

PREFACE

By the time I had graduated from the School of Architecture at Tel Aviv University in 2006, West Bank settlements had become a major political reality in Israel, but no mention was made of them in the architecture classes I had taken. Instead, the focus was on the modernist history of Tel Aviv and the legacies of the International Style. So naturally I was stunned, on my first day at work after graduation, when I learned that the small firm I had joined, located a block away from the Tel Aviv Port, was kept afloat mainly thanks to its work in settlements. I did not stay there for long. The next firm I worked at, then the largest in the country, had other sources of income at the time, mainly in Eastern Europe, but its history was replete with design commissions in settlements. Settlements, it seemed, were everywhere, but they were nowhere; they were rarely discussed in any academic or professional forum, as if architecture had nothing to do with the settlement project or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Later, after I had moved to North America, and decided to leave practice for a career as a historian of the built environment, I encountered a different reality. In those few times when Israel was mentioned, whether in graduate seminars at Berkeley or in random conversations, the settlements were all people seemed to talk about, and architecture had a lot to do with that. It was seen as a means through which Israel exerted its power over the Palestinians, and thus architects were collaborators of the worst kind. Architecture and architects then, were either completely removed from politics, as was the case in Tel Aviv, or conversely, irredeemably political, as was the case in Berkeley.

So I came back to Israel in 2013 to try to understand exactly what the relationship was between architecture and the settlements. I began by conducting interviews with architects who had worked in settlements. Almost all the architects I contacted agreed to meet with me, even though they rarely expressed much pride in their work in settlements. They were often surprised to hear I was studying settlement architecture. For the most part, I figured, their more impressive body of work was carried out in Israel, not in the West Bank. More importantly, work in the settlements had left many of them bitter and disappointed. “I regret I ever laid a foot there,” an architect who designed an entire settlement told me, before he went on to recount the many ways in which a private developer and state officials challenged, tweaked, and ultimately redrew his plans. “What you see there

now has little to do with the plans I had drawn.” My notebooks are filled with comments of this nature. At times, it was private developers and state officials who undermined the architects’ work. Most often, it was the settlers themselves. I soon realized that if I was to understand the architecture of the settlements, I had to expand the scope of my research beyond the profession of architecture, and I began investigating government officials, real estate developers, and the wide range of settler groups who were involved in the settlement enterprise.

The sense of disappointment and bitterness I encountered when conversing with architects, however, continued to loom over my research. It would return in many of the formal interviews and informal conversations I had with settlers. It was also expressed in interviews I conducted with state and military officials. There were exceptions, of course. One settler group was very happy with its new home. So were a handful of architects. But, by and large, few felt as if the design and evolution of settlements reflected their wishes and expectations. Control over the design of settlements has not been localized to the profession of architecture, to settler groups, or to government officials, I learned, but has been in constant flux, shifting from one actor to the other, leaving all parties bewildered and, at times, full of regret.

I explore this haphazard evolution in the chapters of this book. I do not do so with the intention of redeeming architects or the settlement enterprise. As an Israeli who eventually returned to Israel, where I now teach at Tel Aviv University, I am deeply concerned by the spread of settlements, by the ways in which they impinge on the Palestinians’ right to sovereignty and undermine Israel’s democratic foundations, and by the fact that my students may one day see their work entangled in the messy politics of settlement construction. But unless we understand the interplay between politics and the built environment, unless we understand how power works on the ground, the construction of settlements will go unchallenged, and history will repeat itself.

IN THE LAND OF THE PATRIARCHS



MAP 0.1. Map of Israel and the occupied West Bank (in gray) with locations mentioned in the book. (Map drawn by Yuval Yadlin.)