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THE LIFE AND (PREVENTABLE) DEATH OF THE KIBBUTZ COMMUNAL LANDSCAPE

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Introduction

Often referred to as a social experiment, the kibbutzim are voluntary collective settlements based on economic equality, communal property and provision for the material and cultural needs of their members. This utopian form of living served, from 1910 until the end of the twentieth century, as a model of absolute sharing in all aspects of life including the physical environment. This article will follow the formal history of the Kibbutzim as a distinct settlement typology that was shaped by the social practices of their members, from their early beginnings as small communal farms, to their evolution into large and growing agro-industrial complexes, until their demise at the end of the 20th century. We conclude this article with the observation that nowadays, the Kibbutzim are experiencing a possible comeback as environmentally and socially sustainable alternative for the American style suburban sub-division, and will illustrate these new tendencies through our own work in different Kibbutzim over the past few years.

A Distinct Typology

Undoubtedly the lack of parcelation and the un-divided space are the most identifiable character of the Kibbutzim and the most important physical aspect that makes it such a unique typology. The lack of private property have lead to the evolution of a settlement in which the space is continuous and fluid where no division of the land exists and at the same time where everything is meticulously calculated according to the best planning practices of its time. When we look at the zoning maps of the Kibbutzim what we see is a stain of one color – Yellow (residential area) within which the community is the sole sovereign. It may seem as if the planning and execution of the Kibbutzim was an organic bottom up development as in many agrarian societies, but this is not the case. The kibbutzim are a strange hybrid between top down modernist planning and an extremely strong communal participation. The result is a series of over 250 repetitions of the same type, acting under the same principles but with not one particular kibbutz identical to any other due to the differences in local traditions, ambitions and needs.

(Insert image 1)

Historical Evolution

It is important to note that the distinct character of the Kibbutzim was a result of a spatial evolution that was closely related to their evolving social practices. We would like to divide this evolution into three periods each with its own spatial manifestations.

Superposition

The beginning of collective settlement in Israel is dated around 1910, with the establishment of the first communal groups (Kvutzot) in the Jordan valley. These groups championed the ideas of small, intimate group of a limited number of people living together full communal life based on manual agricultural labor. The small intimate groups with their emphasis on a closely-knit communal structure planned their settlements accordingly – around an enclosed yard, where the social and economic spheres were superimposed one on top of the other. This imported farm-yard typology dominated the planning of the kibbutzim for over a decade, until new ideas materialized and necessitated new spatial configurations (Bar Or, 2010) (Chyutin, 2010).

(Insert image 2)

The Big and Growing Kibbutz

It was not until 1921 that the first kibbutz (for the difference between the Kibbutz and the Kvutza see Bar Or and Yasky, 2010 p. 188) was established. The main difference in the idea of the Kibbutz was that it rejected the closed-off exclusivity of the intimate group and embraced the idea of the Kibbutz as Agro-Industrial community oriented towards the general society as an alternative to both the backwardness of the agrarian village and the capitalist exploitation of city life (Yasky, 2010)

The ideas of the "Big and growing Kibbutz" have demanded a new type of settlement plan. It was the well known German Jewish architect Richard Kauffmann, who was the first to acknowledge the urban and architectural implications of such collective life style (Kauffmann, 1940). In his 1926 plan for Ein Harod-Tel Yosef we can already see the features that will become characteristic of the kibbutzim, mainly the separation of space into discreet elements, the hierarchy of the plan towards the center etc. It is interesting to note two aspects that were still evident in this plan which will later disappear - one is the strong axuality of the plan, reminder of Kauffmann's formal German origins and his affiliation to the Garden City movement. But more importantly are the traces of land sub-division, which was eliminated altogether from the Kibbutzim soon after.

(Insert image 3)

An All Day Garden

The term "An All Day Garden" was coined by architect Shmuel Bickels (Bickels, 1960) to describe the Kibbutz as it matured and crystallized over five decades of spatial evolution. This term describes the Kibbutz as a unified domestic space distributed throughout a large area and connected via an intricate network of foot paths and landscaped open communal areas. The minimal residential cells were officially called "rooms" to imply to the idea that the kibbutz as a whole was considered the "House". The rest of the domestic functions were distributed in the residential territory with the main "rooms" of this extended house, the dining-hall, auxiliary social functions located in its center.

(Insert image 4)

This spatial configuration made the landscape the most dominant physical aspect of the kibbutz, since the internal landscape was considered an inseparable part of the domestic sphere. It is interesting to note that it wasn't like that from the beginning, The landscape as a design issue started with local initiatives to improve the quality of life in the kibbutzim a tendency called "camp melioration" (Enis and Ben Arav, 1994), It was Richard Kauffmann who started employing landscape architects to design the communal open spaces in the Kibbutzim. Until the late 1940's we can see a strong tendency towards orthogonal grid patterns with the main axis accentuated as boulevards of trees. The in between open areas especially around the central structures were designed as formal gardens in a very traditional way.

(Insert image 5)

(Insert image 6)

Only in the late 1940's with the appearance of a new generation of landscape architects, we can identify a radical shift away from the formalism of the older generation towards a new,

approach. The new configurations used sculptural, topographic manipulations with very subtle moves to recreate the landscape and make the integration between the open and the built elements seem more organic. This shift was connected to a new sensitivity towards the local Israeli landscape conditions which were familiar to the new generation of architects and a rejection of stylistic formalism in favor of a strong belief in the value of sincerity through the use of the barest elements and minimal moves. This soft, landscape urbanism (Yasky, 2012) (Efrat 2010, p. 123) in which the buildings were situated in the landscape as free standing "garden follies" was a much better fit to the social organization of the Kibbutzim and the way the members occupied their domestic territory, and thus, it materialized and matured to become the visual and physical emblem of the Kibbutzim from the 1950's on.

(Insert image 7)

(Insert image 8)

(Insert image 9)

(Insert image 10)

From non-urban to suburban: the privatized Kibbutz.

An economic and demographic crisis which started in the mid-1980s marked the beginning of the end of this serene picture. As a result, the kibbutzim have been undergoing far-reaching changes, gradually eliminating the different aspects of communal life and introducing privatization, which changes their spatial organization dramatically. The first spatial phenomenon that came out of the privatization process is the suburban "expansion neighborhoods". These local versions of the "Levittowns" were developed adjacent to the existing Kibbutzim but totally segregated socially and spatially from them. At the same time, a process called: "ascription of dwellings" started in the older arts of the Kibbutzim, dividing the habitat and privatizing the shared, communal residential zone according to guidelines similar to those of the expansions, introducing vehicular traffic and suburban Mc-mansions which literally erased the existing fluid undivided internal landscape of the Kibbutzim (Yehuda and Bar Kama, 2001).

(Insert image 11)

(Insert image 12)

Landscape as a wakeup call

With the introduction of private landownership, fences started rising. The qualities of the kibbutz, which came to life in its unique open landscape, are gradually disappearing. In fear of losing this landscape, many of the kibbutzim decided to halt plans of suburban developments and re-think. For architects and landscape architects, this is a most significant moment. This is a time to search for a third way, which preserves the basic qualities of the kibbutz space while accepting a more moderate form of privatization.

In this context we were commissioned by a few Kibbutzim to consult and propose new ways of operation. The most mature example of such re-planning is the one we are doing for Revadim, a Kibbutz in the south of Israel which has an existing zoning plan from 2004 for a typical suburban expansion neighborhood and a subdivision of the old kibbutz. As the Kibbutz started implementing this plan many members have understood the threat it imposes on their existing quality of life and commissioned us to come up with an alternative plan that will better integrate the new expansion neighborhood with the existing fabric of the old kibbutz and will preserve its integrity and quality while allowing them to upgrade their homes. The way we have decided to do it focuses on three aspect – the relationship between the private house and the surrounding communal landscape; keeping the vehicular traffic as far out of the center of the residential areas, including the new expansion; and the preservation and re-invigoration of the open-space system as the main spatial organizing principle.

In order to achieve our goals we are required to work at a much higher resolution than the usual, generic planning. Stitching together the pedestrian paths and the landscape continuums demands tailor-made solutions concerning every aspect of the plan- footprint, height, setbacks and orientation of the built mass and its relationship with the surrounding landscape including existing vegetation, surface water drainage and more.

It is our hope that by introducing an alternative to the generic solutions we can convince decision makers, architects and prospect residents that the Kibbutz, despite the radical changes, still proposes a unique opportunity for sustainable residential environment, in contrast to the failing suburban model.

(Insert image 13)

Acknowledgments

The Shlomo Oren-Wienberg collection. Kibbutz Yagur archive (images 1, 5)
Yad Tabenkin archive (image 2)
Beit Shturman archive, Kibbutz Ein Harod Meuchad (image 3)
The Bickels collection at the Ein Harod Museum of Art (image 4)
Itzhak Kutner archive (image 6)
Yahalom-Zur firm archive (images 7, 8)

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List of Attachments

Image 1.jpg

Kibbutz Yagur zoning plan (above) and housing plan; the residential zone, marked yellow, includes not only residential units but also communal functions such as the dining hall, the clinic and the communal landscape.

Image 2.jpg

The first farmyard, Kvutsat Kinneret

Image 3.jpg

The plan of the kibbutzim Ein Harod and Tel Yosef, Richard Kaufmann, 1926

Image 4.jpg

Isometric drawing of Kibutz Ashdot Ya'acov, Shmuel Bickels, 1940s

Image 5.jpg

Plantation plan of Kibutz Gvaram, Shlomo Oren-Wienberg, 1946

Image 6.jpg

Plan of the main garden in Kibutz Negba, Itzhak Kutner, 1945

Image 7.jpg

Plans of paths (above) and vegetation for housing area in Kibbutz Afikim, Lipa Yahalom, 1950

Image 8.jpg

Topographical plan for housing area in Kibbutz Afikim, Lipa Yahalom, 1950

Image 9.jpg

Housing units within the communal landscape in Kvutzat Yavne, 2012

Image 10.jpg

Kibbutz Ein-Gedi is literally a botanical park in which the vegetation dominates the landscape and the buildings are hardly evident, 2010

Image 11.jpg

A master plan for partial privatization of Kibbutz Hukok (left), Year 2000; the "expansion" plots are colored blue and a zoning map of the kibbutz before privatization (right); the dwelling area is one, undivided parcel (colored yellow).

Image 12.jpg

"Expansion neighborhood" in the privatized kibbutz Maayan Zvi, 2012

Image 13.jpg

Landscape and circulation plan for the renewing kibbutz Revadim, KST- Yasky and Partners Architects and Yael Bar-Maor Landscape Architecture Studio, 2013