

# Arts & Entertainment

## Building a Jewish city

### A look back at Tel Aviv's modernist period

By Pauline Dubkin Yearwood  
Managing Editor

Living in one of the most architecturally significant cities in the world, most Chicagoans can't help but be fascinated by the subject.

But they may not know that there's another city that at one time was a hub of new architectural ideas: Tel Aviv.

Now a Chicago-area art historian who's a native of the Israeli city has written a book exploring that period. Nathan Harpaz's "Zionist Architecture and Town Planning: The Building of Tel Aviv (1919-1929)" (Purdue University Press) documents the city's architectural history and focuses on the interplay between European Jewish architects who moved to the Jewish state after World War I and the needs of residents during a time of explosive population growth.

Harpaz is the curator of Oakton Community College's Koehnline Museum of Art and also teaches art history and museum studies at the college. He was born in Tel Aviv, a city his grandfather came to in 1920, and received his undergraduate degree from Tel Aviv University. That's also where he became interested in the city's architecture, he said during a recent telephone interview.

"The story of Tel Aviv is part of my family history," he says. "When I was an undergrad I

started going around the streets of the city taking a lot of photos of buildings. Over the years it became a major theme in my academic career" and the subject of both his master's thesis and doctoral dissertation. The just-published book, "is the accumulation of something I started many years ago," he says.

"In the 1930s, Tel Aviv was the most modern city in the world in terms of architecture," Harpaz says. "No other place in the world was built so massively with completely modern architecture," with great influence from the Bauhaus school and its ideas of modernism, simplicity and functionality.

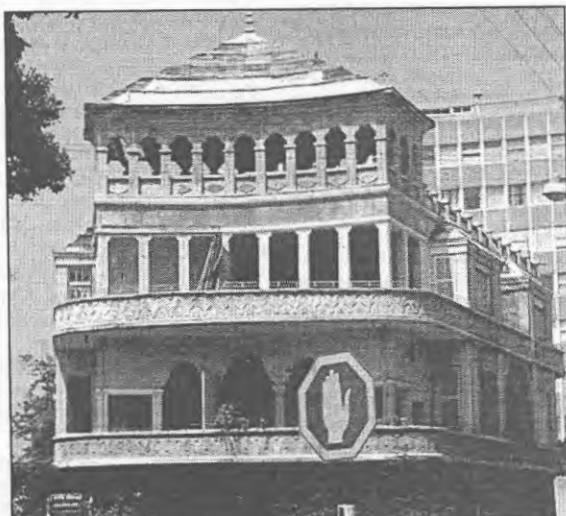
His book doesn't deal directly with that period but with the years previous to it that laid the groundwork for the architectural explosion of the '30s.

Tel Aviv at that period "was like a laboratory for experiments," Harpaz says. "It was the first Jewish city established in modern times and it started fresh in 1909 and did a lot of experiments in a very short time. During the '20s it grew from a small little suburb of Jafra to become the largest city and the most important as a commercial center in Israel. In 10 years during the 1920s it changed dramatically."

During that period, Harpaz says, many Jewish architects moved to the city from Europe and started building there. At the same time young Israeli architects were attending schools in Europe.

"They studied at the most modern, advanced schools of architecture in Europe, including the Bauhaus, and came back to Israel and started this completely revolutionary architecture with a

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## Tel Aviv

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

modern style," he says. "But it took another decade until they breached the gate between theory and practice."

The result, beginning in the 1930s, was "an eclectic mix of all kinds of styles and traditions. There was application of modern architecture in other cities but none so massively as in Tel Aviv. Everything built in the north part of Tel Aviv in the '30s was completely modern architecture."

The book also explores the

debate that existed during the period between those who wanted to develop a more "Zionist" architectural style and others who favored building in an international style. It was a debate that began long before the architectural boom of the '30s, Harpaz says.

"In the late 19th century, when Jews started settling in Israel, there was a debate in every segment of Jewish culture: to keep something unique, something Israeli Jewish, or to be like the rest of the nations, more international. It's debated up to today," he says.

Even the modern architecture of the '30s, Harpaz says, although international in style had

some characteristics peculiar to its locality.

"There had to be a lot of adjustment to climate conditions. You can't build the same way as in Europe. There were adjustments with windows, shading areas in consideration to the different climate," he says.

After the dramatic architectural boom of the '30s, Harpaz says, "Israeli architecture in general just followed whatever developed globally. In the '40s it was very functional and simple; in the '50s, because of the huge wave of immigration after World War II, it was necessary to rapidly build inexpensive housing that was very functional. All the styles that came later were just matching whatever happened in the world."

As for Tel Aviv today, "there are a lot of tall buildings, brand new buildings, contemporary architecture like you would see in any major city," he says. "The skyline of Tel Aviv has completely changed in recent years. Now it looks like a big American city. That is part of globalization; it happens in the rest of the world too."

"Zionist Architecture and Town Planning: The Building of Tel Aviv (1919-1929)" is available on [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) or from Purdue University Press, [www.press.purdue.edu](http://www.press.purdue.edu).

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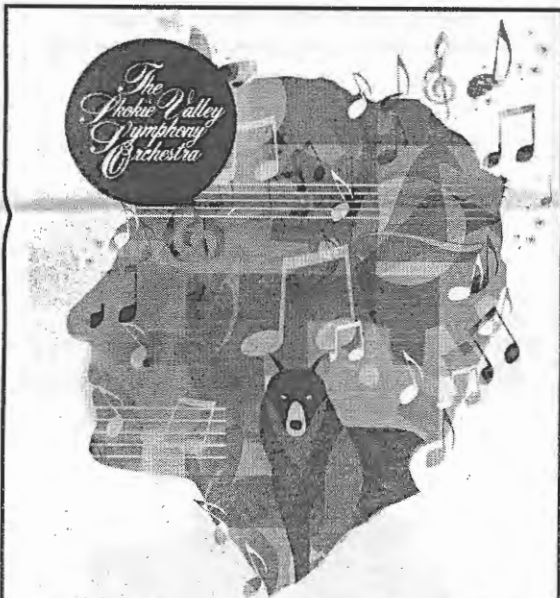


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