

Heike Kaiser

## The Cultured Landscape of Tel Aviv – Yafo: Analyzing and Assessing Multifaceted Drivers of Urban Transformation within Everyday Landscape(s)

### 1. Problem definition / relevance of research

---

'Landscape' is integral to, and intertwined with, all aspects of human life. According to Donald Meinig (1979), it is both "an old and pleasant word in common speech" and "a technical term in special professions", and whether we know it or not, it provides the setting for our lives and therefore directly or indirectly influences everything we do. At the same time our interference with landscape, for good or bad, comes in many forms, from global warming to land use and urban design. It is therefore essential that we are collectively and individually aware of our 'environmental guilt' (Thayer 1994), of which the outward manifestation is the need to save and protect the environment from further destruction.

In order to save and protect we need to perceive, understand and assess the value of landscape. There are many different ways of doing so, depending on factors such as personal background, ethnicity, and education. In his much quoted article, Meinig (1979) identified ten different ways of thinking about landscape and its meaning. He opens his review by stating that "landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads".

Hereby, he captures part of the problem that policy makers, scholars, designers, and students of landscape so often face: "Landscape is not merely the world as we see it - it is a construction, a composition of that world. Landscape is a way of seeing the world" (Cosgrove 1984).

We are also influenced by the media in its various forms: television, film, books, theatre, music and songs in particular, and our perception of landscape therefore works not only at a conscious level but - more importantly - at a subconscious level, too, so that all of the above color our sense of place and our reactions to it (Harvey 2006). Herein, however, lies its greatest potential: Landscape, as James Corner (1999) argues, is "both spatial milieu and cultural image ... a medium that is embedded and evoked within the imaginative and material practices of different societies at different times". Landscape provides a useful way (or ways) of knowing the world (Seddon 1997), it gives us a framework of understanding within which to describe and analyze what we see of and feel about our everyday environment (Swaffield 2002). In all typologies of landscapes, but more often in built environments and thus especially in cities, researchers look for what is distinctive, the special character ('genius loci') that sets one place apart from each other. As a rule, the urban centers which have mostly been examined so far are hundreds or thousands of years old, they have a long cultural tradition, and their buildings reflect that history. Historical research into cities and their transformation over time always seems to require archeological work in the extensive field of urban mentalities, communication patterns and ways of life (Schlör 1999). Tel Aviv, founded in 1909 as a garden suburb of the biblical town of Jaffa, however, still might have few residents who are as old as the city itself, and if you dig too far down, you strike sand. This is a boon to researchers: The archives are complete, the building history of the city is well-documented, and in addition there are Zionist legends about its foundation and sentimental pioneers' stories of the early years which only added to the interest of socio-historical research in the past.

Studying the comparatively young cultured landscape of Tel Aviv-Yafo in this doctoral thesis is therefore an approach of analyzing and assessing present everyday landscapes in a metropolitan area whose rapid urban transformation is highly influenced by socio-cultural, political and economic drivers. Up to now, research on Tel Aviv has mostly been related to narratives about its founding and further historic events having taken place there, to reviews of socio-political struggles with the neighboring Arab community of Yafo during the past decades, as well as to reflections on its UNESCO World heritage site and Bauhaus architecture. Tel Aviv can be 'read' as a microcosm of which one can easily gain an overview, both chronological and spatial, as a model of modern urban development (Mann 2006, Schlör 1999). The city has undergone a rapid development, almost like a speeded-up film, from garden suburb to metropolitan area, and its transformation can be studied in two ways:

One is to focus on the concrete process of urbanization: How did this growth take place, what phases and periods did it pass through, when and how were the houses, streets, shops and factories built, and who lived and worked in them?

A second approach is more concerned with people's mental concepts and memories: how did this development appear to contemporaries, what were their comments on it, what terms did they use to describe what they saw taking place around them, what did the development mean to them? More than any other global city, Tel Aviv has inspired both affection and hatred, how were these feelings expressed?

These two approaches cannot easily be separated: Why should a house be seen as possessing greater 'reality' than the significance it has for those who live in it? Why is a street more 'concrete' than the feeling that one can walk freely on it? Every city has its own atmosphere which distinguishes it from others, and this present research project is to take us beyond the obvious, visible and well-known built environment of the city, to consider the urban landscape rather within the environmental and cultural contexts in times of rapid globalization and transformation processes, to understand the present complex relations between its multi-ethnic residents, their urban lifestyles and their manifestation in everyday surroundings.

## **2. Specification of your research question(s)**

---

'Landscape' offers a systematic basis for understanding the spatial patterns and processes we see around us, and the way that people adapt the environment to their needs and desires. Understanding landscape therefore complements and provides an important counterpoint to other ways of knowing: On the one hand, landscape understanding can be seen as an integral part of modern science, culture and society. As such, it has the advantage of being familiar, largely unquestioned and linked to other forms of conventional knowledge about the environment.

On the other hand, landscape knowledge can be used as the basis for a critique of aspects of modern life. It may challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about what is valued and can provide a voice for specific groups of people whose concerns may otherwise not be heard (Swaffield 2002).

The thinking that gave rise to this research project lies in the belief that there is often a gulf between landscape theory and design practice, and a real danger that current issues in multi-ethnic societies, such as the complexity of cultural identity and lifestyles manifested in the urban landscape and the conflicts for both city authorities and dwellers that derive from it, are not being adequately addressed by landscape architects. Thus, the central aim of this research project is to examine how multi-ethnic cultures and lifestyles manifested in everyday landscapes (can) influence and become positive drivers of urban transformation; how landscape architects can derive useful recommendations for socio-political changes in planning practice within metropolitan areas from the in-depth analysis and assessment of these drivers; and how municipalities can improve their day-to-day management of dealing with challenges (and solving of conflicts) according to the plurality of cultural identities manifested in the everyday urban landscape.

Providing Tel Aviv-Yafo as a case study, it seems like any other city on the globe at daytime – blazing, noisy, dirty. But before the hustle and bustle of the day begins and after it has subsided, the city happens to open up and to provide a surprisingly gentle quality. Even those who dislike Tel Aviv admit that this Mediterranean city has a special way of engaging all the senses – and also our imagination (Aronson 1998).

This impact makes one strongly suspect that its urban everyday landscapes have more to tell. In terms of thorough research, the outsider's viewpoint may often have its dilemmas but it also offers chances.

Foreign eyes might see what others may have ignored, visitors might ask questions that city dwellers take for granted, or offer comparisons not previously imagined, such as:

- In how far does urban landscape of Tel Aviv-Yafo represent the complexity of contemporary Israeli cultural identity? Are there everyday landscapes that only specific groups of people acquire and use? In how far is their impact visible and assessable? What everyday landscapes face conflicts related to the use by different groups of people? What measures could be taken to improve the situation in those areas?
- What public places bear a special historic burden in the urban landscape of Tel Aviv-Yafo? How are feelings of affection or hatred expressed in the everyday landscape, how in the specifically designed landscape? How is the history of Tel Aviv and Jaffa communicated in public space?
- How does contemporary planning, design and management of public open spaces in Tel Aviv-Yafo help establish individual urban lifestyles in the context of cultural identity versus globalization? Are there typical Western, Mediterranean, Oriental or International elements that influence the urban landscape design? How does green infrastructure as a public stage contribute to socio-political and environmental changes (example: the occupation of Rothschild Boulevard during summer 2011, implementation of public bicycle rental all over Tel Aviv)?
- What are the key drivers of Tel Aviv's urban transformation at present? How does the municipality of Tel Aviv-Yafo deal with present and future challenges regarding urban sprawl, green infrastructure, conflicting uses in public open space etc.? Can other global metropolitan areas learn from this example, or vice versa?

### 3. Conclusion for further research proceeding

---

In the process of planning or designing urban landscapes, the social element must never be neglected. It is an undeniable fact that those groups of people likely to be affected by designed change should be consulted. There are many professionals who could (and do) aid this move to universal awareness, but the landscape architects would seem to be in an especially privileged position as being “the stewards of the land and the earth’s natural systems; they work to restore health to ecosystems and to ameliorate the increasing environmental stresses found in our cities and countryside” (Corner 1992).

Being a landscape architect by profession, however, is not enough. In order to understand urban transformation processes against the background of multi-ethnic cultures and lifestyles manifested in public open space observing is important – even better is participating and communicating one’s own perceptions and understanding of landscape (Spirn 1998).

For adequate research on this subject and according to the case study presented, it is important to walk the streets and boulevards in Tel Aviv, do picnics in the parks, sit in street cafés, restaurants or private gardens, look out from balconies and roof top terraces, stroll along the promenade and the port, spend days at the beach, celebrate public holidays, and attend open air music festivals, street parades and public debates on urban squares (Helphand 2002).

With the help of literature review, contemporary media research, interviews of experts and users of public open space, recordings of individual users while walking predefined routes, people’s mental concepts, narratives and memories regarding the urban everyday landscape of Tel Aviv-Yafo is expected to be brought to the surface.

An attentive walk in the city – what Lucius Burckhardt used to do with the perceptive mind of a professional strollogist, and being adapted by anyone capable of opening their eyes and using their feet – can best be undertaken in the very hours following sunrise and after sunset since on the eastern Mediterranean coast the sun rises early, and it also sets early. Thus, a special attention for this research study is to be put on the morning, evening and night life in Tel Aviv and a choice of relevant landscapes and cross-cutting walking routes.

Research results are expected to give insight into how city dwellers and visitors of different ethnicity, education, and personal background perceive their everyday urban landscape, use it according to their needs, may create use conflicts, and thus foster the urban transformation process.

Moreover, this doctoral thesis might help to relate modern cultural and landscape theory to applied urban landscape design and to place the application and practice of landscape architecture firmly within the social, philosophical and cultural background from which it derives and hopefully serves.

Over half a century has passed since Christopher Tunnard (1939) wrote that it was society’s responsibility to cultivate what he called the ‘cultural patrimony’. For him our inheritance included both man-made landscapes and natural wonders.

As John Hopkins makes so evident in his essay “The future: landscape design in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (2005), our patrimony includes the quality of air and water, energy consumption, the sustenance of entire ecological systems, and (in addition to the physical, cultural, and historical) a political and philosophical dimension.

Frederick Law Olmstead argued that urban landscapes should be places that bring together the widest range of people and provide them with a “sense of enlarged freedom”. He believed in the restorative effects of landscape, in terms of both respiratory and mental health, saying: ‘the enjoyment of scenery employs the mind without fatigue and yet exercises it, tranquilizes it and yet enlivens it’. Like Olmstead, Hopkins makes an ethical statement for a landscape that will sustain and nurture human life. Moreover, like Olmstead, he is a democrat arguing for an ‘open, participatory, transparent’ society.

Whether the world adopts his philosophy or does not, this doctoral research project provides an excellent exemplary approach how to assess and deal with everyday landscapes in a metropolitan area with rapid urban and demographic transformation processes.

**Keywords:** Urban Landscape, Cultural Landscape, Everyday Landscape, Strollology, Participatory Planning, Urban Lifestyles, Sense of Place, Local and Regional Identity, Green Infrastructure, Quality of Life, Urban Transformation, Globalization, Multi-ethnic Society, Middle East, Israel

## Literature

---

Aronson, S., 1998, Making Peace with the Land – Designing Israel's Landscape, Washington, DC: Spacemaker Press.

Corner, J., 1999, Recovering landscape as critical cultural practice, in: J. Corner (ed.), Recovering Landscape: essays in contemporary landscape architecture, New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Cosgrove, D., 1984, Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape, London: Croom Helm.

Harvey, S. et al. (ed.), 2005, The Cultured Landscape – Designing the Environment in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, illustrated ed., London and New York: Routledge.

Helphand, K., 2002, Dreaming Gardens – Landscape Architecture and the Making of Modern Israel, Center Books on the International Scene Series Vol. 2, Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Harrisonburg, Virginia: Center for American Places, in association with Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Hopkins, J. & Neal, P., 2005, "The future: landscape design in the 21<sup>st</sup> century", in: Harvey, S. et al. (ed.), 2005, The Cultured Landscape – Designing the Environment in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, illustrated ed., London and New York: Routledge, pp. 149 – 171.

Mann, B.E., 2006, A Place in History – Modernism, Tel Aviv, and the Creation of Jewish Urban Space, Stanford Studies in Jewish History & Culture Series, Stanford University Press.

Meinig, D.W., 1979, The beholding eye: ten versions of the same scene, in: D. W. Meinig (ed.), The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schlör, J., 1999, Tel Aviv – From Dream to City, first edition in English, London: Reaktion Books.

Seddon, G., 1997, Landprints: reflections on place and landscape, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Spirn, A.W., 1998, The Language of Landscape, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Swaffield, S. (ed.), 2002, Theory in Landscape Architecture – A Reader, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Thayer, R. L., 1994, Gray world, green heart, New York: Wiley.

Tunnard, C., 1939, Gardens in the Modern Landscape, London: Architectural Press.