Tel Aviv Narratives

IRIS ARAVOT
Technion — Israel Institute of Technology

GENIUS LOCI

"Genius Loci"[1] is a mythical term. In Latin it refers to both the guardian spirit of a place, and to the special atmosphere of that particular place.

> *"...ancient man experienced his environment as consisting of definite characters. In particular he recognized that it is of great existential importance to come to terms with the genius of the locality where his life takes place....survival depended on a "good" relationship to the place in a physical as well as a psychic sense"* [2]

The special attitude of the mythical man to place and to the world in general is termed by the philosopher Ernst Cassirer "the mythical symbolic form". According to Cassirer all human culture is the product of five distinctive "symbolic forms", i.e., modes in which human beings impose order, constancy and meaning on the ever changing phenomena of the world. These are: myth and religion, art, language, history and science, all of which are equally valid. Each symbolic form has its own unique perspective which cannot be reduced to any other. Renunciation of any symbolic form is virtually an impoverishment of human ability.

The feature central to mythical intentionality is characterized by Cassirer as the "sympathy of the whole".

> *"We are in the habit"- Cassirer says - "of dividing our life into the two spheres of the practical and the theoretical.....we are prone to forget that there is a lower stratum beneath both of them. Primitive man is not liable to such forgetfulness.....His view....is neither merely theoretical nor merely practical.....it is sympathetic."*[3]

Thus, the mythical perspective does not aspire to objectivity / neutrality but sees the world as saturated with emotional qualities. This does not override learning from experience: "Myth and primitive religion are by no means entirely incoherent, they are not bereft of sense or reason. But their coherence depends much more upon unity of feeling."Most important : "even in the life of civilized man it (i.e. myth) has by no means lost its original power" [3]

The academic or professional search for affinity between architecture (we refer to urban design as part of architecture) and other realms tends to exclude myth, perhaps because "myth as a sacred narrative" is perceived as too embarrassingly indistinguishable from legends and fairy tales, and "mythopoeia " - deliberate and conscious myth making - as too threatening a retreat to the anti-rational Still, one of the paradoxes of architecture (and probably of all creative activities) is precisely that rational investigation reveals its mythical bases, either as meanings of the architectural artifact or as components of architectural dispositions, intentionalities and approaches. This is due to the dependency of architectural content and attitude upon interpretation and implementation of values, indispensable for the creative act itself, but rationally rooted only partially, and unjustifiable beyond a certain limit.

Hence, two enquiries ensue:

(a) An empirical enquiry which should display, classify and analyze the essential relationships between narrative and/or mythology and architecture in various times and places. It should reveal narrative and mythological contents, both directive and explanatory, as well as mythical functions concerning the architectural artifact and architectural theory.

(b) A speculative enquiry about the use of mythical capacities during the creative process.

This essay acknowledges the importance of empirical enquiry both in itself and as a rationale for speculative enquiry. However, the intention of the experiment described in this essay is not so much to emulate precedents as to explore the mythical capabilities of urban designers. It seeks to open up possibilities rather than to discuss what is extant.

NARRATIVE AND URBAN DESIGN

Design approaches with architectural and urban narrative content have already been widely acknowledged and legitimized in post modernist theories. Prevailing approaches concentrate on either (a) poetry or literature, or (b) "free narration".

(a) The aim is to use poetry and literature as sources for metaphors, analogies, symbols and signs for architectural or urban components and/or compositions. The passages from narration to design may be literal or interpretative in varying degrees, but in all cases the architect's contribution is neither more nor less than reading and formal interpretation. This approach is legitimized essentially by the common denominator of architecture and other forms of art.

For example: Antoniades, as an educator, examines the power of various literary forms as vehicles for the stimulation of work and as themes of architectural design. His students produce a "Palace of Odysseus" influenced by Homer, "Sibyl's Cave and the Infernal Regions" after Virgil's Aeneid, etc..

The best known example of this category, is probably the Danteum by Terragni [4]. This unbuilt project, based on Dante's Divine Comedy, was inspired, structured and directed by Dante Alighieri's account of his journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. Terragni himself left notes of his conceptions in Relazione sul Danteum (Report on the Danteum): Initially he was inclined to personification of architectural elements , but ultimately based the relationship of the Danteum to the Comedy on mathematical correspondence. He transferred the numerical divisions of the poetry to geometrical elements and organization

in space. One may compare Terragni's interpretation of this text with that of Stanley Tigerman. Tigerman's Bathing Pavilion Project as Homage to Dante's Inferno of 1980" is a purely metaphorical visualization as permitted by a large bathroom[5]

(b) "Free narratives" are not based on existing texts in literature and poetry, but are the outcome of the designer's talent, who is both the creator of the narrative and its interpreter. Sources for characters (= components) or plots (= relationships) depend only on the architect's personal preferences, history, experience, etc. Narratives need not precede architectural design, either logically or temporally. On the contrary, narrative and design grow dialectically. Support and the supported or direction and the directed may exchange places and, in principle, their themes unfold freely as the work develops.

An example of this is Lebeus Woods' narrative of an all-embracing cyclical cosmology, wherein Man and Culture are in perpetual movement between four cities or existential conditions: the City of Earth (dawn, birth, spring, intuition, socialistic..), the City of Fire (noon, youth, summer, ascent, heroic balance, poetry, aristocratic..), the City of Air (dusk, maturity, autumn, artificial, abstract, individual, capitalistic...) and the City of Water (midnight, old age, winter, descent, prose, bureaucratic..)[6]

A typical example of "free narration" in architectural education is presented by Clive Knights, whose students had to invent various narratives of two lovers, a maker of prosthetics and a maker of jewels, or a maker of violins and a maker of jewels, for whom they designed dwellings[7]

The present approach is conceived for issues and scale of urban design rather than for those of a building, and differs from the foregoing types of narrative, in that it introduces a two-fold requirement of the architect: (I) responsibility for context and content, and (II) subordination to some internal structural logic. The architect becomes the storyteller, instead of merely a "reader". But at the same time his or her investigation and definition of relevant spheres of life are required as sources for "themes" and "characters" (as opposed to personal or random sources).

The "plot" for such a narrative is based on the revelation of parallels in the various spheres of life in the city under consideration: parallel "characters" and/or relationships, as manifested at specific intervals in time and/or when undergoing metamorphosis.

The "plot" must evolve and present a course or tendency which will channel design or planning interventions.

Thus, the specific "story of here and now" and the "genius loci" form the basis of the present approach. They are the counterparts of every "narrative".

A PRIORI AND A POSTERIORI URBAN NARRATIVE

Like a great work of art, a city at its best has its unique integrity, its specific nature and its particular logic . When revealed, these aspects constitute the narrative of the city, as dependent on social, physical, economical and other "objective " variables as on interpretative - subjective ones.

"Delirious New York" is an extreme and successful example of such an endeavor[8]. The narrative of Manhattan is initiated from the recognition of an unprecedented cultural condition which developed at the end of the nineteenth century , first in Coney Island and then in Manhattan, namely congestion of people, systems and technology. This condition gave rise to three general principles having special architectural and urban implications:

I technology as a superior substitute for Nature,

II continuous multiplication and rearrangement of functions and places within the three dimensional repetitive pattern permitted by the skyscraper, and

III imposition of metaphoric models offering "islands" of emotional shelter.

Manhattan, the brave new metropolis, with the Downtown Athletic Club and Radio City Music Hall as prototypes of the three principles, flourished until the forties, when it failed due to a profound lack of nerve. However, as soon as Manhattanism, both as need and potential, is recognized again, it may be revived and reused, as have been many conceptual and practical projects of the O.M.A.

This may be considered an a posteriori urban narrative- " a posteriori " - because the explanatory / directive narrative appears, both logically and chronologically, after the creation the city itself; and "narrative" because, as with the myths created in antiquity, it interweaves a motivated set of values with an imaginative - conceptual order, imposed on established facts and processes. Like the myths of the ancient peoples, it does not contradict experience and common sense (or contemporary scientific knowledge), but imposes meaning specifically on what is still inexplicable.

There is, however, another type of urban narrative which, though resembling the previous one in function, differs very greatly in origin and potential. This second type may be called a priori urban narrative. - because it is based on an exalted ideological concept, which precedes any practical confrontation with actual situations.

Cities of extended organic development provide fertile soil for a posteriori urban myths because their urban fabric is stratified and saturated with detail, fragments, and traces of earlier times and events. Similar interpretation of newly planned towns is more difficult, however, since they are obviously relatively sterile and bare, and dependent on explicit ideologies.

THE TEL AVIV EXPERIMENTS

Tel Aviv, Israel's biggest city - sometimes referred to as "the only Israeli city" - is quite remarkable from the above a priori / a posteriori point of view. In spite of being a New Town (founded in 1909), it provides a wealth of sources for personal urban mythology , and despite its beginning and development in a highly ideological milieu, it has little ideological basis[9]

Fig. 1. The foundation of Ahuzat Bayit.

The Zionist creed has prevented the establishment of an Israeli urban ideology, and hence the creation of an inclusive Israeli urban narrative. Although nineteenth century utopias such as Herzl's "Altneuland" outlined urban visions, they remained in the realm of literature[10]. After the first world war, and with the rise of a local, agriculturally oriented socialism, such utopias were relegated to the margins of the Zionist creed. Urbanism was looked upon as a hindrance to the creation of a new and healthy society, free from the restrictions and deficiencies of the Diaspora.

Against this background, Tel Aviv was a very unusual phenomenon. Its growth from Ahuzat Bayit, the European neighborhood of Jaffa, to the largest city in Israel arose from sheer necessity rather than from ideological preferences. Thus Tel Aviv originally had no relation to a recommended model or to a general urban myth.

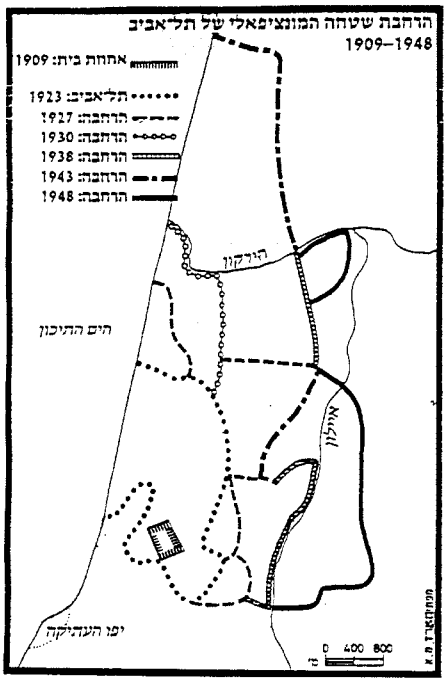

Fig. 2. Tel Aviv growth stages in the years1909, 1923, 1927, 1930, 1938, 1943, 1948.

Today, 86 years after its foundation, an existential understanding of the city, of its nature and being, apart from fragmentary statistics and documented events, encourages the production of a posteriori narrative myths.

While working with two groups of students, I proposed adopting this position as a starting point for overall interpretations of Tel Aviv. Several teams were encouraged to put forward a posteriori narratives for the city, so as to reveal systems of specific laws which explain and link existing phenomena. The students were free to draw on any aspects, from prehistory to politics and from the arts to philosophy. The only requirement was to examine the wealth of Tel Aviv phenomena as far as possible, and to link the objects and/or events selected by means of some particular law or formula.

The working method was empirical and deductive:

1. Background studies for the planning of Tel Aviv according to conventional spheres of urban studies (i.e. demographic aspects, land use, densities, statutory data, economic data, etc.) and one additional aspect (politics, ideologies, media, (including television and newspapers), light music, publicity, the arts - cinema, literature, painting , etc., were suggested.)

   Sources:- professional and other texts; personal observation, documentation and interviews.

2. Choice of additional aspect for study. As much documentation as possible of Tel Aviv phenomena according to this selection.

3. Examination of all phenomena to find a common denominator, trend, or "rule" explaining their existence.

4. A correlation between the results of (3) and the conventional aspects of broader urban phenomena.

5. Speculation on future changes deriving from (3) and (4).

6. Stages (3)-(5) could include an analogous model .

Thus, the narrative myths of Tel Aviv had to be interpretations of the reality, not opposed to facts but through the discovery of a specific order in the ever changing flux of the metropolis. As in 'Delirious New York', the participants were not restrained by paradigmatic distinctions between the relevant and the irrelevant. They were required to extract Tel Aviv's unique narrative. As with a scientific theory, the narrative had to provide an explanation of the extant, as well as a direction for the prospective.

THE NARRATIVES

Twenty-nine students produced fourteen narratives of Tel Aviv. Of these, seven were created against the background of the climax of the "Intifada" (the Palestinian uprising). The rest were written immediately after the Gulf War.

The narrative "The Secular Town which Suffocated the Sand" (by I. Sobel), reviews the modifications of the Tel Aviv image, which evolved from the naive, popular approach into media and political images, culminating in the "City which never stops" (the slogan of the last municipal elections). During the metamorphosis, an image of "Tel Avivness" was constantly cultivated, exalting the transient and artificial over the natural and historic. Earlier images and values were rejected as nostalgic and were replaced by a variety of "in" celebrations - from restaurants and pubs to art and literature.

Fig. 3. A variety of "in" celebrations.

Tolerance besides lack of persistence, easy acceptance and easy desertion, existence within a maze of changing concepts and realizations all these are the foci of the narrative "Kaleidoscope" (by S.Ben-Shem). This is hardly surprising, for Tel-Aviv is a city of polyglot emigrants and provincial Israelis, each with his or her own ideas and reasons for becoming part of the kaleidoscope of possibilities. (One of the most popular images here is Tel-Aviv / New-York. .

The narrative, "Between Destiny and Fate" (by R. Gerd and E.Zilberman) reveals life like cycles rooted in the dualism "Tel" (denoting the past, archaeology, death), and "Aviv" (meaning "spring" i.e. new growth, budding).

Threatened by its ghosts, including Arab Jaffa , the city on the cliff abandoned by the founders of Tel Aviv, who set out to build the Ahuzat Bayit neighborhood, the city is seeking life, potential, the future. Any phenomenon which might be interpreted as aging or as approaching "natural" death is quickly eliminated. Within each cycle the process of searching and hunting is accelerated and intensified until everything is discarded before it matures. Things die before realization, maintaining an eternal potential. The climax of the process, identified as "birth of a dead embryo", returns the cycle to its beginning.

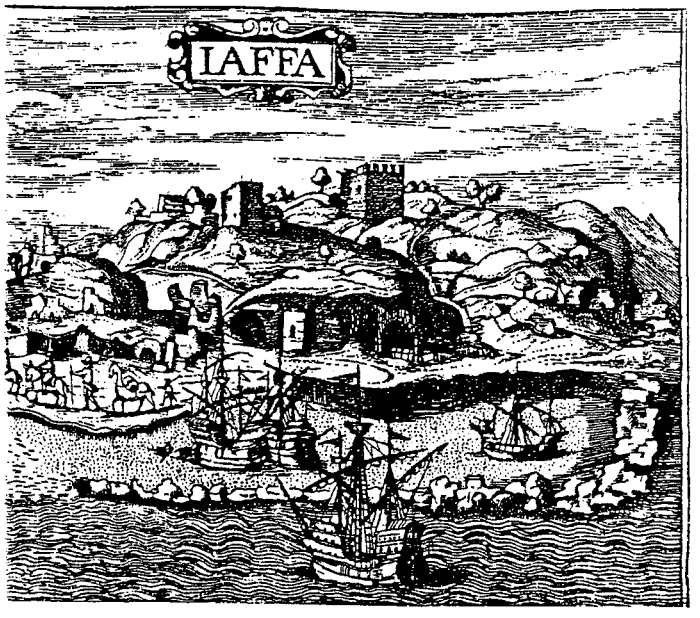

Fig. 4. Arab Jaffa of the 19th century.

Architectural illustrations are the Tel Aviv port, which only functioned for a few months, and the new central bus station, which has never been used at all [11]

The threat of the "Tel" evokes the ambivalent attitudes to the traditional Jewish legacy - i.e. the secular city versus religious tradition, celebration of the present versus the "hope of two thousand years" which is expressed in our national anthem; in other words, an ongoing condition of impermanence and search for fulfillment.

"Searching Tel Aviv" (by A. Meiroz), "Dreams" (by M. Levy) and "Longing" (by H. Lusky and D. Azrieli) , are all narratives which review dreams, ideas and ideals which flourished in the city and were then abandoned.

Seeking and searching occur in art and architecture, in education and ideology. Changing styles and beliefs aim at achieving the local Israeli secular as opposed to the Jewish and sacred, i.e. the essence of "Tel Avivness". "Secular", "place", "plasticity" and "visualization" are opposed to the biblical imperative which forbade the creation of graven images and idols.

Fig. 5. Hollywood inspiration in a 1965 election poster.

"Israeli architecture", "Israeli art", "Israeli theater" - all express a striving towards identity, to be located somewhere between the traditional and the modern, and between the local and the universal.

Two thousand years of longing for the city of Jerusalem, vitiated the capacity to realize, and left the founders totally unable to come to terms with constructing a city on the coast - the basic situation of Tel Aviv.

This is the principle theme in "The Conquest of the Sea" (by O. Halaf and Y. Levy) . Ancient concepts of fear of the ocean and the tradition of the abstract are offered as explanations for Tel-Aviv's orientation away from the sea. All the main arteries run parallel to the coast, none actually lead to the sea. Recent projects for reclamation of the shore at Tel Aviv are interpreted as a conquest, as a victory over the primordial enemy.

Degeneration, change and constant seeking for the still unattained are closely examined in "A Besieged Town" (by S. Tzarfati and A. Rapoport). The narrative examines events in an apocalyptic era.. Pessimistic conclusions about the tenuousness of the present situation are intended to arouse moral accounting in such diverse areas as architecture and politics.

Fig. 6. The poor ecological condition of the Yarkon Stream, Tel-Aviv.

CONCLUSION

The experiments with narratives may be considered from three different points of view: (a) as a way to exploit mental capacities which are, to a certain extent, neglected due to the current domination of scientific thought; (b) as a methodology for a more extensive and profound understanding of urban environments; (c) this method as applied specifically to Tel Aviv.

(a) Regarding enhancement of mental capacities, the central question is why this should be so desirable. Following Cassirer it is my position that renouncing mythical capacity, implies renunciation of a unique mode of rendering the world closer and more meaningful. It is a perspective that preserves the physiognomic aspect of things, as well as our emotional response to them. No other human capacity can offer substitutes or improvements for the mythical capacity, which binds us to life in its most immediate and vital manifestations.

(b) The proposal of narrative as a methodology for urban studies also raises questions, such as : "What sort of understanding is added by this approach?" or "Why can it not be achieved through conventional modes of urban studies?" and "How is this additional understanding incorporated into the urban planning or design process?"

This article suggests that even before formal-physical interpretation, the narrative - myth has a central hermeneutic task of clarifying the existential aspects of living in a particular city at this particular time. The understanding to be achieved thereby is similar to *Verstehen*, a term used by Max Weber to denote understanding from within, by means of empathy, intuition and interpretation, as opposed to knowledge from without, by means of observation and analysis. *Verstehen* is continuous, because the hermeneutic cycles are endless. Therefore, narrative myths are contributions to the Verstehen of urban places, even though there is always room for further understanding and interpretation.

With this general recognition of contextual values in urban design, a process is initiated which brings to mind paradigms and their predetermined and limited concerns[13]. By creating the narrative it is hoped to broaden, implement, and ultimately legitimize new concerns as contextually relevant in urban design. Using a Cassirerean terminology we would say: urban design should lean on all five symbolic forms, and narrative may be regarded as the contribution of the symbolic form 'myth'.

There is no single recommended way to incorporate narrative myth into professional-practical activities. Rather, it is a method emphasizing negative and positive values of a specific urban society and its "ethno-logic" - the structure of reasoning of decision making agents in that urban society[14]. There may be several systems which incorporate the values emphasized by a narrative, just as there may be innumerable systems which incorporate social justice, equality and other values. These may be evaluated, for example, according to their utility. This article, however, is not concerned with the evaluation of urban values and ways to incorporate them, neither in principle nor specifically for Tel Aviv. Hence, it is hardly relevant to look for predetermined means of putting narrative myths into practice.

(c) For all their variety, the notions of impermanence and transitoriness are nonetheless the existential experience that they have in common. These are the two basic values which form the common denominator of the narratives created in the experiments. Tel Aviv has been erected on sand, and as in an archetypal metaphor of moving sand, so it is with the city. It is continuously changing according to specific rules as interpreted by the creators of the narratives. What should be done with such values - is a different issue.

To summarize: A narrative myth provides glimpses at the actuality of a city as interpreted by a specific person at a specific time. The imaginary sum total of all narrative myths is probably the truest description of a city. However, since this sum total is in constant fluctuation, it is beyond grasp by conventionalized methods of learning, understanding and design and planning processes. The reason is that conventionalized methods are based on constancy, generalization, fixedness, order, all that "objectivity" stands for. As opposed to that, narrative myths exploit subjectivity. This however, does not necessarily lead to solipsism, but to an inter-subjective verstehen. It is the author's conviction that also no trodden ways to exploit narratives can be offered, every individual can and should find his/her own way towards authentic interpretation of the city.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1]Norberg-Schulz Christian *Genius Loci* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980)

[2]Cassirer Ernst, *An Essay on Man* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970) p. 90.

[3]ibid. , p. 89.

[4]Schumacher, T.L. *The Danteum* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1985)

[5]Tigerman Stanley. *Stanley Tigerman - Buildings and Projects 1966-1989* Mollman Underhill S., ed. (New-York: Rizzoli, 1989©

[6]Woods Lebeus "Architecture, Consciousness and the Mythos of Time",in *A.A.Files* 7 ®1984©? 3-13Æ

[7]Knights, Clive. "In Defense of Metaphor", in Linzey Michael, ed. *Writing, History, Architecture, Myth - Proceeding of Paper Conference* (Auckland, New Zealand: 1991):.239-254.

[8]Koolhaas Rem, *Delirious New York* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978)

[9]For example: "The White City", exhibition at the Tel-Aviv Museum.. *WHITE CITY Exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum*. Curator: Levin Michael. (Tel Aviv: Museum Publication, 1984, 1986)

[10]Herzl Theodor, *Alt-Neuland* (Hebrew translation: Sokolov Naum, "Tel-Aviv", 1903)

[11]The new central bus station, with its six floors of commercial facilities, finally became operative in 1993, but economists already analyze its failure as a shopping center.

[12]For example: when we experience urban places as giving a sense of "hereness", "enclosing", "friendliness", "dreadfulness" etc.

[13]A prominent example is the Modernist approach, as defined in the Athens Charter. See: Le Corbusier, *The Athens Charter* (Grossman Publishers, 1973)

[14]Cohen Eric and Ben Ari E., "Hard choices: A sociological perspective on value incommensurability", *Human Studies* 16 ®1993©? 267-297Æ

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper is based on a longer version published in the *Journal of Architectural Education. Vol. 49, No. 1*, November 1995.