

The Destruction of The Dream

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Introduction

The Bat-Yam City Hall building is the result of an architectural competition that was held in Israel in September 1958. It presented us with an opportunity to design a public building that was to express the democratic notions of a local government. The context was the newly emerging consciousness of the Young State of Israel in its first formative years.

The original design has been considerably modified and was, during its various design stages, constantly redefined. Many of the most meaningful changes took place during the period of construction, which started in 1961 and was completed by September 1963.

Location

Bat-Yam was then, in the late fifties, a small town on the Mediterranean coast line: it was more like a suburb of the metropolitan city of Tel-Aviv. Its image was that of a small resort coast town. According to the conditions of the competition, the City Hall was allocated a site near the existing centre of the town. However, following a preliminary examination of the urban form, we suggested moving the location to another larger stretch of public land that was available. The new area was much further to the south and much closer to the sea shore.

The idea behind our recommendation was to secure for the fast growing population of Bat-Yam a gathering place, a central square that would link the fledgling city directly with the Mediterranean sea shore. Thus we hoped to set guidelines for the future urban development of this, at that time, anonymous small community, to help to build its identity by having it centred around the sea shore, in accordance with its name "Bat-Yam", which means "Daughter of the Sea".

The Middle Eastern Heritage

Even at a very early stage of design, while examining the new location for the City Hall, we sought comparisons and confirmation in the ancient and classical architecture of the Mediterranean. In view of our national history and our complex relations with the ancient world, it seemed quite natural to use a Hellenistic-Roman analogy. The example of Pompeii, a prosperous Mediterranean town, but not a metropolitan city, was particularly suitable. However it was only when Bat-Yam City Square finally obtained the narrow elongated shape of its site, that this approximation became quite obvious. From then on, we consciously developed the plan of the City Square following in analogy of the example of the Pompeii Forum: after the idea of the nearly enclosed city square, crowned with a freely positioned City Hall was firmly established, we later looked into other civic places for further confirmation of our ideas, such as the Isphahan Central Square, the Piazza San Marco in Venice and –an example nearby the El-Jassar Mosque in Acre. Through this effort we have transcended the cultural boundaries of our own architectural tradition to include not only the treasures of the Renaissance, but also the Islamic architectural tradition as an integral part of our new regional sensitivity.

Civic Square

The design of the square was carried out in parallel to the design of the City Hall: the idea of enclosing a large urban space entirely, within a frame of buildings, ran counter to the predominant trends of design at the time. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, urban spaces were usually defined as a composition of free standing dissociated objects, arranged in a quasi equilibrium. Among the post-war urban designs, the model we liked the best was the plan for the reconstruction of Le Havre by August Perret. Within the great rectangular framework of the urban square, the Bat-Yam City Hall was placed diagonally on the main axis of the square. At the time, this solution seemed to us to be an almost a dissident act of defiance, as if we had moved the San Marco Church out of the Doge's Palace walls, or had turned the Pompeii temple diagonally within its forum. We felt very strongly about stressing symbolically the independence and dignity of local government. The detached positioning of the Bat-Yam City Hall within the rigid frames of the square, suggests visually just this notion.

Pompeii Forum

Throughout my personal encounters with the mayor of Bat-Yam I referred to our Middle Eastern Mediterranean heritage: this amalgam of different cultures was brought to visibility as both relevant and legitimate via our project. Even though it must have seemed strange to the mayor, it was an attractive and versatile argument. Pompeii served as a demonstration that a small town should strive for a unique local identity and might achieve that goal through its public architecture.

Our difficulties began to arise due to the fact that modern architecture, in its sterile utilitarian incarnation, had gained immense prestige at that time in Israel: our design was at odds with the accepted standards and anonymous appearances of public buildings, representing a faceless government. I had to assure the mayor over and over that our design, however strange and bizarre it might seem to him, was, as a matter of fact, the genuine and contemporary offspring of a long architectural tradition. It was a building, however, that was to continue our own heritage in the here and now. Ancient Rome was our most solid example: with the progress of the design, the Pompeii analogy presented itself in a more direct and less ambivalent light. The design of the City Square assimilated the rectangular shape of the Pompeii Forum, though on a larger scale. It was to be a true centre of civic life in the best of the Greco-Roman tradition, transformed and adjusted to suit the present local needs and biases.

Additional Elements and Facilities

The competition building program had demanded the design of an office building: our design for the City Hall building gradually transformed it into a true public place. This gradual metamorphosis of the concept of the building was consistent with our intentions to embody the democratic spirit of local administration through new architectural interpretation. Even though the local bureaucracy was already growing quickly, we believed, rather naively, that we could succeed by architectural means in attracting and encouraging free and spontaneous use of the building by the citizens of Bat-Yam.

To guarantee the public character of the Bat-Yam City Hall we introduced a series of architectural elements that were never demanded by the client: they surpassed the narrow economic constraints of plain construction, minimum occupation of space and the monochromatic use of materials that were the common characteristics of local modern design.

(A) The Central Atrium

The core of the Bat-Yam City Hall is its central atrium, which is a three-story-high space, enveloped externally by a row of office units and faced internally by open corridors. At the very early stages of the design I consulted Tony Garnier's design of Boulogne-Billancourt, L'Hotel de Ville: I was fortunate to come across an original 1936 pamphlet from the building's dedication, with interior photographs not included in my L'oeuvre de Tony Garnier. That initial example of Garnier's design had a decisive influence on our understanding of an open-multi-storey public place. Particularly indebted to Garnier is the idea of directing the open corridors into the central hall to increase its visual impact.

Such an arrangement of a public hall enclosed by workspace puts the incoming public on equal terms in the use of the building. The clear and unobstructed views assist one to orientate oneself easily within the building. People do not feel inhibited to make spontaneous free movements towards any destination. The atrium of the Bat-Yam Hall was designed with some of the functions in mind that one associates with auditoriums; as a kind of community centre. Naturally, I was then aware of other important prototypes that were to some extent related, like Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum, Alvar Aalto's Saynatsalo Town Hall and Oscar Niemeyer's Caracas Museum. In this sense, the Bat-Yam City Hall continues the tradition of buildings built with a central open space as a core. It insists on the central position of man within architectural space.

(B) The Amphitheatre

The design of the City Square had a definite influence on the design of the City Hall: an amphitheatre wing adjacent to the building could serve as an example to verify this claim. It is connected to the building by the flat surface of a reflecting pool. A small elevated performing platform in the midst of the pool is accessible from the interior of the building. The ensemble is particularly suitable for small performances due to the intimate nature of the space, sheltered by the overhanging floors of the levels above. The amphitheatre thus enhances the City Hall building and contributes to the festive atmosphere and encourages public participation. Unfortunately, the reflecting pool was never realized, and even though the amphitheatre was built, to my knowledge it was never used.

(C) The Roof

During the design process we assigned a new public usage to the roof of the building; a kind of elevated public square, as an extension of the activities carried out inside or outside of the building. The major spanning beams that carry the structure of the roof define the form of its space, which is dominated by four ventilation and light towers. They also function as sculptural objects upon the roof space, and serve as crowning accents to the building's skyline. In this way they provide a theatrical background for performances and evening gatherings.

The Peristyles

The architecture of Bat-Yam City Hall is ruled by mathematical laws of symmetry and ornament, in order to enhance its spatial organization: the building itself is a three dimensional hierarchical ornament. This becomes evident at many different scales. Through the consistent use of the ornament-geometry, the forms of the walls and ceilings merge into one continuum that is visible in the interior and in the exterior. The Bat-Yam City Hall makes no claim to the austere beauty of some of the buildings contemporary to it; on the contrary, the "ornamental" appearance of its elevations was calculated for strong sunshine and close visibility. The same reasoning holds true for the coffered diagonal square ceilings of the 'peristyles' of the building. Even when deciding upon the colours of the overhanging ceiling of the City Hall we intended to enrich the form by evoking the royal range of colours that are the red, blue and gold of king David and all subsequent royalty.

The Light and Wind Towers

The light and wind towers that are placed on the roof are useful as energy saving devices, and in addition they enrich the silhouette of the building: in the context of the city and its square, the building transformed into a large crown. It became an unmistakable symbol of nobility; the nobility of democracy. A democracy is in need of rich images and symbolism, to help it to exercise its power over the pluralistic and chaotic nature of the society.

Epilogue

Without question, social were to have a major impact on the architecture of our building, which became a symbol of a newborn nation's self-consciousness: in the years immediately following the creation of the State of Israel, hopes were high that moral considerations would be considered. We intended to express those high ideals and intentions, those desires and convictions in advance, so to speak. In their architectural transformation we hoped to reinforce those ideals. Unfortunately, our intentions were warped by bureaucracy and were able to change little in the steady erosion of Israel's public life.

Failure

Our long study came to a nought: the City Hall was completed in 1963. Following an adverse press campaign in which the building was ridiculed, the mayor of Bat-Yam was forced to resign. Two years later, in 1965, after I refused to reduce the size of the City Square, I myself was fired, and the work was entrusted to another architect. The terrain was then hastily sold to private contractors. The City Square was never built and the citizens were deprived of their rights to a public for free assembly. During the course of time, events have come full circle: from a resort town of the 1950s, the Bat-Yam of today has become infamous as a hotbed of organized crime. Today, upon arriving in the area, the first question a visitor will ask is how did I managed to parachute the City Hall into the midst of such densely packed buildings. One immediately wonders why such a building was sited in one of the ugliest places in the neighbourhood.

So, not only was the Bat-Yam City Square never built, but even the City Hall building itself, from an architectural viewpoint, has been systematically destroyed. The same forces that are at work in destroying architectural work, living habitats and the environment in general, are also those that work on destroying whatever is still left of the Zionist dream.