to reduce the year devoted to city planning to one semester only. This raises questions about the depth of the agenda, especially regarding the relations between building and its surroundings.

One of the phenomena I run into in almost every school is that the students don't really understand why research is necessary before beginning to plan their project. In most cases they avoid applying the findings and conclusions they themselves have reached. As a teacher, how do you explain to a student what preparatory research is needed for?

Research is a state of mind, neither foreplay nor lip-service paid to prove that we did something before we entered planning. The important thing to teach the student is that research continues until the planning has ended. And that includes not only the planning question, but also to ascribe the programme to the relevant typology.

You speak about typologies while most of the students don't even take the trouble to examine similar buildings that someone had already broken his head over. They usually plan everything intuitively without a real understanding of the subject, which in my view is the core of any research.

The problem is that many students - usually the most talented ones - manage to cruise through the school years on the waves of the talent they actually bring from home. For them planning is an abracadabra, expressed by mystical statements and impressive computer presentations that are backed up by no professional ability.

What did you learn in the first lesson of your first year at the architecture school in Delft?

...don't ever give your client what interests him, but what he hasn't even dreamed of being interested in. I'm not sure that was in the first lesson, but the fact is it stuck in my mind.

In other words, the smaller the client is, the larger the architect... even when the client remains dissatisfied?

I don't think the term 'satisfied' suits here. The architect's role is to read the client in ways he hasn't read himself yet. In other words, to mediate between what he is and what he may be, through space and form. It may sound arrogant, but when you go to a restaurant you don't tell the chef how to cook!

The difference is that the restaurant is the chef's - you either eat there or not. In architecture we ask the client what he wants to eat and then try to cook it, don't we?

No doubt that it's vital to know who the client is and what his real requirements are, but if we were to be motivated only by what interests our clients, we would have no existence. Very often clients can't distinguish between requirements and solutions. I believe that our role is to open the client to a world he was never aware of. This may be compared to psychoanalysis. You try to understand what motivates the patient. When our client asks for instance for a fireside in the house, it's not necessarily because he's cold, but maybe because he promised one to his wife who'd seen one in a glossy magazine.

I was taught that architecture is part of reality, even when we ourselves weren't the ones to invent it, or else how could we tolerate works of others architects?...

I believe things work as cause and effect, but a momentum has to be created. It actually makes us not just planners but also educators, simply because it's our field and there's no one else to do it for us.

There's no doubt that education is important, but you're speaking about re-education. Can you find an example of an architectural invention that changed reality, like the internet, the computer, the cellphone?

I don't know if architecture can create reality, but I'm sure architecture can alter the experience of reality. If we take for example what happened in Bilbao after Gehry's museum was built, this not only changed the image of the city but also promoted tourism and the economy in general.

Unusual forms and elegant museums do not make a city. Can you imagine a street where all the houses are Gehrylike? Where would you play marbles?

I forgot about the marbles... but architecture is also culture, and to create culture, the boundaries have to be constantly pushed as far as possible.

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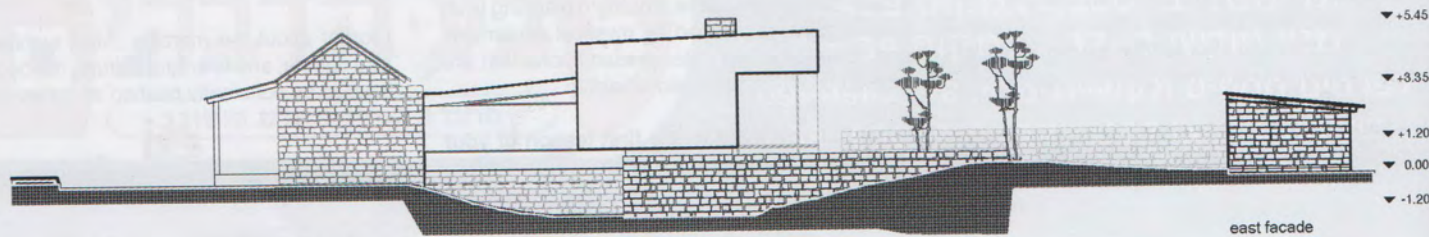
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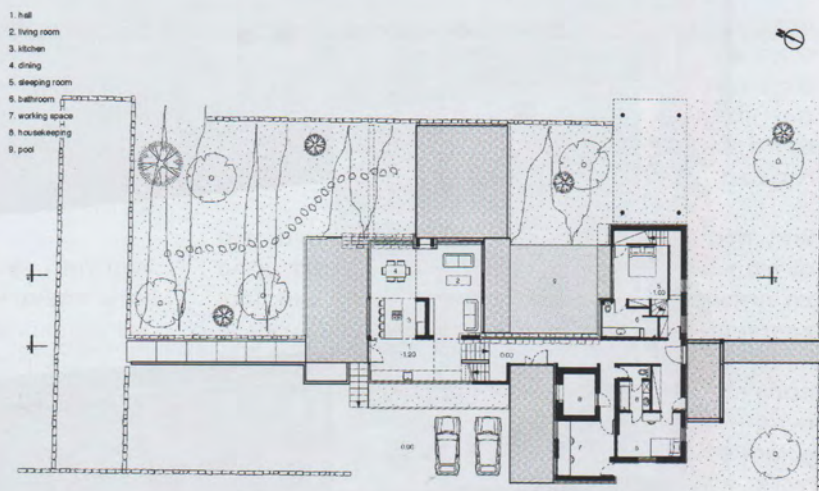


Private house, Yesod Hama'ala - conservation and addition

The new structure hovers like a box above a system of stone walls typical of the 19th century settlement. The entrance corridor was extended to become a connecting axis along which are arranged all the spaces of the complex.

Architect: Uri Cohen, with the participation of Shahar Botkin





Ground floor 1:200

בית פרטי, יסוד המעלה - שימור מבנה קיים ותוספת חדשה
 המבנה החדש הממוקם במרכז החלקה מרחף כקופסה מעל מערך של קירות אבן אופייניים ליישוב מהמאה ה-19. בתוך כך, פרוזדור הכניסה הוארך כדי ליצור ציר מחבר בין כל חלקי הקומפלקס.
אדריכל: אורי כהן, בהשתתפות שחר בוטקין

מבנה זה הוא יצירה אדריכלית מרתקת, המאחדת בין המסורת והחדשנות. המבנה החדש הממוקם במרכז החלקה מרחף כקופסה מעל מערך של קירות אבן אופייניים ליישוב מהמאה ה-19. בתוך כך, פרוזדור הכניסה הוארך כדי ליצור ציר מחבר בין כל חלקי הקומפלקס.

צילומים: דוד עדיקא

