

First Look at the Public Space in Tel Aviv

Foucault states that those in power create the systems of culture in a nation. At first glance, this theory seems to define Tel Aviv. The major intersection between the Shuk Hacaramel and Allenby Street is in the shape of the six point Star of David. The major neighborhood, Neve Sha'an's streets form the eight points of a menorah. In fact immigrant German Jews designed most of the city's architecture in the International style. However, the architecture of the buildings and streets only create the infrastructure of the city's culture. In a true democratic space any individual can have an impact and in a city graffiti can serve to not only allow the poorest citizen to impact their space, it can also serve as a tool to renovate a decaying building and as a way for disenfranchised groups to impact the cities artistic culture.

According to Henri Lefebvre the design of a city, created by large corporations and intellectuals with access to power, creates the conceived space. He argues that lived space, or representational space is the space of symbol making. People create meaning in the space we perceive and those representations serve to not only define the space, but to actually be it. Taken together, the conceived, the lived, and the perceived space formed Lefebvre's definition of the public space. Lefebvre's thoughts and theories contain the implicit idea that the public space and the social space are one and the same, an idea that in recent times has come into question as the social space has expanded past the physical space and can now be accessed in the digital space. In his lecture on the public space Ash Amin reverses these doubts, arguing that the physical space remains a space where all citizens (and non citizens) can interact with each other even if the interaction is brief (Amin, 2006). Don Mitchell argues that public spaces are the last true democratic spaces because of the ability for a democratic space to visually remind people of all income levels, especially the homeless who are usually excluded from most other social interactions (Mitchell, 1995).

Like any city, Tel Aviv has an issue with physical the physical separation of income levels. Rozenholc describes three levels of efforts toward the reversal of concentrated urban poverty areas also known as "ghettos" or bad neighborhoods"(Rozenholc, 2010). All three types of urban renovation mark physical renovation as either the goal, or an aspect of the renovation project. In all three types of renovation physical renovation did little to improve the lifestyle of poverty and local business influence actually did more. When we take away people's ability to choose the area they are allowed to inhabit and then worse, change that area without considering their input we remove their ability to shape their world. If the public space is a social product then when the public space is abducted by the government and large corporations and created by the government, that space ceases to be a public space and becomes a government and corporation space.

It is no coincidence that, globally, these are the areas where graffiti is most prevalent. Graffiti or street art has historically been used as a political and artistic tool of the lower classes. It was first used to fight against the established art culture that condemned street art as scribbles, but grew into a tool used to fight established political and social aspects of the capitalist society (The Last Public Space).

But while graffiti may be the historical tool of the people used to fight against the established culture, certain members of society have a larger effect on the visual public space. A quick glance of the streets in Tel Aviv, reveals the most visible alteration of the public space occurs on balconies. Along the streets I studied, Lewinsky, Allenby, and Rothschild, multiple balconies had constructed gardens, put up flags, even painted the walls. Although the streets are home to different crowds (Lewinsky is in a ghetto neighborhood while Allenby and Rothschild is considered middle to upper class area) they display somewhat similar patterns for reclamation of the physical public space, indicating universality to the methods. However two areas on Rothschild Boulevard show little to no sign of non-corporation change to the area, revealing the limitations of the individual's ability to impact the public space.

Walking down Allenby Street a person is struck first and foremost by the diversity of the shops. As with most of Tel Aviv the buildings on Allenby were created in the International style (see photograph A). However, intersecting streets will have high rise apartments that stand in bright blue contrast to the yellow-brown and fading white of the older buildings (photograph B). The mixture of old and new is also present within buildings. Certain buildings seem to be only partly remodeled with older parts visible above newer shops. Some of these buildings are apartments (photograph C), while others are abandoned (photograph D, photograph E) or in the process of being renovated (photograph F). One abandoned building in particular, 58 Allenby Street used to be a famous café, and before that a hotel. Now in the process of being renovated by Kimmel Eshkomot Architects the abandoned building dons a variety of street art (photograph O, P). The building was not created by the artists that decorated it, nor was it created with the intent to make an artistic space, and yet that is what the area became. Corporations still own the building and in the next couple of years it will reopen as a hotel with clean walls, but in the time that the building takes to open it is in effect owned by the people of Tel Aviv who decorate it as they please. Although not able to reclaim certain spaces (such as those on Rothschild Boulevard which I address later) graffiti artists are able to claim spaces that are not in official use.

Lewinsky Street is famous for its Central Bus Station, an area that itself is famous for stabbings and, recently, a series of rapes. However, this is not written into the area itself where the buildings are bright and where balconies are crowded with objects that give each building a unique complexion (photograph H, photograph G, Photograph I). Both on Allenby and on Lewinsky balconies offer people the opportunity to change the way others see the building (photograph Q, R). However, in both cases this method of individual change of the visual space is limited to those who can afford private property. Therefore there is still a base adherence to the capitalist system. Those in the lower classes and (in Tel Aviv especially)¹ those who have been excluded from private ownership, are deprived of the ability to legally alter the public space. Because they have no ownership rights, the lower classes must resort to public infraction (photograph K). Through graffiti and leaving behind trash, those who do not own property can change the physical space. Although trash is not considered a positive change, certain types of graffiti can serve to beautify an area (photograph J, photograph S). More so seen on Lewinsky Street where companies have no financial incentive to restore buildings. The ability of the property-less to artistically change the decay around them empowers them in two ways. The first is by allowing all individuals to exercise a method of restoration reserved for those with access to costly construction. The second empowers them to change the social space in which they reside by expanding the ability of the property-less to contribute to the artistic culture of their city.

¹ Tel Aviv suffers from a housing crisis and there have been multiple protests in the past years. This housing crisis effects lower income families, immigrants and young people. Basically those who have not yet established themselves in the city's approved space.

Rothschild Boulevard is full of graffiti. Almost every gate in front of every house has at least a sticker or drawing (photograph L). And yet there are two clear areas of Rothschild Blvd. that do not have the smallest ink of graffiti. The first is Habima Square, a public area known for "cultural sites" such as the Habima Theatre, the Fredric R. Mann Auditorium and the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion for Contemporary Art (Welch, 2014). Mainly empty, Habima Square does have one major graffiti mark located on the Habima Theatre door. Besides this obvious tag, there is little public marking (photograph M). The second area with a noticeable lack of graffiti is the business end of Rothschild Boulevard (specifically the Business Tower and 1 Rothschild Boulevard, a luxury apartment building). The plaza outside of 1 Rothschild Boulevard and Habima Square are both technically labeled a public area. However, in practice they do not invite all types of public life. Looking around the parks there are no public notices forbidding people to enter the area and yet even when the square is full of people, it there are no obvious lower income individuals or homeless people (photograph N). Restricted public space is not a new phenomenon and there are numerous theories to describe these observations. One theory argues that the general increase in security culture explains the desire of the homeless to remain outside of a square where buildings seem as though they have security guards and cameras (Furedi, 2007) Another explanation stems from Foucault's arguments on the Heterotopia. Although the spaces themselves are public they are surrounded by concert halls and expensive buildings. These "high culture" institutions are symbols that represent luxuries afforded to certain classes of people. These symbols functions as a description of what the space means and for whom the space is meant. There may not be an overt delineation of who may enter the area, but the symbolic representation of the space holds enough social stamina to effectively prevent certain groups of people from entering the area.

Habima Square and the Business Center stand in stark contrast to the Central Bus Station. Both areas maintain a certain type of person, but where Habima Square is a center for the established upper classes of Tel Aviv, the Central Bus station invites those who cannot afford a car. There is a significantly higher amount of decaying, abandoned buildings and street art around the Central Bus station. The young and the lower classes are at risk of being property less. Through this mechanism, graffiti becomes their main method of changing the conceived space around them. Disenfranchised groups have the ability to impact the perceived space if that space is both physically located in an area they inhabit and if that space does not symbolically impede them from either entering or altering the physical area. Graffiti can restore an area, and can serve as a tool of restoration for a space that has not been claimed, but it is not powerful enough to break the symbolic barrier that prevents all groups of people from inhabiting the same area.



Photograph A: View of apartment buildings from Allenby Street. All buildings made in New industrial style. Newer buildings are not necessarily brand new but have simply been renovated and improved as demolition is not encouraged.



Photograph B: View of Allenby street. International style buildings in foreground and newly made skyscrapers in background. On the balcony of the older building there is a Gay pride flag. Tel Aviv is known for its acceptance of gay pride and encouragement of gay pride festivities.



Photograph C: View of apartment buildings on allenby street. Although shops below the apartment are painted the apartments themselves retain the original color.



Photograph : Corner of Allenby and King George V street. Abandoned building is on the upper floor of a few shops. The building is heavily graffitied.



balcony on Allenby street with graffiti written on side.

Phtograph E: Abandoned building



Photograph F: Side of billboard on Allenby Street. Building is currently buing renovated, This was the only part of the renovation site that had visible graffiti on it



Photograph G: Balcony on Lewinsky street, series of flags and objects fill balcony.



Photograph H: General view of Lewinsky street. International style in foreground and new apartment skyscraper in background.



Photograph I: Lewinsky Street. Clothes Hanging from balcony



Photograph J: Graffiti seen on Lewinsky street. Rather than be used as a tool of infraction, graffiti is used to beautify a building that has begun to fall into disrepair. In effect this serves to renovate the building's exterior while simultaneously contributing to the historical and artistic space of the neighborhood.

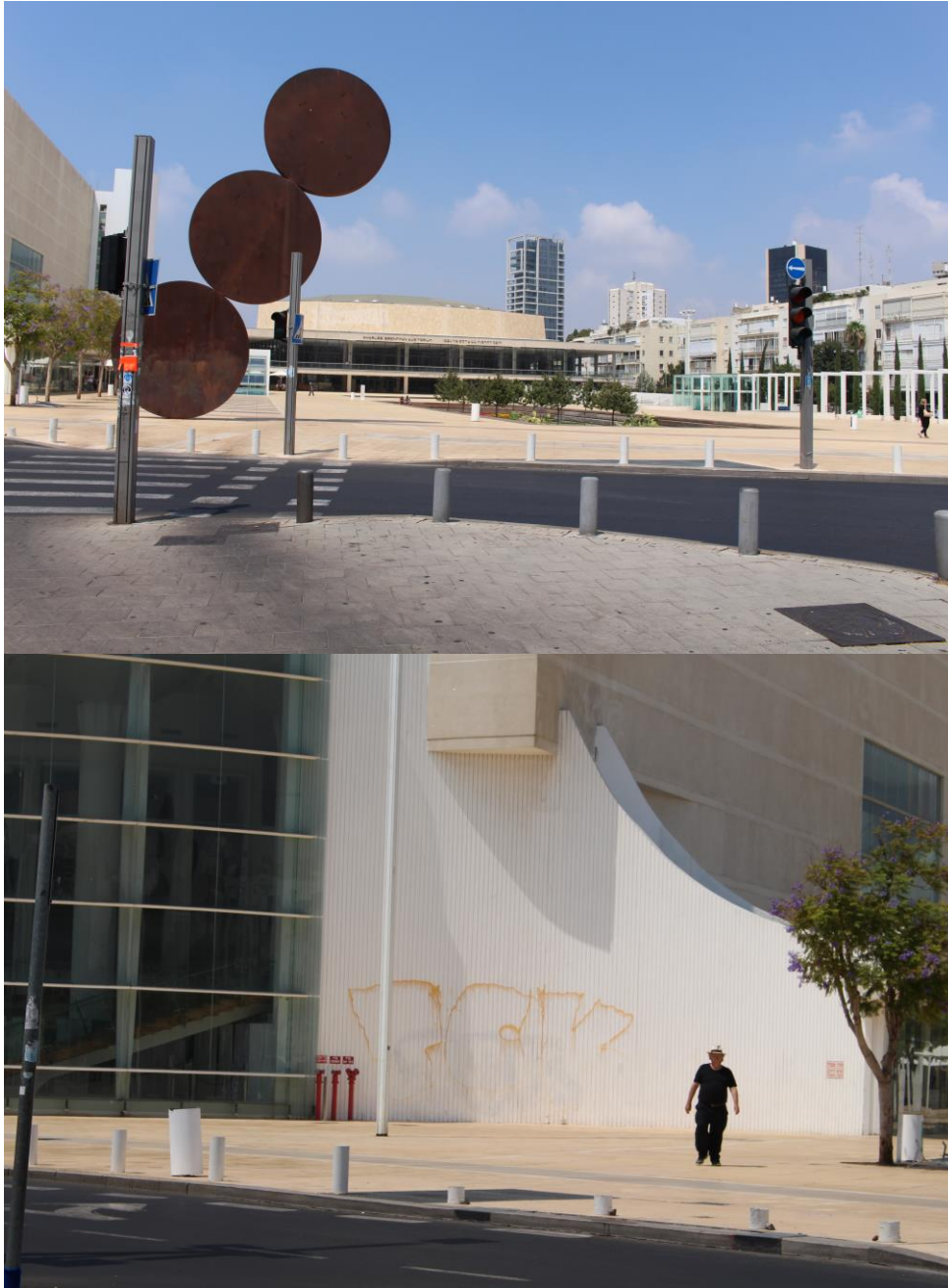


Photograph K: view of alleyway on Lewinsky street

-
-



Photograph L: Rothschild Boulevard Graffiti outside of apartment homes



Photograph M: Photograph of Habima Square and zoom in of only graffiti tag on Habima Theater. Tag reads TCK.



Photograph N: 1 Rothschild Boulevard with only graffiti in square in front of building.



Photograph O: Picture of graffiti on 58 Allenby Street



Photograph P: 58 Allenby Street, Image of full building undergoing construction



Photograph Q: Photograph of Balconies on Allenby Street



Photograph R: Photograph of Balconies on Lewinsky street



Photograph S: Graffiti on Lewinski Street

Work Cited

Mitchell, Don. "The End of Public Space? People's Park, Definitions of the Public, and Democracy." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 85, no. 1 (1995): 108-33.

Amin, Ash. "Collective Culture And Urban Public Space." *City*: 5-24. (2006)
<http://www.publicspace.org/es/texto-biblioteca/eng/b003-collective-culture-and-urban-public-space>

ROZENHOLC, Caroline. "THE NEIGHBORHOOD OF FLORENTIN: A WINDOW TO THE GLOBALIZATION OF TEL AVIV." *Journal of Urban and Regional Analysis*, 2, no. 2 (2010): 81-95.

"The Last Public Space" *The Thistle*, 1, no. 4 June/July (2001)
<http://www.mit.edu/~thistle/v13/4/graffiti.html>

Welch, Adrian. "Tel Aviv Buildings : Architecture." E-architect. March 6, 2014. <http://www.e-architect.co.uk/israel/tel-aviv-buildings>.

"Public Space: Fear Rules: The Expansion of the Empire of the Unknown." Public Space: Fear Rules: The Expansion of the Empire of the Unknown. Accessed September 11, 2014.