

## Destination unknown

### Zvi Hecker in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist

„Agency Of Unrealized Projects“ at the daadgalerie, Berlin  
October, 2012

*Fascinated by unrealised projects, Hans Ulrich Obrist has met the pioneering architect Zvi Hecker, whose work is an inspiration to many young architects today, but also has a very strong impact on the art world. Together, they discuss his first steps in architecture, his most iconic buildings and his many unrealised projects combining his skills as an architect with the vision of an artist.*

**Hans Ulrich Obrist: I would like to ask you about your unusual beginning in architecture, or rather “beginnings” as you began to study architecture three times. First in Samarkand, then in Krakow in 1949, then in Haifa in the legendary Technion.**

**Zvi Hecker:** Well, I already started a globalisation process in the early thirties. Born in Krakow, Poland in 1931. With the break of the WWII I was sent to Siberia, then to Samarkand, before returning to Poland. I have studied architecture in Technion in Haifa in Israel, taught in Quebec, Canada, and in Vienna, Austria. In 1991 I came to Berlin. That’s why I claim to study architecture more than once.

**H.U.O.: When I was a student, I met P. K. Höning, a very interesting artist connected both to art and to technology. He told me that the Technion was a utopian school for him. Could you tell us about your experience there?**

**Z.H.:** I think that the Technion was basically a very provincial school of architecture, before P.K. Höning and Alfred Neumann arrived there. Yona Friedman came to teach as well and also Al Mansfeld and Munio Gitai. It seems to me however that it is quite impossible to teach architecture, though I have tried it many times. After all the famous Bauhaus, with so many great artists and architects, such as Mies van der Rohe, Gropius, Kandinsky, Breuer, Klee, Feininger and others, failed to produce more than one known architect.

**H.U.O.: You said in an interview: “The difficulty in imagining architecture is an intrinsic part of the architect’s work. It is a continuous process in which the realised ideas are only stations on the road. The architect has to pave himself [a path] in order to be able to move forward.” Can you tell us a little bit more about this path?**

**Z.H.:** This is also what I try to explain in my *Sketches*, showing how complex and lengthy could be the process of design. Whatever length of our experience, architectural design is always about trying to reach a solution, a destination. In my case, the destination is never known to me and I keep trying to imagine its whereabouts. And yet, an architect has always to show his client that he knows where he is heading, which is in a way a schizophrenic situation. We know that we don’t know, but we can’t admit it.

**H.U.O.: This obviously leads us also to evoke the controversy around some of your projects from the very beginning, although some later became legendary. It began when you did the addition to the Arab village Ein Raffa in Jerusalem, a project which led to you being blacklisted for ten years.**

**Z.H.:** Which meant I couldn’t build at all since in Israel, the only client in the early 60s was the Ministry of Construction and Housing. The chief architect of the Ministry Mr. Mertens told me: “Mr Hecker, what you are trying to give to the Arabs, we don’t give to the Jews.” So, my blunt answer concerning equality in democratic society– you can imagine – put me on his blacklist.

**H.U.O.: And then there was the Technion affair with your mechanical engineering lab, one of your most famous projects, from 1964 to 1967. It led to an incredible *cause célèbre*, because the project was not carried out the way you wanted. So, it was realised, but it was yet actually unrealised by the client. Can you tell us about this exciting saga?**

**Z.H.:** Well, there are things you do when you’re young: climb at night on the roof and destroy thirty windows because were not of your design. Fortunately, at that time, the security in Israel was not as tight as today. So, nobody caught me before I could finish my work. But later, the police summoned me for interrogation. It became a public issue and the most prominent artists in Israel wrote an open letter defending my legitimate right to accomplish the building as it had been designed. So, in a way, it opened a discussion in Israel of the right of the artist to his work.

**H.U.O.: When I went to Israel, I was amazed to see how early and how much you built as an architect. It was during these early years when you collaborated with Eldar Sharon and Alfred Neumann. Can you tell us about this exceptional moment of prolific realisations?**

**Z.H.:** Well, one has really to attribute the early works to Neumann, because Eldar and I were after all his students. He was a genius. So, I was participating in the process of design and realisation of the early works in Israel. We tried to give an architecture expression to the new country. We were a minority voice, but quite a strong one.

**H.U.O.: When we started the Agency of Unrealized Projects, Dan Graham said that very often for an architect, as opposed to an artist, eighty or ninety per cent of the projects, remain unrealised. What would you say is the percentage in your work?**

**Z.H.:** I think Dan Graham is right: I believe about ninety per cent of my projects remained unrealised.

**H.U.O.: The idea of the unrealised is fascinating, particularly in relation to one of my favourite projects of yours, the Spiral Apartment House, which is in Ramat Gan in Israel. It is not only one of your landmark projects, it's also interesting for this whole idea of realised–unrealised, complete–incomplete, because obviously the spiral is an infinite form.**

**Z.H.:** As you said, by definition, the spiral is unfinished and can grow on and on. A true but funny story illustrates the unfinished character of the Spiral. During the First Gulf War Saddam Hussein's missiles had fallen in Ramat Gan not far from the Spiral Apartment House breaking only window glass. Immediately a crew was sent by the municipality of Ramat Gan to assess the damage. We heard them reporting to the central command: "We are near the building on Tzel-Hagiva Street, it's beyond repair." But the building had suffered no direct hit! That's how unfinished the Spiral building looks.

**H.U.O.: It's obviously a building connected to expressionism in architecture – and there is a beautiful text where you say it speaks many languages: "It speaks Arabic regarding the human condition when sheltered by high walls. It argues in Hebrew over the sheer necessity to bring together muscles and materials. But at the same time, it's quite fluent in Russian when construction becomes architecture. Its Italian is very Baroque, as spoken in the Piedmont by Guarino Guarini."**

**Z.H.:** Well, I think that, in its process of design, architecture goes through many translations, using many different languages. First one does sketches, then computer drawings, models, engineer calculations, etc. And then all this material has to be translated again on the site by other professionals using different languages, a real Tower of Babel. So, in the end, if your building is finished as you have designed it, it is a miracle.

**H.U.O.: The Spiral building is one of these miracles, because it actually did happen.**

**Z.H.:** Well, much because I was working physically on the scaffolding. Not once completely different kind of stone was brought on site, and I had to improvise. So, by adapting my design to the changing situations I was translating my own intentions, creating, one can say, a new original.

**H.U.O.: Once I spoke to Philip Johnson and he said he sees architecture, buildings as sculptures. As in your case, we should never forget the importance of someone like Finsterlin who also conceived buildings as sculptures. What are your inspirations?**

**Z.H.:** I think I am influenced by very simple things and by many good artists, such as Micha Ullman and Mario Merz, with whom I sometimes collaborated. So, maybe this kind of work of collaboration is in itself an inspiration.

**H.U.O.: One of your most well-known projects is the Heinz Galinski School in Berlin in the 90s.**

**Z.H.:** The starting point of the design was a metaphor of a sunflower. But of course, as construction progressed, no one could see the sunflower, but rather a kind of small city, not really one building. And then, before the school was finished, we made a model of it, to find out that it looked like the pages of an open book. These mutations of the project's image, I believe, are very characteristic for a design process: you begin with an 'A', and if you are very successful, you find yourself ending with a 'Z'.

**H.U.O.: And sometimes remains unrealised, such as the city centre of Ramat Hasharon.**

**Z.H.:** True, but unrealised project can be a fertiliser for projects realised later. So, one can say that the Spiral building in Ramat Gan and the Heinz-Galinski school in Berlin benefitted from the thinking and drawings developed while working on the unrealized project for the City Centre of Ramat Hasharon.

**H.U.O.: Speaking of unrealised projects, it seems to me that there are very few housing or social housing projects these days. I suppose this is due to the declining interest in that field since the 60s. You went against that trend and proposed very exciting “mountain housing projects” for many countries – the Netherlands, I think Romania, but also for Marzahn here in Berlin, and London. Being from Switzerland, I’ve always been interested in mountain architecture.**

**Z.H.:** I think it started to be interested in the forms of mountains in the late 80s. My friend the artist Menashe Kadishman made some cut-outs in steel. Some of them looked very strange, I thought like mountains. I tried it as a housing project in Berlin. This would be the first mountain in Berlin. And I think the idea was not bad also for Bucharest, a city partially destroyed by Ceausescu. It would provide the city with a unique silhouette.

**H.U.O.: You’ve developed these projects thanks to many drawings. In the art world today, there is still a lot of drawing going on, but when I visit young architects’ studios, I notice that drawing seems to be on the decline; it all happens now digitally. Your work seems to be an extreme opposite to that.**

**Z.H.:** Some people believe that, because of the computer, one doesn’t have to draw anymore. Earlier architects were drawing with a pen called Rapidograph. One had to shake it constantly to get it work, today the computer draws effortlessly. So the architect, I believe, is free to think. My own sketches are some kind of attempt to seduce the idea to speak its mind.

**H.U.O.: I would like to talk more about the present. You’re working on several projects in Berlin, where you’ve lived for more than 20 years now. I am particularly interested in the Schiphol airport project and in your idea that the future should not be reduced to centralisation.**

**Z.H.:** Our Schiphol project serves the Royal Dutch Police maintaining the security of the airport. The design looks like a medieval walled city with one difference, the wall is the city. But speaking about airports we can’t predict what kind of flying machines will be developed in the future and I think that to close the possibility of using small airports close to the centres of the cities is a lack of vision. For example, the Eiffel Tower was thought to be completely useless, and many artists signed a petition to have it destroyed. Fortunately, Marconi invented the radio and the Eiffel Tower became the largest antenna in the world.

**H.U.O.: That’s a very fine example of an unexpected future use. This idea of reconversion leads to one of your latest projects, one you worked on from 2008 to 2010: a new public space in front of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin.**

**Z.H.:** It’s called “Neuer Platz am Brandenburger Tor”. For the moment it’s only a crossroads of vehicle traffic, while it could be a fantastic place, a kind of piazza, with coffee shops, etc. Today only the municipality can decide to close the roads and diversify the traffic to allow the public gathering. This results in traffic chaos in the centre of Berlin. I want the citizens of Berlin to take advantage of this unique place freely and permanently.

**H.U.O.: One last question: when we first met at the Architecture Biennale in Venice, you told me that what’s important about architecture is not only studying its history, but also *living in* it. And I’ve always been fascinated by your idea of not living in just one apartment, but having a collection of apartments by Le Corbusier, Gropius... all over Berlin. Can you tell us about this very unusual collection?**

**Z.H.:** Well, it’s very simple. An architect is not rich enough to buy a sketch by Picasso. But he might have some savings to buy an apartment by Erich Mendelsohn, Bruno Taut, Alvar Aalto, or Oscar Niemeyer. So, that’s how I started my collection of architects’ apartments. It’s far from being complete, mainly because so many great architects have built in Berlin

**H.U.O.: What’s missing?**

**Z.H.:** I have seen of an early Mies van der Rohe, which not many people know about, because Mies seldom included in his oeuvre and it’s quite expensive.

**H.U.O.: And that’s in Berlin?**

**Z.H.:** Yes. On Afrikanische Strasse. Very nice apartments in a very nice building. Anyone interested?

(laughter)

