

## Spiral Hecker

### Sir Peter Cook

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**The (as yet unfinished) spiral pile of dwellings erected by Zvi Hecker on a hillside near Tel Aviv marks a new stage in this most painterly architect's development. Yet the building is far more than just a willful exercise in form-making: it responds to the climate, and it creates a community of apartments in which each dwelling is individual, each offering a different kind of homecoming.**

With so many buildings you find what you had expected: predictable window types or entrances supporting formal relationships that immediately recall one or another archetype. In our own century this may well have been seen at its most powerful in a drawing-where the bypassing of naturalism can reinforce the thrust of the architectural idea and its atmosphere-making a very strong impression on the mind of the observer. The latter may well be a fellow architect and may well be less talented . . . so we can merely speculate upon the mixture of pride and irritation of Erich Mendelsohn as he watched more and more strip windows flying round the curved corners of every Westernised town in the 1930s . . . or the similar predicament of Aldo Rossi in the face of those sets of well-drilled, square windows set above flush colonnading that has become the choice of the more pompous downtown insertions.

From the safety and comfort of Northern Europe we can say that these things come and go but they are merely one layer upon many, and that the buildings themselves can be measured against the truly literate, inventive or simply beautiful architecture that still survives around the corner. In new countries, however, it is a much heavier issue. Symbolism is read very consciously and there comes a point in the establishment of society where something that is not merely Regionalism, based upon preexistent crafts and materials but has more rhetoric and form, is needed. Often this need is felt most strongly by a country unshackling itself from an earlier condition and so we have the conscious encouragement of the Art Nouveau as a high style for Brussels as it becomes the capital of the Belgians, the invention of 'Dragon Style' (drawing upon a study of the Viking ships and stave churches for its details) at the moment when Norway is released from Swedish and Danish rule--or the act of invention by Sir Edwin Lutyens for New Delhi where he creates an Anglo-Indian architecture that bypasses the patronage of the situation through its sheer quality.

The city of Tel Aviv is one of those places whose physical origins (like Sao Paulo, Melbourne or Milton Keynes) seem so bland that nobody notices the growth of a large city until it is too late. Unlike Haifa or Jerusalem where usefulness or deep significance allied to dynamic topography take over, it is just a flat patch of scrub and dunes near to the old port of Jaffa. But it is a city with a memorable twentieth-century atmosphere that was the product of some Scottish town planning and German and Belgian architectural education. This heady mix resulted in a series of close-packed villas with deep balcony rooms, in the firm, stripped-down manner that you can find on the outskirts of Dunkirk or Stuttgart and streets with a central reservation of grass and trees that spring out of Letchworth. It is a little seedy these days but the combination remains urbane and refreshing under the sun. Within a discipline of four floor heights and cream painted cement, a remarkably wide range of good Modernist housing has served usefully for 60 years. However the aspirations of subsequent generations of Israeli architects have shifted. Perhaps there was an instinctive reaction away from the memory of the European villa and the British tree-lined walk as anachronisms in a tough little country under the hot sun and subjected to psychological as well as physical siege.

Certainly the direction of its first architecture school, the Technion at Haifa, has established a very identifiable set of interests. From somewhere (perhaps Zvi Hecker will give a clue) there has grown up a tradition of geometrical gamesmanship. In the 1950s in particular, nearly everything that involved the interlocking of hexagons, octagons, rotary forms and the very imaginative works of Yona Friedman and Leopold Gerstel, was instantly traceable to that stable. Beyond the territory of projects where such interlocking and other mathematical accretions could be developed, the typical housing in the rapidly spreading cities began to get larger, bulkier and, frankly, cruder. Breaking the bonds of the Bauhaus did not lead to any spirited category of freedom--rather to a nondescript and much more provincial architecture. Into this situation the young Zvi Hecker emerged as the protégé and subsequent partner of his teacher, Alfred Neumann, and had built a small city hall (at Bat-Yam) by the time he was 28 and two villages by the time he was 29 (all together with Neumann and Eldar Sharon). By the age of 32 he had, with the same office, built the apartment building in which he still lives. It is an extreme example of octagonal organization and contains large internal areas of captive space. It is relatively pure-even diagrammatic as a building. So far we can define Hecker as a true, creative and even doctrinaire son of the second Levantine generation of architects.

But this is too simple. The characteristic that distinguishes him from his contemporaries- indeed from virtually every other Israeli architect -is his combination of daring and artistic flair.

The new building at Ramat Gan is extraordinary. It could never have been produced by a mere card-carrying geometricist. Nor does it carry any of the inhibitions of the dull assertiveness of the concrete buildings that typify this middle-class town that joins into Tel Aviv. Moreover it is directly across the street from his own apartment. Imagine the nerves that you need to face the seven-year gestation and development of the building until the last piece of broken glass is cemented on to the balcony soffits and the last apartment-buyer has had his last grumble. There is a spirit of determination about the man who has on occasion resorted to fisticuffs when his buildings have been badly constructed which is not necessarily inconsistent with an extreme subtlety and sensitivity as a person. In the Spiral he has himself gone up on the ladder for hours helping to lay the surface pieces, "Not", as he says 'that I have been seeking to revive the role of an architect as a medieval artisan-craftsman. I would rather describe the nature of my work on the Spiral as an attempt to interpret-translate design intentions into the language of materials and changing possibilities of realization'.

His instincts are more those of the studio artist than conventional artist, and after two years formal postgraduate study at Tel Aviv's art academy he has continued to hold regular gallery shows of his paintings as well as drawings and models. These last are probably the core of his operation-they most clearly thrust forward with verve and audacity out of the more correct and more geometrical first moves. In the new building at Ramat Gan he follows this process again – but in full size.

It is an exotic building. The exotica come from three degrees of move working towards each other. First, the giant slashing steps which are emphasized by the bright-ribbed metal sheets that have all the devil-may-care of a racy lady dashing the lipstick fearlessly across her mouth in a single gesture. Second, the more coquettish and curving elements-some of which are ramps--others balconies: these tend to be white but are not totally scrupulous about keeping their edges to themselves, so that crinkly runs of stone can creep up on them . . . and they themselves can sawtooth their surfaces into larger chunks of the building. Third, the twinkling occurrence of strange openings and strange stars and mirrored soffits. Like Itsuko Hasegawa at Shonondai (AR August 1990), Hecker acts as his own surface decorator-inventor.<sup>1</sup> With his painter's eye he is able to hold on to the clarity of the parts. In its way the building has as much discipline and hierarchy as in more correct examples and there are clear rules for the occurrence or non-occurrence of surface features.

To come upon his earlier and his later buildings, both for housing, one on each side of the street, is an educative experience. Here are more than 20 years of thinking. At first glance they are completely different, at 20th glance they are still completely different, yet some preoccupations remain. The treatment and interpretation are effectively inverted over that period of time.

In the older building, the architecture is tough and the surfaces absolutely consistent. The degree of correctness of the geometry—almost taken to an abstraction—is also evidence of a young, though believer. The belief remains, so that he could write in the mid 1970s "...the geometry of polyhedral, by itself, inexhaustible and intriguing as it certainly is, must not be confused with the intensity of expression of architectural forms displaying such geometry. Geometry *per se* serves architecture only as an imaginary scaffolding, securing its construction to be finally removed, its traces only suggested by the created architectural form...I consider the geometric principles...to be insights into the structure of space... as much as they are images invoked by the great mathematical and ornamental tradition of Mediterranean cultural heritage to which I belong".

In the newer building, the basic rotation is the securing scaffolding which can be celebrated as a flaying, wild series of armatures and his concern with the controlled Mediterranean ornament is surely tempered by other memories. Hecker grew up in Poland and Russia, his first year of architectural study was in Cracow where even young Jewish lads must have been only too aware of the romantic obsession with which Classical motifs and standard symbols are played with in Polish art and architecture: almost implying that to directly carry through a disciplinary of placing or edging something is rather tedious and insensitive. Could it be that maturity, more than a little Polishness has also returned in Hecker's work?

There is a parallel change in the direction of the two buildings (but both hug into the side of the hill): the first occupies its site in a more or less complete way, but is extravagant of space inside the building—though the bonus is a useful shaded, breezed-through cave. Seemliness is thrown to the winds down the hill at the Spiral. The mass of the building is gawky, splattery, perhaps like a whole hill town itself. More concentrated in essence, more free in image.

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<sup>1</sup>A very useful 18 months for me in which I was able to see both Hasegawa's Shonondai and Hecker's Spiral twice...in both cases three-quarter finished and then completed: able to see the importance of the decorative work in both cases.

Zvi Hecker is anything but the typical sensibility Israeli architect. Indeed, he is treated as a talent eccentric by the builders of the worthy but dull buildings all around him...though he uses the same careful engineers and useful concrete techniques. As with Frank Gehry, most of his friends are artist. With them he can really talk about space or color or dynamic. With them he can talk about using naughty materials for there is precious little naughtiness in Israeli architecture. So *they* will understand his enthusiasm for the pink cheapo stone (about 15 mm thick) that he slaps into the spiral. It is a material that is more often found on the sides of *falafel* shops or the houses of Arab builders, not in this bourgeois suburbs. Certainly not on *serious* architecture. Yet this is surely serious in the sense of being part of his search for a levantine architecture. For him that is "An amalgam of many cultures... as far apart as the structures of Sinan and the unassuming vernacular architecture of an Arab village. On the one hand highly sophisticated and structurally daring...on the other hand native...architecture is a chain of many different interlocking languages, each has to be translated from one to the other... into visual sketches, preliminary drawings, models, structural calculations, working drawings, etc... the quality of the final result depends upon the quality of translation.

In more recent years, his building activity has been sporadic but his teaching activity quite wide, especially in the US. It would seem that his extreme interest in translation has led him more and more towards the role of the studio architect—which is certainly the atmosphere in which he works. There is nearly always a competition on the go, with a small number of very young architects, vast numbers of scribbles and models... again, a smaller-scale version of the atmosphere of Frank Gehry's studio in the early 1980s. He teaches, not at the Technion, but characteristically at the Hasadna, a small, as yet unrecognized architecture school in a factory building with arty, enthusiastic students (reminiscent of SCI-ARC in Los Angeles in its first years). His antennae run far out beyond the cultural context of his city and it was intriguing to find him on last year's programme of the Storefront Gallery in New York... which tends to show the younger and more metropolitan architects such as Dilier & Scofidio, Neil Denari or Peter Wilson.

The connection does, in fact, exist—if you are prepared to look at the Spiral housing straight-on. Without too much categorization. As a phenomenon. As stuff. Let us switch for a moment to London in the early 1980s. To the work of the NATØ group; in particular, its leader, Nigel Coates. In a series of projects concerned with London Docklands, the Falklands War and other themes that sound very much of local interest, a manner of drawing and modeling was used that depended on a palette of coarse, bricolage-like slapping and dragging and thrusting of materials—often on to jagged splats of form. In detail, there were all sorts of insertions and sawtoothed marks. As this (in fact) well-educated and architecturally quite astute group began to spill out of the AA and to build shops, it homed in on more calculated juxtapositions of the bits. Elsewhere we must one day argue through the issue of verve versus calculation. But the true NATØ building never got built, for Coates himself has moved into a far more picturesque mode in his buildings in Japan.

The NATØ building does exist. In Ramat Gan. Designed by man that none of them has ever met. Not just by picking on one or two bitsy details, or the odd coincidence of jabbing or coloration, when I first saw it in early 1989 (unfinished) I cried out, 'It's NATØ'.

Two points can be made. First, that the combination of a geometrical discipline and painterly bricolage may not be a bad thing—the potential tedium of both in their pure condition is tempered and challenged. Music contains innumerable examples of this strategy. Somehow architecture is much more uptight-or lacking in true composers. Second, that a middle-aged architect can actually produce a youthful building-in using: his knowingness to allow him to move the edge...and beyond. There could be a third point to be made in advocating that we all should live across the street from our buildings, able to monitor them: we should be so lucky. Though a steady point can be made in advocating the honing process by the architect. Why don't more of us get up on the ladder and carve and trowel away?

A pedantic analysis of the building will reveal that there are only nine apartments. That there are 43 types of window (my own hypothetical figure). That 15 types of angle occur. Yet the whole thing is systematized in its composition and organization. With liveable-in apartments. Magnificent views, a real sense of identity.

Perhaps the metropolitan area of Tel Aviv is finally acquiring an equivalent of Soane's house in London, Eames' house in Los Angeles or the Villa Stocklet in Brussels—none of them accessible enough or commonplace enough to create progeny but absolutely necessary to the internal architectural culture of the cities. To elevate the discussion above that of the merely appropriate, sensible or generic. In such a way does a culture become mature.

My hunch is that even the funny old Scottish town planners and the young pioneers just back from Dessau and Ghent would have been amused by Zvi Hecker's hillside.