Identity-shaping Landscape: People’s Houses in Eretz Israel as a Case Study

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People’s Houses in Eretz Israel\(^1\) as a Case Study

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Abstract

The conception, construction, and usage of people’s houses in Eretz Israel demonstrate a unique and unmistakable affinity to the landscape in all its natural, cultural, physical, and metaphysical aspects. This relation to the landscape has yet to be examined in research on people’s houses in general\(^2\), and on those of Eretz Israel in particular\(^3\). This article aims to identify this relation, and to analyze its manifestations and the view of people’s houses as indicators of identity search, definition, and construction via the landscape. The article is based on a sampling of one hundred people’s houses designed, constructed, and used in Eretz Israel between the 1920’s and 1960’s, in which it has examined issues of spatial positioning, architectural program, morphology, and materials.

**Keywords:** Architecture, Identity, Israel, Landscape. People’s Houses

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\(^1\)Eretz Israel, i.e., “the land of Israel,” is a term frequently used in Hebrew to refer to Palestine both before and since the establishment of the modern state of Israel.

\(^2\)See: Collectif, Ed. (1984); Klein, R. & Toulier, B., Dir. (2009)

\(^3\)A research study of the people’s houses in *Eretz-Israel* as an architectural, social and cultural phenomenon from the late 1800’s until the 1960’s, headed by Esther Grabiner and Edina Meyer-Maril, in process at the David and Yolanda Katz Faculty of the Arts at Tel Aviv University, with the support of the Israel Science Foundation. The study database is currently being processed.
Foreword

The building of people’s houses in Eretz Israel began in the late 1800’s, together with Zionist settlement. The immigrant-pioneer society and its institutions assigned the people’s houses a key role in the society’s existence, and they were built in all manner of Hebrew settlements, including rural farms, small communities, villages, towns, and workers’ neighborhoods. The houses were inspired, both as ideas and as physical structures, by the European people’s houses. Their transmission to Eretz Israel was attended by changes to program and presentation, based on the needs, dreams, and limitations of the transmitting agents – who included city planners, architects, community leaders, and a public that created and consumed culture.

The European people’s house was a multipurpose structure for meetings, leisure and education that embodied a class consciousness and social planning; it expressed socialist utopias while at the same time providing a vehicle for their realization. Its characteristics were consistent with the Zionist movement’s desire to mold a new man, or rather “a new Jew,” on a socio-cultural basis. The core values of this “new Jewish identity” included: fostering a socialist tradition, encouraging political activism, settling Eretz Israel, performing manual labor, promoting universal education, and developing the arts. The people’s houses in Eretz Israel were seen as both greenhouses for, and creators and disseminators of, the new Hebrew culture founded on those values. The people’s houses accommodated and drove educational, recreational, and creative initiatives, and were regarded as “the new workshop, a modern melting pot for the soul of the Hebrew nation”\(^1\).

Spatial Positioning

The European people’s houses were placed into built environments: around factories, in working-class neighborhoods, and in urban centers. Late 19th century – early 20th century European planning saw them as social and cultural centers that symbolized “togetherness” and which could heal society’s ills. Accordingly, they were positioned in central, widely-visible locations within the terrain. A representative of this approach was architect Theodor Fischer (1862-1938), one of the originators of the German version of the garden city\(^2\). Among his students was Richard Kauffmann (1877-1958), a Jewish-German architect and city planner who, beginning in 1920, headed the Zionist Executive’s planning team. By the 1940’s, Kauffmann planned in Eretz Israel over a hundred agricultural cooperative settlements, in which he applied the latest urban planning principles in keeping with the garden city approach. Unlike traditional villages, which had taken shape over a long historical process, these new settlements were pre-designed.

\(^1\)Central Zionist Archives: KH 49035.
Kauffmann saved a special place for the community’s cultural building, which he considered to be the embodiment of communal living; his definition of this building as the settlement’s “crown” served as both metaphor and construction plan. People’s houses appeared regularly in Kauffmann’s designs: he positioned them at the highest point of every settlement, and highlighted their paths of access within the hierarchy of traffic axes and/or through landscaping. The people’s houses, normally built years after the settlement’s planning, and sometimes under a different name, were indeed built, in the vast majority of cases, in the location indicated by Kauffmann’s plans.

In flat settlements, a parallel dominance was achieved by placement at the end of an axis, at the intersection of central traffic axes, and/or at the center of an ample perimeter of open space. Another means of emphasis was the stairs, designed in various manners, at the front of almost every people’s house.

Kfar Yehoshua provides a telling example of the importance of topographical height when positioning people’s houses. In designing this settlement in 1927, Kauffmann placed the people’s house at the highest point of the settlement’s topography, which lay at the end of a main road. In 1937, in the meetings to start construction on the people’s house, the community, which held equality as a core value, demanded that the house be relocated to the settlement’s geometric center so as to be equidistant from all members’ homes. Due to the pointed debates, the decision was entrusted to an elected committee. The committee decided that, in this case, the members are to forgo equality and build the people’s house on Kfar Yehoshua’s most beautiful spot, as proposed by Kauffmann.

The building’s prominence within the topography and/or the built environment, such that it could overlook its surroundings and be seen from afar, was considered an important part of its cultural and social role, as indicated by numerous documents in settlement archives. A typical example is this 1933 text by public figure Haim Ben Asher, Member of Knesset for Mapai (The Eretz Israel Workers’ Party), 1949-1955: “The temple and the church embodied the building genius of mankind through the ages… at the center of the commune, which has no religious church, shall stand the culture house. This place is meant not merely for festivals and prayer times, but also for daily cultural needs… this house should manifest the commune’s lifestyle, innate preferences, and values…”.

Seven years later, architect Shmuel Bikels (1909 – 1975), who had arrived to Palestine a graduate of the Lviv technical college, and had designed approximately eighty kibbutzim, wrote: “In the European

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2In its translation to the Zionist reality of Eretz Israel, the structure whose social-cultural program corresponded to that of the European people’s house was normally called ‘the people’s house’. At times it was given a different name, and some people’s houses had their name changed in the course of their existence. The naming of people’s houses in Eretz Israel forms the subject of a forthcoming article.
3Dominance within the terrain also carried a strategic defense aspect, to be discussed elsewhere.
village, the church dominates the village, symbolizing and gathering in the collective religious fervor… this has been displaced by a cultural experience… the culture house is the temple of this experience.”

Architectural Program

The dominant positioning of the people’s house was thus implemented in new settlements, that is, in the vicinity of un-built landscape. This enabled openness to the surroundings, and the integration of those surroundings into the workings of the people’s houses. These buildings, imposing when compared to the settlement’s homes, were nevertheless too modest to accommodate a large crowd during public gatherings. Thus, the adjoining open space provided solutions: a stage opening on one end to a built hall, and on the other end to an “open theater space” made up of the natural hillside; a multipurpose veranda at times used as a stage facing the outside courtyard, and at other times as an extension of the inside space; and other such inventions. These characteristics were supported by morphological developments, which shall be discussed later in this article.

The landscape’s role in the positioning and program of the people’s house was also an ideological one. Zionist society sought to identify biblical landscapes in the landscapes of Eretz Israel, and considered these landscapes a call and promise to a homeland “genesis” project. The landscapes evoked feeling of longing, inspiration, and legitimacy in holding onto the land; connecting to the landscape was experienced in this society as connecting to the ancient roots of the Jewish people in Eretz Israel, as well as deepening those roots. Reaffirming the affinity between the immigrant-settlers and the territory’s landscapes was part of creating the new Jew, and a key element in constructing his culture. For example, in a detailed proposal from 1935, Kibbutz Movement cultural committee member Eliezer Liebenstein, who served as Member of Knesset between 1949 and 1955, writes: “The emotional ties awakened by encounter with the land are of vast cultural value to us… no less than the new member, must the old member become acquainted with the land and strengthen the bonds of emotion and imagination with her.”

In the minutes of settlement committees, in newspaper articles, and in interviews with persons involved in construction, among the reasons for the positioning of people’s houses, landscape visibility is frequently cited as having cultural value. The criterion of overlooking the landscape appears, for example, in the guidelines for designing cultural buildings written by architect,

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2 With the exception of a few people’s houses built in existing cities, such as in Jerusalem, Haifa, and Tel Aviv.
3 This is a core foundation of the Zionist movement. It originates in Hovevei Zion ideology and the writings of Theodor Herzl; for example, see Herzl’s “The Jewish State,” published in Vienna and Leipzig in 1896: Herzl T. (1956): p.66.
city planner, and Bauhaus student, between 1931 and 1933, Shmuel Mistechkin (1908 – 2004)\(^1\).

The idea continued to hold relevance for decades, as illustrated by two examples from different eras and landscapes. The first is “Zipori House”, built in 1946 in the kibbutz of Kfar Giladi in the Upper Galilee. Its position, at the top of a hill on the southern end of the kibbutz, was determined by a committee made up of kibbutz representatives and public organizations that had helped finance the building. Its architect, Josef Edelman, placed an opening at the back of the stage that also enabled to view performances from an outside courtyard, and a large south-facing window that gave onto a view of the Hula Valley from within the building. On the day after the groundbreaking, the press announced: “All shall look to the house on the hill, and from it they shall draw creative strength and courage… unworthy am I to describe the place’s majestic view… and the symbol that it provides.”\(^2\) The second example is the people’s house in Kfar Daniel in the Shfela (the Judean foothills.) Following its construction in 1963 on the settlement’s highest point, the settlement’s representatives requested the addition of exterior stairs leading to the roof. The surrounding vista, which extended from the Shfela to the Jerusalem hills, was near and dear to Kfar Daniel’s residents, who used to take their guests up to the people’s house roof to view the scene\(^3\).

The people’s houses built around the Sea of Galilee (Heb.: Kineret) were typically built facing the lake, with viewing portals giving onto it. In one inaugural ceremony, lines were quoted from poet Rachel Bluwstein’s 1919 text “On the shores of the Kineret”: “No mere landscape is the Kineret sea, no mere stretch of nature. A people’s destiny is wrapped up in its name. With thousands of eyes, it peers at us from our own past….”\(^4\).

The 1947 cornerstone charter for the people’s house at the kibbutz of Sdot Yam, on the Mediterranean shore south of the Roman city of Caesarea, stated: “We build on the sand, facing the sea, a house to provide some accommodation for a great, enterprising spirit, a home for a regenerating Israeli culture…”. One of the building’s rooms, designed by architect Shmuel Mistechkin, was conceived as a regional antiques museum. This is a typical program item. Many charters contain a statement that the people house is also to be used for environmental study and research, and that one of its spaces is to be a repository of artifacts, flora, fauna, etc. from the settlement’s vicinity. These spaces were dubbed “nature rooms”, “environment museums”, “local antiques museums”, “museums for regional antiques”, and so on.

The search, discovery, collection, cataloging, display, and pedagogic activities surrounding natural and archeological artifacts from the nearby area provided the buildings’ communities an additional means of holding onto the landscape. Many documents illustrate the importance of this program item to the residents – and no less so to the Zionist organizations. For example, in the

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\(^1\)Mistechkin, S. (1935): p. 73.
\(^2\)Davar newspaper, August 2, 1946, p. 1.
\(^3\)Kfar Daniel archives, Jubilee book.
settlement of Kfar Azar, the people’s house construction committee adopted a proposal by the Jewish National Fund to build an “Azar House” that would “provide a place for expressing the redeeming of the land and its role in the life of our people.” In other instances, locally discovered antiques were simply incorporated as decoration in the building’s protective perimeter.

**Morphology**

The morphology of the landscape on view, which often formed a spatial extension of the people’s house, had in many cases also inspired its design. The building’s lines, levels, and/or spaces were often designed in analogy to the surrounding topography or with inspiration from images related to the nearby scenery. The people’s houses, which dominated their surroundings, were built in various relationships to the topography, while employing it in different ways. Common among those were large portals onto the view, flat roofs, verandas and yards, and levels that made use of the topography for activities and scenery-viewing. For our present purposes, we shall examine a small sampling of this aspect that we can analyze vis-à-vis topography types, characteristics of the architect’s work, and the shifting trends that took place between the 1920’s and 1960’s.

The multiuse cultural building at the kibbutz of Ramat Yohanan was designed in the late 1930’s by architect Leopold Krakauer. The complex is articulated to include the hillside between the two wings of the building, and uses the slope as a natural theater opening onto the view, in which a large crowd would gather for performances and ceremonies.

In the kibbutz of Kfar Ruppin, Kauffmann set the settlement’s shape in 1937 as a trapezoid whose short side occupied the highest vantage point, from which one could overlook the Jordan river and the valley of Beit She’an. This place was named “culture hill,” and provided the location for the people’s house. The building, erected thirty years later, is characterized by a viewing deck that encircles the central space and contains the entrances and exits to the main hall.

At the kibbutz of Alonim in the northern Yizre’el valley, a culture and community building was built in the late 1950’s at the top of a hill. It was designed by architects Hanan Havron (1939 – 2000) and Ziva Armoni (1926 –

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3The “Arthur Ruppin Memorial Education and Culture House” was designed in 1963 by architect Arieh Sharon (1900 – 1984) and others.
have three levels, employing the height differences on the lot’s natural slope. The complex, which features a stair-step profile, includes spaces for various functions as well as “empty” spaces – yards and rooftops – used for events and scenery-viewing.

The “culture house” at the kibbutz of Ginosar, built in 1958-1960 under the design of architect Shlomo Gilad (1922 – 1990), was positioned at the eastern end of the kibbutz’s building axis, on a hillside facing the Sea of Galilee shore. On its first floor, a large window and a veranda facing the sea form a sort of “binoculars.” The building’s placement makes use of the hillside, and its morphology references the nautical world in the shapes of both the spaces and the window apertures. The sandy hues of the stucco and the flooring reinforce the building’s affinity to the shore.

In 1962, when the cornerstone was laid for the people’s house at the kibbutz of Beit Alfa, it occupied the highest point on the kibbutz’s built portion, with Mount Gilboa in the background. In the building’s outline, one can detect a continuation of the Gilboa’s slopes. Access to the building is festive – sheltered under, or buoyed by, the gardened hierarchy of the higher mountainside. The main hall is flanked by smaller spaces, among them a museum for local artifacts and a memorial room. The latter culminates in an intimate viewing deck that returns the viewer’s gaze to the landscape.

Another morphological aspect is the division of people’s houses into wings, and their connection via semi-covered passageways. These axes, which are open and yet part of the building – as well as the landscaping around the people’s house and the path leading up to it – all turn the people’s house into a scenic whole. This arrangement of the landscape creates exterior passages that are in fact interiors, and vice versa, thus reinforcing the relationship of the building and its visitors to the landscape.

These characteristics were also ideologically motivated. For example, in a publication by the Palestine Engineers, Architects, and Surveyors Union for an exhibit on twenty years of building, a passage on people’s houses stated: “…to turn part of a mountainside into a gathering place for thousands by making full use of the topography… this open architecture contains a pioneering momentum…” and recommended to “bestow on our public buildings a character that would express their connection to the land…”

Materials

The choice of materials, textures, and colors further expressed the affinity to the landscape. The preference for concrete in Zionist building in general and people’s houses in particular was inspired by European influences, prominent among whom was architect Le Corbusier. The use of concrete served the

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1This culture and community building was dubbed the “Youth Aliyah House,” and was also intended to present the history of the German youth aliyah, to which this kibbutz’s founders belonged.

Zionist struggle for Hebrew labor, as the Hebrew ownership of cement manufacturing freed Jewish building from dependence on Arab stonemasons and the Arab-owned quarries. Concrete was aesthetically interpreted as a symbol of the Zionist ethos, as embodying locality, power, and authenticity. Many people’s houses were cast in concrete, and some featured cutting-edge building technologies for their time. The outer texture of the concrete – exposed or partly-exposed with markings of the casting mold, plastered with rough stucco, or painted – altered with the trends of the time.

However, the use of natural unprocessed stone was also prominent as a marker of locality. The stone was generally rough-hewn and used for exterior walls, mostly on the ground floor. The idea of using untouched local stone to depict the people’s house as growing out of the earth and/or having a connection to it was stated explicitly. For example, the 1947 cornerstone charter for the culture house at the kibbutz of Ma’anit stated: “…we shall build the house of hewn stones, mined from the local rocky terrain… this house and its stones shall symbolize our fervent will… and we shall build a Hebrew village in the homeland, with this house at its center.”

On the day following the inauguration of the culture and community building planned in 1958 at the kibbutz of Alonim, the press announced: “Never have eyes seen such walls: stone on stone, from local rocks. Bare of plastering, the stones seem to tell you and all others arriving at the gates of Alonim about this grand and glorious affair – the Youth Aliyah.”

The stones on site also included stones from structures predating Zionist settlement. For example, the history of the Tel Adashim workers’ settlement (moshav) states in relation to the inauguration of the people’s house in 1943: “the old huts… whose rubble provided stones for the people’s house now standing tall at the heart of the moshav… those stones could tell of the dilemmas of sons returning to the homeland to work and preserve it… [they are] an important link between the distant past and the renewed present.”

In the professional literature of the time, we have found the following: “Building that grows out of the ground takes on its roots, and merges with the surrounding atmosphere, with the color of the mountains and the flora…”; or: “we actual builders also wanted to strike roots deep into the ground as does the field worker in this country.”

Large, unique, natural, or processed stones found among the local antiques were also incorporated as visual highlights in designing the close vicinities of people’s houses. The natural stone and the ancient stone, which in various traditions were perceived as authentic testimonials and memorials, were used

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2The building, designed by architect Ya’acov Geber (1907 – 1993), was named after Haviva Reik, a Palestinian Jewish paratrooper sent by the Jewish Agency and the British Special Operations Executive on military missions in Nazi-occupied Europe.
3The settlement’s archives: the charter written for the laying of the cornerstone.
in this architecture as spokespersons for the “discourse” of the people’s houses’ communities.

Concrete and stone, having diverging characters and typifying different building traditions, were both used to represent authentic, exposed locality. Their use within specific, identifiable elements continued even as construction saw more and more plastered or glass walls.

Epilogue

Physical and metaphysical connection to the landscape of Eretz Israel was a linchpin of Zionist ideology. The people’s houses of Eretz Israel, conceived as a “crucible for the new Jew,”1 played a key role in constructing the Zionist cultural identity, and their builders turned to the landscape both for inspiration and for construction matter. The desire to link Zionist society with its new territorial surroundings as a means of defining identity, and the use of the landscape to empower this identity, are evident in the spatial positioning, the architectural programs, the materials, and the morphology of the people’s houses. Furthermore, the idea of the building as a place to view the landscape ties the building into its surroundings, and appropriates the landscape for the building’s own uses. The people’s house as a viewpoint has acquired added value in its organic relation to the landscape, and in its providing an unmediated experience of the landscape.

The tripartite link between the people’s house, the landscape, and the builders’ identity has been stated, emphasized, and entrenched in additional ways. For example, dates for cornerstone or inauguration ceremonies were considered of great importance, and thus were selected carefully. In the vast majority of cases, we find two categories of dates: either on the Xth anniversary of the settlement’s groundbreaking, or on holidays that emphasized the connection to Eretz Israel and its landscape. In many cases, this was Tu Bishvat – the Jewish Arbor Day, a holiday for planting trees; but it could also be Passover, in which spring in nature was emphasized, or Shavuot, in which first agricultural crops were emphasized.

Many settlements chose to design their New Year’s greeting card with a picture of the people’s house within the mise-en-scène, in the literal sense of the building’s surrounding landscape. A settlement’s greeting card is a visual symbol of the community’s explicitly shared traits, serving to represent the settlement and act as its signature. These cards reconfirm the insight that the people’s houses and their surroundings, conceived and used in the Zionist project as “a new workshop for the nation’s soul,”2 represent an explicit landscape of identity.

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1Yitzhak R. Molcho, Jerusalem people’s house council member, Central Zionist Archives, KH 49035.
2Yitzhak R. Molcho, Central Zionist Archives, KH 49035.
Figure 1. *Open stage and 'open theater space', kibbutz Ein Harod and kibbutz Tel Yossef, 1934; Architect Arieh Sharon Courtesy of Ein Harod Archives*

Figure 2. *Typical plan and perspective with people’s house at the center and Nahalal, 1922. Architect Richard Kauffmann. Courtesy of Nahalal Archive*
Figure 3. Multipurpose veranda, people’s house Bnai Zion, 1955. Architects I. Belzitzman & A. Leitersdorf. Courtesy of Bnai Zion Archives: A1/92

Figure 4. Culture and community building, Kibbutz Ramat Yohanan, 1946. Architect Leopold Krarauer. Courtesy of Ramat Yohanan Archives
Figure 5. Culture and community building Kibbutz Alonim, 1958. Architects Hanan Havron & Ziva Armoni. Courtesy of Alonim Archives

Figure 6. Culture and community building, Kibbutz Alonim, 1966. Architects Hanan Havaron and Ziva Armoni. Photo by author
Figure 7. Culture and community building, Kibbutz Maagan, 1959. Architect Shlomo Almoznino. Photos by author.
Figure 8. New Year’s greeting card. Culture and community building. Kibbutz Hulda, 1954. Architect Jacob Yarust. Courtesy of Hulda Archives

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