

The Rough Cuts—Zvi Hecker's Palmach Museum in Tel-Aviv

Sir Peter Cook, 1998

In Europe the notion of the museum is becoming increasingly questionable: should it not move away from merely shielding or celebrating history and become even more user-friendly as part of the entertainment menu: full of 'experiences' and 'interactive delights' -and surely with a well-stocked gift shop? Or in the United States it must often represent the cultural ambition of the community and that of the family that donated the money. Either way, a smooth operation is required. Smooth of message, smooth of circulation, smooth of communication and, most of all, smooth of material.

Israel isn't like that. Despite a noticeable upswing in the standard of living during the last decade with a technologised society that boasts the second highest incidence of mobile 'phones and the highest incidence of computerised garden irrigation in the world, there remains the underlying sense of threatenedness. Of the necessity to cling to the territory by both muscles, intellect and fingernails. To present culture through any application of smoothness would cause irritation and seem effete. Especially in a museum that celebrates the formation of an underground army that fought the British rule, later becoming part of the Israeli army and having such as Itzak Rabin emerging from its ranks.

This memory is celebrated on a steep embankment on the road leading into the University area from the city by a sudden jagged insertion. Closest to the street are the roughest of several walls. The building is uncompromising. The concrete is marked and slurped over. The many holes in it are functional enough, but at the same time reminiscent of an attack. Yet there are liberating cross cuts and the reassuring sight of trees within.

Around the University lies one of the most desirable suburbs of Tel Aviv, boasting the smartest shopping mall, the best-watered greenswards and the usual intellectualised yuppies in their German cars. Did Zvi Hecker not need to remind them of the struggle by which this agreeable scenery had been made possible? Yet of all Israeli architects he is the least likely to wear a hair shirt: certainly the most cosmopolitan and sophisticated who furthermore, spends more of his time in Berlin than in Israel.

The competition for the Museum and that for the Jewish School in Berlin were won by him almost simultaneously and for a while these buildings developed in parallel. Both mark a final recognition of talent that had consistently resisted the pressures of a chronically provincial and readily compromising architectural milieu. A tragedy when measured besides the fulsome and sometimes exquisite work of the 1930's when Jewish architects from German and Belgian academies created the 'white city' - liberally interspersed with intelligent spacing and planting. In the 'fifties there were still some interesting pieces of invention and a natural condition for Corbusian imitation, by the 'sixties the rot was setting in and by the 'seventies and 'eighties there were more and more chunky, coarse or bland concrete crates being erected.

Hecker had emigrated from Cracow a year after commencing his architectural studies and joined the Technion in Haifa. He became a protege (and later a partner) of Alfred Neumann who had been a key link between European thinking and the search for an appropriate Israeli vocabulary. Much of this search seems to have revolved around the use of total geometries and Hecker himself has found inspiration from this pursuit.

In the 1980's he built an apartment house called the 'spiral' (located directly opposite his own apartment which he and Neumann had designed twenty years before). As the building swirled around up to the ninth or tenth floor Hecker drove across the fundamental geometry with series of almost free-standing steel slashes. He inserted dagger-like balconies, he covered it in what is locally-regarded as 'kitschy' stone craze: effectively violating the rules not only of 'nice' architecture but of his own architecture. The spiral was highly original and inspired. It attracted the attention of foreign observers. The Berlin school however was a very different challenge. Hecker was well aware that mere nerve and verve would not be enough in a city that contained such a thorough history of Western architectural thought. His tendency to 'sit' hard on any project: constantly involved on site and constantly modifying

both details and even quite large chunks of design development gave him the necessary excuse to open a second office in Berlin. As the school developed it was visited and admired by Gehry, Hejduk and almost everybody whom Hecker could respect.

The awareness, by an architect already just in his 'sixties, that he must rise to the occasion and the euphoria of being -at last -amongst a peer group and a milieu that valued thoughtful architecture, brought forth a building that kept the inspirational base of strong plan geometry plus strong thrusting elements but with a refinement of detail that he seemed to equally relish.

Meanwhile the Palmach Museum moved forward more slowly. Its character more decidedly 'Israeli' through its contradistinction from the Berlin atmosphere. Neither an American or European piece of smoothness, nor yet a piece of foursquare concrete assertiveness, it seems to have captured the inherent toughness and nervousness of the culture. Its geometric inspiration not needing to rotate or fly outwards but this time seeming to slash along the embankment. In his own words the placing of the display areas underground is both symbolic and helpful in preserving the natural character of the site and thus an overground exposure of the more celebratory areas follows on from this. Nervousness is augmented by the threat of the rear slab by the intersection of an even higher generative slab ~ though the theatre is then able to enjoy the 'VI shaped space thus created. Nervousness is sustained in the manner of jagged encroachments of the two main slabs around the centre of the courtyard become entry points -to the auditorium on one flank and the museum on the other.

Hecker has become adept at knowing when to turn up or down the interpretative heat: often avoiding the unyielding effect of bland concrete surface in a hot climate : his walls are sometimes made up of sandstone slivers that recall both the shallow cliffs by the beaches North Tel Aviv, but also episodes in a desert battle where the act of digging-in is frantic and psychologically akin to the act of rasping. The heat turns down for the courtyard which is curiously reminiscent of some small public open spaces in the 1930's city (tragically recent generations of developers have regarded such spaces as an inconsequential in scale and not worth bothering about). The heat is up again for the cafeteria and meeting-room zone where a giant 'picture' window grins out in the direction of the University. Openings are sometimes mere cuts out of the top of the walls but sometimes the window or door itself is hidden into the cut space that has been created (the same device is to be found in the School). Hecker's exchange with Europe has almost certainly encouraged such a range of interpretation and subtleties as the observation of how a window frame can be concealed on the inner side of a masonry nib, the way in which people might shelter in a doorway or the way in which occasional diagonal glimpses can outwit frontal observation.

Most of Hecker's Israeli friends are artists: in particular he has collaborated with Michael Ullmann (who also lives half his time in Stuttgart), he has often shown his own drawings and paintings in galleries, but only recently and through his international recognition .has he become a national figure. Unlike his reception at a Biennale or a foreign institution he is locally regarded him as 'an artist', 'perfectionist' or 'experimenter'. It is said that he destroyed the windows of an early building with his own hands because they were wrongly constructed. Such concentration is only really appreciated by the younger thinking architects of Israel. It is characteristic of Hecker's response that it is one such: Rafi Segal: has been his associate on the Palmach design.