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# The myth of informal place-making: stitching and unstitching Atarim Square in Tel Aviv

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The metaphor of stitching/unstitching can be applied to the mechanism employed by authorities, professionals and users alike—each for a different purpose and under different circumstances—for appropriating the urban space. It views the urban space as a socio-political arena that involves ongoing negotiation. The metaphor is used in this paper to debate some basic premises of architectural discourse of the everyday. Analysis of Atarim Square on Tel Aviv's shoreline—focusing on three periods: the 1930s, 1960s and the 1990s—reveals ongoing and often simultaneous processes of 'stitching and unstitching'. The key contention here is that formal (official and professional) spatial processes are not necessarily limiting, just as informal processes (personal and communal) are not always liberating, and that both are endemic to the socio-political construct of the everyday.

## **Introduction: everyday and architectural practice interrelationships**

Walking along Ben-Gurion Boulevard towards the shoreline of Tel Aviv, crossing the city streets stretching north-to-south parallel to the shore, one suddenly finds oneself in a deserted urban square. The shops are closed, the display windows are blank, the pavement is broken and the cylindrical dance-club building, once the main attraction of the square, is falling apart (Fig. 1). Is it the architectural design that makes the public eschew this place? Is it avoided because of its appearance? Is it neglected because it no longer caters to peoples' needs and desires? Has it ever catered to them?

Atarim Square seems to have been trapped in the complex interrelationship between everyday needs and how professionals view and produce spaces in

the city. At first glance, Atarim Square could be considered to be an extreme case of the imposition of architectural formality on everyday life. The deserted square and its grandiose architecture emphasise the dichotomy between the formality of architecture and the informality of the everyday. However, examination of the production processes of Atarim Square reveals a different story about urban formality and about how the ongoing processes, planned and unplanned, shape and reshape the space 'top-down', 'bottom-up' and 'sideways'.

Through the study of Atarim Square we argue against the romantic notion that tends to view the users of a place as its makers. We are interested in how places are appropriated, but doubt whether, through their performative activities, the users of a place actually give it shape and form. We question

Figure 1. Atarim Square, view from Ben Gurion Boulevard, 2006. The square is an open space with a commercial centre on the north (right) side of the image, kiosks on the west side, and a club on the south (left) side. (Photograph: Tali Hatuka.)



the current professional concept that everyday life in the city is a resistance against professional modes of operation.<sup>1</sup> Architecture, particularly urban design, is vital for formulating patterns of urban life and experience. We agree that 'architecture is inescapably concrete and it forms the fabric and the setting of everyday life'.<sup>2</sup> Thus, we do not conceive of the everyday as negating the physicality and concreteness of architecture, but we do assert that architecture is not only a means for supporting and maintaining the everyday, but also embodies and constructs that everyday. By analysing Atarim Square, our intention is to encourage discussion of everyday architecture and urbanism by means of the perception of architecture as a material culture embedded in a socio-political context. We see the Square through the interrelated 'production processes' of architectural interventions and everyday practices.

The concept of the everyday has been used in architecture mainly as a reaction to globalisation; an attempt to resist commodification and consumerism. As asserted by Steven Harris, using Henri Lefebvre's words, everyday architecture stands against 'the bureaucracy of controlled consumption'.<sup>3</sup> Margaret

Crawford insists that 'everyday space stands in contrast to the carefully planned, officially designated, and often underused spaces of public use...'.<sup>4</sup> John Kaliski argues that this makes the everyday open to 'the elements that remain elusive: ephemerality, cacophony, multiplicity and simultaneity'.<sup>5</sup> Everyday architecture and urbanism thus oppose utopian production of urban space and the formal tightness involved in making the modern city. While resisting the urban form adopted by hegemonic power,<sup>6</sup> it envisions 'life outside the circle of architecture'.<sup>7</sup> This focus on architecture (with a lower-case 'a') in its broadest sense, sees the city as a cultural landscape, and architecture as the material world that people make and conceive.<sup>8</sup>

We suggest that everyday examination should not be based exclusively on users' perceptions, but must address the interaction, the interrelationship and interdependence between institutional powers and quotidian rituals. Analysis of these reciprocal relationships creates what is defined in this paper as a process of 'stitching and unstitching' that is endemic to urban development; processes of change and re-envisioning the physical environment. This notion of stitching/unstitching with its

socio-political implications challenges the myth of informal place-making or 'looseness'<sup>9</sup> often portrayed as a means of resisting professional modes of operation. It is also a call to view urban production, its formal and informal practices, as an ongoing, interwoven, mutually agreed or consented process of 'mending' the socio-political construct of the everyday. This complicity with the everyday should prevent us from falling into the traps of either demonising the work of architects as a means of controlling environments or of mystifying the role of the users as opponents of order. We also remind ourselves that all actors operate in specific social and political contexts. This acknowledgement, along with the understanding of the dynamic processes of interventions by all actors, will motivate and encourage new ways of engaging with contemporary urbanity.

### **Everyday theory—its limitations**

The concept of the 'everyday' was first developed in anthropology and ethnology, arising from interest in the ordinary 'lived experience', an attempt to understand culture as deriving from common shared values and how the latter are translated into the norms and rules that regulate society.<sup>10</sup> Henri Lefebvre's writings<sup>11</sup> concerning the relationship between the everyday and modernity discuss the ability of the everyday 'spontaneous conscience' to resist the oppressions of daily existence. Michel de Certeau, disregarding the monotonies and tyrannies of daily life, stressed the individual's capacity to manipulate situations and create realms of autonomous action as 'networks of anti-discipline'.<sup>12</sup> Anthony Giddens perceived everyday practice as a

challenge of modern nation/statehood, whereby daily routines of skilled participants construct a liberating social order through originality and creativity.<sup>13</sup> Personal actions thus create cultural and social re-definitions that can effect change.

Theories of the everyday include analysis of local versus global lifestyles focusing on typologies of urban daily life.<sup>14</sup> Tracing day-to-day routines and social interactions in urban environments offers correlations between human activity and technological, physical and social processes. However, this approach also disregards the complexity and multiplicity of the everyday. The non-discriminatory and rather romantic theories of day-to-day practices blur the boundaries between power relationships, arbitrarily classifying the actions of individuals and/or groups as related to social class, ethnicity, age and gender.<sup>15</sup>

Consideration of the everyday as a critical construct has attracted the attention of architects, essentially in reaction to the universality of globalisation, and as an attempt to resist commodification and consumption.<sup>16</sup> They see the everyday as a lived experience, a political struggle against capitalist economy and professional complicity with governments. This resistance, as Harris insists, 'lies at the focus of the quotidian, the repetitive, and the relentlessly ordinary.' Accordingly, the everyday is defined as 'that which remains after elimination of all specialised activities.'<sup>17</sup> This is clearly an attempt to extend the premises of architecture beyond the traditional notions of convenience, strength and beauty,<sup>18</sup> to include spaces that are outside the scope of architecture<sup>19</sup> and to present new professional agendas. This extension calls for

engagement with the temporal, 'the spontaneous event, the enjoyment of diversity and the discovery of the unexpected', defined by Karen Frank and Quentin Stevens as 'looseness'.<sup>20</sup> Obviously, such inclusiveness enriches architecture with spaces not traditionally included in the architectural canon.

However, even this professional interest in the everyday seems to have degenerated into a mere aesthetic celebration of the picturesque. Attempts by architects to celebrate 'ordinary', 'banal' and 'less photogenic' spaces have, in effect, fostered a post-modern search for authenticity, frequently promoting the everyday as a commodity. Avant-garde responses to the everyday have created a useful framework for the exotic 'other'. Even the claim that everyday reality 'on the ground' can confront modernist utopias<sup>21</sup> seems to support professional presentations of architecture as the beautification of elements in space.

This architectural understanding of the concept of everyday does not construe it as one element of a complex economic, social and cultural reality. It is often divorced from political circumstances. In the context of the developing world, the everyday is not considered against the old or new forms of Western dominance so often embedded in local patterns of control. Thus, it disregards the political implications and the intricate ways in which a nation state engages in constructing the everyday.<sup>22</sup> As Ananya Roy argues, informality is not a territory separated from the State, but a practice supported by the State and its apparatuses. Understanding informality thus requires working out how the State operates, both through planning and through the unplanned and the 'unplannable'.<sup>23</sup>

This mode of thinking about the everyday also necessitates seeing it as a state-constructed mechanism that manifests order, land distribution and wealth—all having political implications. In the light of the current preoccupation with planning from below (that has often resulted in lack of attention to the 'top down' mechanisms of the public sector<sup>24</sup>) the everyday deserves reconsideration in order to challenge the prevailing assumptions regarding the means by which the urban environment is manufactured and controlled.

Our intention is to broaden the notion of the everyday, which we view as integral to urban production processes that are monitored by societal norms, but also by the users who maintain or negate these norms. Stitching and unstitching the urban space is how these repetitive social practices are negotiated, both by the authorities and by the city's inhabitants. The premise concerning our investigation of Atarim Square in Tel Aviv is that the everyday derives from understanding spatial evidence within a particular socio-political context. Thus, the everyday results from interaction between the institutional and the quotidian. Our task is to go beyond understanding of the institutional and the quotidian as dialectic forces. We wish to conceptualise these forces by means of terminology that allows us to talk about space, materiality and production while acknowledging their contradictory alliances and rivals.

### **Conceptual framework: stitching and unstitching**

The verb 'to stitch' means to sew or to join together: stitching can unite what had previously been separated, or invoke new configurations of repairing

detached things. Mending has been a core concept of architectural practice throughout history<sup>25</sup> and emphasises the rehabilitation and regeneration processes that are taking place today in cities worldwide. Obviously such processes also include unstitching, by destruction of other, perhaps poorly perceived or barely acknowledged, environments.

'Stitching' and 'unstitching' describe what can be identified and seen on the ground at a particular moment in time. All too often, achieving these processes takes place beyond a site and over a period of time. In other words, stitching/unstitching is a way of looking at the materiality of ordinary life in the urban context as an ongoing process of change and revision. By using the term 'stitch' we suggest considering the relationship between the urban experience and the urbanscape as repeated acts of creation and re-creation of everyday realities. Modifying or disrupting the repeated relationships of the urban experience and the urbanscape redefines the place and its nature. Repetition as a means of creating change is not a new idea. Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner<sup>26</sup> show how, ironically, a repetitive ritual permits reorganisation of physical, cultural and psychological forms. Such are processes of place appropriation by users who, through repeated visits and recurrent activities, make the place their own. In that sense, the stitching process is not merely a single realisation of a place from an abstract plan, but an ongoing process of daily rituals of bodies and materials fighting over the place's identity. Authorities can modify a place through regulations indicating its characteristics and use. But, it is the daily ritual that gives it being, not occasionally or by chance, but regularly.

The stitching/unstitching process negates predetermined, value-based ideas such as tightness<sup>27</sup> and looseness, in which even viewing them as dialectic forces is inadequate.<sup>28</sup> As opposed to such ideas of control and resistance, the concept of stitching/unstitching suggests that urban formal practices are not necessarily limiting, just as informal processes are not always liberating, and that both are part of the contestation of space in particular socio-political contexts. Nor do we imply that the identity of the participants in urban processes is predetermined. The same participants may be involved in both the stitching and the unstitching, depending on the circumstances of space and time.

What are the mechanisms that activate the stitching and the unstitching processes? Influenced by spatial practices that stimulate specific actions, they include representation, use, construction and destruction. They are frequently motivated by conflicting processes and are appropriated by actors who sometimes play contradictory roles. Stitching the urban space by means of representation defines and redefines its image. Often intended to motivate consumption, such stitching is usually not divorced from the geopolitical goals of the State. But representation also works beyond the formal boundaries, for urban users whose everyday activities make the place and its image. This everyday use often creates a tension between the formal place as envisioned by authorities and professionals, and how it is actually utilised and inhabited. However, this is not a binary situation, but a complementary one. As suggested by Robert Venturi, the challenge to formal routines by daily practices is not necessarily chaotic. Rather, it creates an alternative place controlled by a new

form of order.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the production of ordinary places is not necessarily arbitrary. The quotidian is often the outcome of hegemonic ideologies cognisant of the power of daily routines. This state-constructed everyday, ie, the built environment in which the quotidian takes place according to national goals, is an efficient and powerful tool for constructing a sense of place by controlling everyday informal practices. At the same time, use is still the most powerful mechanism for unstitching existing definitions and fostering an alternative use that is more effective both for the place and for its representation.

The construction of urban space is usually established through architecture, which is interested in the construction of a spatial order that is, often, only achieved by destruction. As suggested by David Harvey, destruction has been a useful capitalist mechanism of urban production.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, as current urban realities suggest, violent situations of war and terror have been generators of rebirth and renewal. Urban destruction has contributed to the production of space, in an ongoing mechanism of stitching and unstitching.<sup>31</sup>

### Stitching and unstitching Atarim Square

Atarim Square is situated on the shoreline of Tel Aviv. As with other coastal cities all over the world, the beach of Tel Aviv is a significant and liberated urban space. It offers the city-dweller an escape from day-to-day routines and allows for non-conformity, uninhibited dress codes and sexual permissiveness not tolerated in other parts of the city. The beach is often organised spatially, culturally and climatically, modified for specific rituals

according to the position of the sun and the direction of the wind. Personal belongings such as towels, games and sunshades demarcate territory in this area, and express the politics of the body in space. Thus, on the one hand, the beach is often considered as extra-territorial—a place where the body can temporarily escape socio-spatial limitations.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, this lack of rigidity and freedom of expression also represents the beach's economic potential and its value as property.<sup>33</sup> The contesting forces operating along the urban seashore affect its design, often accelerating the processes of stitching and unstitching so evident in Atarim Square.

### The 1930s: formal and informal development

The site, leased to Tel Aviv's City Council in the early 1930s,<sup>34</sup> became cluttered with shacks and tents erected mainly by Jewish immigrants and refugees from Jaffa, forming what eventually became the Machlul community. As opposed to the institutional effort to tighten spatial criteria for the seashore as a whole, the Machlul community exemplifies the 'stitching' of a place by everyday lived experience.

Tel Aviv's urban development is not directly linked to the sea. Its incremental expansion to the north and east has been due to land availability. When its chaotic spread out of Jaffa was engendered by the Geddes Plan (1927), the sea was regarded as an ecological resource, and the streets were laid out to allow the sea breeze to penetrate the city. However, the Geddes Plan oriented the city to the north-east, which did not take full advantage of its seashore. One reason for this is that the beach was not significant to Zionist ideology, and hence

not considered as an asset for State-building. Indeed, many areas along the beach were allocated to polluting industries, while others became informal spaces for popular leisure activities. This prime resource, ignored by urban developers, became, in the 1920s, a free zone for unregulated activities by residents.

The successful unplanned use of the beach revealed its economic potential. The City Council's attempt to 'set the seashore in order' in the 1930s meant creating a new plan that would more clearly define the division between public and private space.<sup>35</sup> The plan consisted of an elevated promenade to link the city and the beach, and to retain a view of the sea.<sup>36</sup> Drawn up by the City Engineer and funded by the Municipality together with the British Mandate authorities and the local community, the plan transformed the vernacular of the seashore into a controlled public space. In addition to the promenade, it offered demarcated areas for sitting and strolling, dividing the shoreline into parallel linear strips of beach, promenade, street and buildings (hotels, clubs). This 'capitalist' layout allowed relative freedom for developers, but also provided ample public space for the citizens of Tel Aviv. Photographs of the beach in the 1930s and 1940s show lively cafes and clubs.<sup>37</sup> Although they made the area more accessible, the linear strips (ie, beach, promenade, street and buildings) clearly limited public use of the beach.

This 1930s plan did not, however, include the site at the northern end of Tel Aviv's seashore. The land south of the Abdel Nabi Cemetery was owned by the British, and designated for bathing and small kiosks. It eventually became the Machlul community



Figure 2. Machlul: the site leased to Tel Aviv's City Council in the early 1930s became cluttered with shacks and tents erected mainly by Jewish immigrants and refugees from Jaffa, forming what eventually became the Machlul community. (Vili Folander, Tel Aviv Historical Archive.)

(see above), having no formal infrastructure or public services. The Machlul residents, unable to comply financially with the official ordinance that every shack should have a concrete foundation and that each unit should have a chemical lavatory, were considered illegal squatters. As opposed to the institutional effort to tighten spatial criteria, the Machlul community exemplifies how a place is 'stitched together' by the everyday lived experience.

The photograph of the area shows squatters' housing between the hill and the beach, used by residents and visitors (Fig. 2). The beach appears to be a free zone, temporarily occupied by users and their personal belongings. The squatters' form of order did not accord with the hegemonic ideology of the Council or the Geddes Plan. The temporary units were based on the interrelationships between the inhabitants, not on a regulated system. This allowed the residents to define the space dynamically.

It is significant here that the inhabitants' stitching process did not differentiate between private and public. Improvised paths from the squatters' houses to the sea integrated the beach with the



Figure 3. Map of Tel Aviv from 1936 showing the site location at the end of the Keren Kayemet Boulevard, on a grid of detached buildings facing north-south, ending in vernacular wooden structures facing east-west, blocking the view of the sea. (Map: 1. Keren Kayemet Boulevard; 2. Machlul Neighbourhood; 3. Cemetery: Israel National Map Archive.)



neighbourhood. This is clearly evident in a map from 1945 (Fig. 3). The site is located at the end of the Keren Kayemet Boulevard,<sup>38</sup> on a grid of detached buildings facing north-south, ending in vernacular wooden structures facing east-west that block the view of the sea. With no formal architecture along the edge of the boulevard between the beach and the neighbourhood, everyday use has determined the character of this area. We do not suggest that this is a 'liberated' space. Rather, it is defined by cultural codes that dictate their own order. Although there are no formal documents relating to access to the beach through the neighbourhood, one can assume that the spaces between the squatters' homes were semi-private, uninviting.

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 changed the balance of power along the beach. The boundaries of the city were altered after the

annexation of Jaffa and the demolition of the Menshiyeh neighbourhood.<sup>39</sup> From the official spatial-political perspective, the beach defined the western frontier of the city and the State. It was planned as a tourist attraction, intended to promote Tel Aviv as a secular centre in contrast to traditional religious centres, such as Jerusalem, Nazareth and Tiberias. As part of this plan, Jaffa was transformed from a hostile town into an 'Old City', integral to Tel Aviv. The recognition of Tel Aviv-Jaffa as a national asset gave rise to large-scale plans for the beach.<sup>40</sup> Three areas along the shore were selected for development: (1) the Jaffa regeneration plan to the south; (2) a business centre on the ruins of Menshiyeh Village;<sup>41</sup> and (3) a tourist centre to the north (over the Machlul neighbourhood). As opposed to the linear strips of the 1930s, these plans were based on mega-scale urban developments inspired by postwar architectural schemes for urban regeneration.

### The 1960s: place-making and nation-state building

The Machlul community was ousted in the 1960s and replaced by a business and tourist centre—the Atarim Project—focusing on the economic potential of the shoreline. The rationale was Tel Aviv's central location and proximity to the airport. The aim was to invest private capital in a project developed according to a publicly initiated plan,<sup>42</sup> thereby advancing municipal interests along with national goals. To fulfill this aim, the Municipality and the State activated unstitching and re-stitching mechanisms in order to deconstruct the image of the place and its use.

The demolition of the Machlul neighbourhood was the first unstitching action. Supported by the State, its transformation from a peripheral locale inhabited by immigrants into an economically successful seashore development necessitated careful representation. Atarim, a national–municipal company, was established for this purpose.<sup>43</sup> To accelerate development, the Municipality delegated the demolition of the Machlul community to Ezra and Bizaron, a state–municipality company, and entrusted the design of a commercial centre of 25,000 sq. m. to the architect Yaakov Rechter. It was intended to house various tourist services and a permanent exhibition of Israeli export products.<sup>44</sup> The intention was to elevate Atarim Square and commercial buildings over a public parking area and a six–lane motorway paralleling the shoreline (Hayarkon Street). The aim being not just to stitch together the image of the place, but also to make a new topography for the area, redefining the relationship between the beach and the city (Figs 4, 5, 6).

In 1963, the City Council invited Professor Luigi Piccinato to prepare a master plan for the shoreline that would take into consideration all existing projects.<sup>45</sup> Piccinato visited the city and met the architects. His report opposed many of the projects along the shoreline. His plan, modest and sustainable compared to those of the Israeli planners, was to preserve Jaffa Hill and Menshiyeh Bay, thus creating three new focal points along the beach.<sup>46</sup> His argument was that the proposed tourist centre's density was inappropriate for the site.<sup>47</sup> He publicly criticised the suggested parking area and the constructions above it, seeing them as a purely economic speculation.

He believed that Tel Aviv should avoid erecting big concrete blocks, and that residents should participate in the planning process.<sup>48</sup>

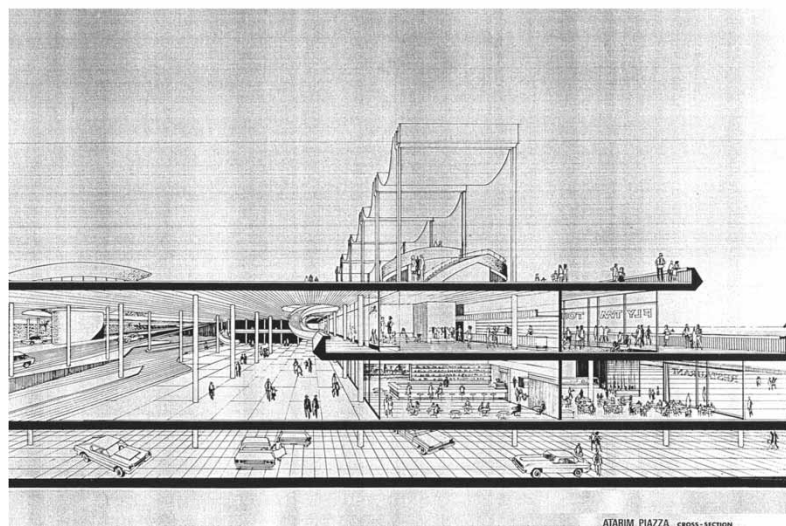
The Mayor and the City Council, asked to intervene in this professional dispute, requested the original architects to submit 'plans that relate to Piccinato's suggestions, but are substantially different.'<sup>49</sup> This resulted in a compromise that reduced the construction area to 18,000 square metres (the final plan, approved in 1965, consisted of 19,400 square metres).<sup>50</sup> Along with this plan, the Atarim Company intended to attract investments for future projects, with 70% supplied by foreign investors,<sup>51</sup> 'to combine public and private interests for the benefit of all.'<sup>52</sup>

Walking along Keren Kayemet Boulevard towards the beach in the late 1960s, past the grid of free–standing buildings, facing north–south, one arrived at an elevated square. The square, the roof of the commercial centre, was an open space with kiosks on the west side, an hotel and commercial centre to the north and a club on the south side. From it, one could descend two floors to the beach by a staircase at the south end. The goal of the square was to regulate movement towards the sea. As Yaacov Rechter, the project's architect, said:

We must ask, what is the quality of a city open to the sea when it is not constructed on a mountain? (ie, when the viewer's gaze is not directed to the sea from a mountaintop)...I reached the conclusion that the only way...when the city is flat, is to create an axis of activity as a sort of spine opening to the sea.<sup>53</sup>

Atarim Square is an obvious stitching act to redefine the beach and city relationship. It is an attempt to

Figure 4. Perspective and section of Atarim Square, as designed by Yaakov Rechter: the section illustrates the planned activities on the ground and underground levels, with the open square on the roof. (Rechter Architects Archive.)



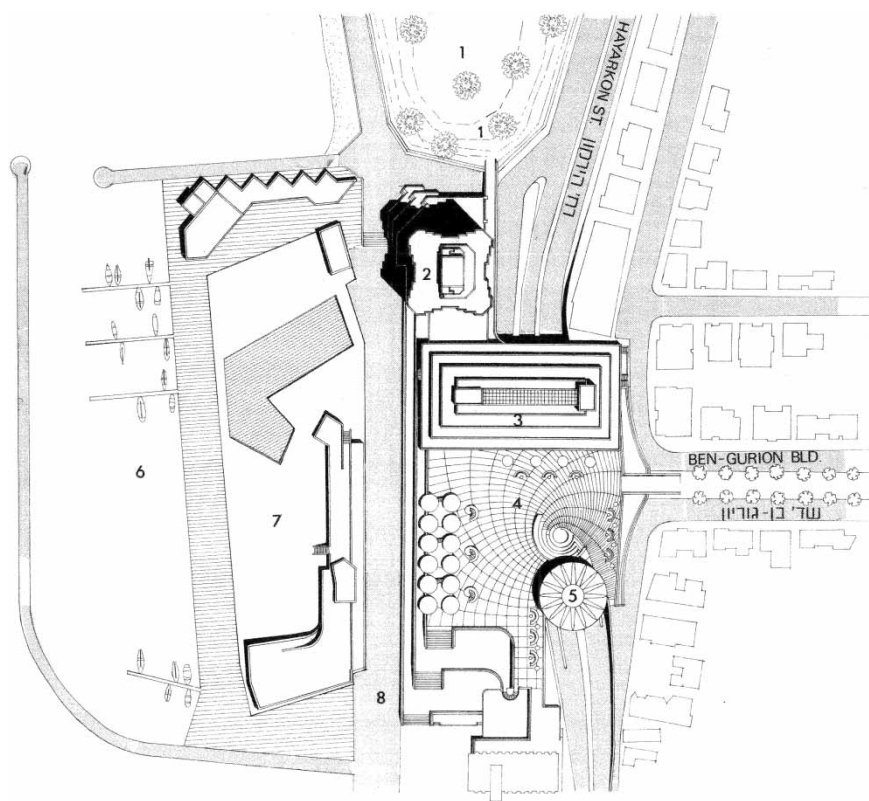


Figure 5. Atarim Square, plan:  
1. Garden; 2. Hotel;  
3. Commercial centre;  
4. Plaza; 5. Dance club building; 6. Marina;  
7. Swimming pool;  
8. Promenade. (Rechter Architects Archive.)

adjust the city to the economic prosperity and political changes of the late 1960s. In terms of architectural style, however, the construction of Atarim Square was also an attempt to 'unstitch' the architectural discourse of Tel Aviv as the *White City*. As an architectural project, it can be aligned with Brutalism, bringing 'truth to materials' by means of a tough approach to Modernism and

its basic principles. Against the prevailing white stucco buildings of International Style architecture in Tel Aviv, the project's exposed concrete surfaces attempt to challenge the language of modernism. But this 'brutal' use of materials is actually meant to overcome a sense of placelessness, and to integrate the project better with its beach surroundings. For Tel Aviv, which celebrates its whiteness as a form

Figure 6. Atarim Square: the main stairs parallel to the sea, connecting the square with the beach.  
(Photograph: Tel Aviv Historical Archive.)



of westernism,<sup>54</sup> Atarim Square is too alien. Paradoxically, the intention to blend in with the sandy beach and the cliffs, makes it absolutely foreign to the *White City*, and totally unacceptable.

Dissociated from its urban context and from the beach and city life, Atarim Square clearly embodied the cooperation between money, state and city; but in spite of some success in property sales, services and rents, the Square never actually supported commerce. This failure is usually attributed to the design—the redefinition between the beach and the Square, between private and public; the hierarchical separation between traffic and pedestrians, and objectification of the space; pedestrians' difficulties in reaching the Square, and their disinclination to use the space; the size of the project, how it cuts the continuity between the city and the shore; the blocked views to the sea, the sealed façades and the restaurants that face the city rather than the ocean.<sup>55</sup>

However, in this stitching process, it was the mediation between the participants that failed. Atarim Square, with its introverted centre, controlled circulation and regulated views, is clearly intended for consumerism. City dwellers found the Square unattractive, and avoided it, which led to its unstitching, proving once again the power of popular dissociation from a place, and the fact that, despite unlimited authoritarian hegemony, personal resistance is effective. In other words, while the State and the Municipality were stitching up the image of the place, the inhabitants of the city were unstitching it.

The result was Atarim Square's decline at the end of the 1970s, immediately after its opening. Currently, as Tel Aviv celebrates its reinvented 'White' image, to which Atarim Square clearly does not belong; the square is undergoing a formal loosening, deliberately created by the authorities' neglect. In a city proudly proclaiming its 1930s' heritage—a bourgeois, Western–Jewish image—the 1960s' attempt to redefine an indigenous Israeliness<sup>56</sup> is clearly perceived as an anomaly. The *White City*, the image of Tel Aviv as a World City of the second millennium, glorifies its 1930s' International style, especially in the midst of the second Palestinian Intifada.<sup>57</sup> Rather than adhering to its Middle Eastern context, Tel Aviv prefers an invented, imported, 'clean' European image.

### The 1990s: formal unstitching

Atarim Square is clearly an unstitched site, sentenced to death (Figs 7, 8, 9). Its owners neglect it and prefer to leave most of its commercial spaces unused. Do they hope to replace it with a more



Figure 7. Atarim Square from the south, 2006, illustrating the six-lane highway, Hayarkon Street below the square, with the collapsing cylindrical dance-club building. (Photograph: Tali Hatuka.)

profitable project? The Schiff family, who owns (under different names) about 45% of the commercial space in the project, has recently acquired an additional 20% of the stores in the Square.<sup>58</sup> However, the place is still mostly unused and continues to crumble.

The Municipality, to which about 47% of the area belongs (including the parking spaces and the upper plaza), does little to improve the situation. Allegations about tax relief given to the Schiff family have been dismissed. But building exceptions, construction without permission, violation of land use regulations and other irregularities may tell a different story. Being responsible for the Square's maintenance and able to compel private owners to make necessary improvements, the Municipality does not seem too eager to save the Square. The previous Mayor, Shlomo Lahat, declared that the Square would be better 'dried out'.<sup>59</sup> His deputy, Dan Darin, envisioned two gigantic hotels in its place. The accelerated decline of the Square is convenient for marginal groups seeking the neglected and unlit spaces of the city. The spaces below the

plaza are mostly deserted, but covered in graffiti, indicating an active presence.

As a result of these unstitching processes, Atarim Square has been transformed into an informal place. Local newspaper articles celebrate its ugliness, its uselessness and its contested architectural identity. Resentment encourages the unstitching process by turning the space into a 'white elephant'. Is this a process of decline or the result of deliberate unstitching? There seems to be no tension or conflict among the various participants, as if the Atarim site is just another place that was created only to be destroyed and rebuilt.<sup>60</sup> The destruction is encouraged by disuse and neglect, confirmed by the developers' and the Municipality's intention to reconstruct the place in accordance with the prevailing urban image. This formal manipulation of unstitching by municipality, developers and users alike, demonstrates the different strategies for redefining social spatial order.

The situation must be understood in the context of other urban and national stitching processes. Since the 1990s, public debate in Israel has been

Figure 8. Atarim Square, interior, 2006: the shops are closed, the display windows are blank, the pavement is broken. (Photograph: Tali Hatuka.)

Figure 9. Atarim Square, blank west façade facing the sea, 2006. (Photograph: Tali Hatuka.)



questioning the Zionist ideologies<sup>61</sup> as privatisation and globalisation increase amidst the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict.<sup>62</sup> Urban development in Tel Aviv during the 1990s was related to the end of the first Palestinian Intifada and the hopes raised by the Oslo accords, and increased immigration, mainly from the former Soviet Union. These events have affected both the image of the city and its urban spaces. In an attempt to re-frame the vision of the city, Tel Aviv has tried to free itself from the State and its spatial order. The emphasis now is on Tel Aviv as a ‘world city’, an urban centre offering quality of life, and services suited to international business and hi-tech communities. Proximity to the airport, ample

leisure areas and expensive beach-front apartments modernised to international standards are among its assets.<sup>63</sup> There is no room for Atarim Square in this re-envisioned urban fabric.

What has caused this pivotal change in urban conceptualisation? One explanation is that many shared values have dissolved as a result of globalisation and the economic power of late capitalism. Having grasped the relationship between architecture and capital production, the Tel Aviv Municipality is attempting to reframe its urban vision,<sup>64</sup> restructuring itself by discarding the national order and its manifestations of the 1960s. Through professional discourse, it searches continuously for economic leverage. UNESCO’s recognition of the *White City* as a world heritage site (2003)<sup>65</sup> is another asset that will promote urban property. Denigration of the Square and the refusal to accept its alternative usage or to practise spontaneous appropriation support the city’s current property agenda of unstitching the place.

### Conclusion

The case of Atarim Square clearly demonstrates how various actors are involved in the stitching and unstitching processes of urban space. In the 1930s, the Municipality constructed a formal promenade along the shore and, at the same time, permitted the informal neighbourhood of Machlul to emerge. Inhabitants were deterred from using the space by the municipality’s stitching in the 1960s. In the 1990s, the Municipality unstitched the same place, and is hoping, through a deliberate policy of neglect, to derive future benefits from current decreases in land values. This interplay between

everyday life and institutional power, between professional and users' interests, demonstrates an ongoing socio-political negotiation over the definition of urban space as a dynamic process of simultaneous stitching and unstitching.

Analysis of the shoreline development in Tel Aviv during the 1930s, the 1960s and the 1990s, reveals the contest between an area of freedom and carefree atmosphere and the economic potential of its property value. This has not changed over the years, but new strategies are being used to alleviate these tensions. For example, the Machlul neighbourhood in the 1930s was as regulated as the Square in the 1960s, differing only in scale and scope of regulation. In the 1930s, regulations applied to the local residents of the area; in the 1960s, they applied to the entire city, ie, to the potential clients of Atarim Square and the beach.

It is evident that only the context of the operation and the actors have changed. The mechanisms are traditional—representation, use, construction and deconstruction, the standard architectural means for advancing changes demanded by economics, political circumstances and social forces, evident in the case of Atarim Square, but universally applicable. Urban representation attempts to create spatial control by constructing a new or upgraded image of a city and/or its parts. Stitching a space by means of representation furthers its re-development by re-defining its image. In today's global reality, urban representation is often geared to motivating consumption, although it is often employed politically, especially in Israel, in order to stitch and simultaneously unstick a national image. Nonetheless, representation also works for

the inhabitants of a place who, through their everyday activities, appropriate the space and thereby affect its image. Whatever new representation is suggested, be it formally or informally, it has always given rise to a parallel process of unstitching, to facilitating an alternative to an existing situation.

Creating the Tel Aviv urban identity along its shoreline is an ongoing process of mending. But even though the shore is traditionally liberating and liberated territory, spatial looseness and informality seem impossible here. Due to the conflicts over its use and representation, Tel Aviv's shoreline is continuously being defined and redefined. The shore, including Atarim Square, is thus the outcome of complex relationships between attempts to accelerate change for the purpose of building a national identity, advancing economic prosperity and, especially on the users' part, to live with all of that. What is interesting here is that even when a place seems as firmly stitched as the Atarim development during the 1960s, it is simultaneously unstitched through its rejection by the public.

Today Atarim Square stands as a witness of that rejection, embodying the process of stitching/unstitching as a socio-political negotiation over spatial urban form and its use. Struggles are inevitable, between individuals and/or groups aspiring to appropriate the urban form for their needs. The question is how to expose these conflicts over a place and its identity in order to motivate social action towards a better and more just city. Analysing the emancipation and enlightenment triggered by these processes exposes the hidden coercion of time-space. It suggests a transition from hegemonic top-down, or bottom-up views, from the spatial looseness or



tightness that all too often positions professionals and users as rivals, to more complex perspectives. If adopted, the concept of stitching and unstitching can make us aware of the tools used by all actors, of the socio-political context and of the physical reality of the resulting urban space. It could push the romantic appreciation of the everyday towards a more political understanding of its meaning. Furthermore, it could include the contribution of architectural practice to understanding the political construct of the everyday, motivating and innovating new ways of stitching and unstitching urbanity.

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