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How should Tel Aviv deal with his historic garden city?

The White City, a vivid Bauhaus heritage.

In the centre of Tel Aviv is the White City, a garden city build in the first half of the 20th century. This ideal city grew in an organic way to the Unesco-monument of today by constantly restoring and building.

Strolling in Tel Aviv is a pleasure. The spacious beach boulevard, the boulevards in the centrally located White City and the shopping streets beckon on a lazy spring evening to watch and to be watched. Cycling there is equally pleasant, for the visitor on his rental bike, secure on the well-maintained bicycle paths. On the White City-boulevards strollers and cyclists are both welcome.

Yet here, on the newly redesigned boulevards, you see one of the controversial aspects of the modernisation of the White City. Why did the designers choose for modern chairs right in the middle of the foot and cycle path? That seems a trivial question in the case of a boulevard in some suburb, but a boulevard in the White City – a garden city - is in the centre of Tel Aviv, where a boulevard is an important public space with kiosks and playgrounds. These boulevards give the city a solid structure like the canals of Amsterdam. Both, the centre of Amsterdam and Tel Aviv - the White City – are Unesco monuments, based on a clear main structure that developed organically. A revamp of such a boulevard is more than addressing any space. It is a vulnerable heritage that longs for a careful approach.



Nowhere in the world are so many Bauhaus buildings concentrated in one area as in the White City. The sparkling white buildings are in a special way arranged according the rules of the garden city from the beginning of the twentieth century. The owners of these buildings didn't maintain this modern architecture very well, which was the immediate cause for Unesco to make it a World Heritage site in 2003.

Green spaces

Patrick Geddes (1854-1932), who was both biologist and city planner, makes a drawing of the White City in 1925 that initially gives a whimsical pattern of roads with some green patches of public parks, cemeteries, riverbanks and leftovers of orange plantations.



In his explanatory statement he lays emphasis on the intended green character of this new part of the city that not only consists of those green patches, but also of parks for the neighbourhood and of building plots from five hundred square meters where a building of two storeys can be constructed on one third of the plot. Furthermore he makes a differentiation in boulevards, main streets, residential streets and paths to the neighbourhood green that make up a flexible, not yet solidified grid. This flexibility is essential, because the government does not own the land and while building the White City from south to north they can acquire it piece by piece.

Bearing in mind his English background of gardening and his penchant for squares, he develops a neighbourhood model with buildings around a public green space, within a windmill shape of residential streets. This neighbourhood model and the unpredictable process of obtaining land results in quite different neighbourhoods that stick together because of the strong structure of boulevards and main streets



The ideal image according to Geddes: buildings around a public green space.

Geddes did not prescribe architecture, which gave the modern Jewish architects – who fled to the English protectorate Tel Aviv-Palestine before World War II – the opportunity to build their Bauhaus fascinations in modern white architecture. During the building process the local government changed the rules in 1938. From then on the architects could build up to fifty per cent of the plot in four to five storeys high only if the building was constructed on columns ('pilotis').



Managing this spontaneous or organic White City gives the municipality some headaches. The Unesco for instance only regards the preservation of the Bauhaus architecture but also reprimands authorities that want to affect the urban structure. This protection of the urban structure is necessary, because due to the massive suburbanisation and settlements politics in the last few decades, the White Town lost its attraction. In some places you will now see the fruits of the numerous restoration works.

