

Bet Hapoalim (Workers' House) and the Amphitheatre

Galia bar or



Dedication of Bet Hapoalim, 1927. Shoshana and Yirmiyahu Rimon collection, Haifa Municipal Museum

Bet Hapoalim (Workers' House): “New Pertinence”

When Bet Hapoalim was opened in 1927, the Hadar Hacarmel quarter boasted two public buildings: the Technion, at the heart of the public space in the neighborhood's northwestern sector, and Bet Hapoalim, on public land on its eastern flank. The contrast between the two structures was startling. In the former, Alexander Berwald's Technion loomed: a ponderous, imposing stone building decorated with Oriental arches and surrounded by a garden loomed. The latter, Bet Hapoalim—a stucco-faced concrete structure adjacent to a place of gathering that was exposed to the elements, like a bird's nest in the middle of a cityscape.

The architect Yohanan Ratner held Alexander Berwald, his experienced elder colleague, in enormous esteem. Ratner served Berwald as his assistant at the Technion Department of Architecture (which Berwald headed) and partnered with him in designing the nearby Histadrut Kupat Holim building, where the trade-union federation's health-maintenance organization was quartered (dedicated in 1931). Ratner, however, did not believe in reiterating a style from the past, as would happen if he mimicked the Technion building, and ruled out the faddish adoption of

modern gestures. In fact, he spurned stylistic mannerism of every kind and strove for what he called “new pertinence.” The correct spatial and material approach to take toward the surroundings was, he ruled, “localism.” He affirmed abstraction, but only the kind that strives for attentiveness to the surroundings by applying sensitive spatial-technology thinking that responds to needs. Bet Hapoalim’s concrete structure was radical in its day. With its clarity, straight lines, and simplicity, it fit into the surrounding fabric amazingly. Ratner designed the Amphi-Theatre with mathematical calculus, tailoring it to the topography and making its stage visible from everywhere.

Departments of architecture inscribe Ratner as a pioneering, innovative, and influential professional. Although hardly a memory remains of the façade of Bet Hapoalim, the building has a constitutive place in modern Israeli architecture.

Just as Berwald and Ratner are separate but complementary, so were the institutional buildings that they designed. The mating of Bet Hapoalim and the Technion spurred growth in the neighborhood and throughout Haifa. Here the question of the source of Hadar Hacarmel’s vitality finds its answer. Three focal public locations rest at the base of the plan for the neighborhood (produced by Richard Kauffmann pursuant to a memorandum by the Scots town planner Patrick Geddes). Apart from the two buildings mentioned thus far, the public space of Benjamin Park and Bet Ha’am deserves mention. Each of these three public places in Hadar Hacarmel has its own character and meaning. It was the cooperative web that took shape among these institutions, however—combined with a city center comprised of commerce,

offices, and public buildings—that poured effervescent life into the neighborhood and made its reputation.

The pulsating heart of Red Haifa was the complex of Bet Hapoalim, the Amphi-Theatre, and the Ora Cinema—the last-mentioned dedicated by the Haifa Labor Council in 1935. Included in Bet Hapoalim, among other facilities, was the Betenu hall, where people gathered ahead of performances or public gatherings, a kindergarten for working mothers, a workers' kitchen, the Borochov workers' library, a reading room, a labor exchange, and offices of trade unions. The Kupat Holim and a dental clinic were set up nearby.

Construction of Bet Hapoalim



Construction of Bet Hapoalim, the Nachman Syrkin Workers' House, 1926. Courtesy Solel Boneh Archive

It was in 1925 that Haifa first celebrated May Day. Two years later, a crowd gathered for this purpose for the first time at Bet Hapoalim, which was still under construction. Those years, which saw the construction and dedication of Bet Hapoalim and the Amphi-Theatre, were the years of social and economic crisis that typified the Fourth Aliya. Many despaired and left the country, e.g., a large group of members of the Labor Brigade that headed

surreptitiously to Russia. In Haifa, unemployment was so bad that about one-third of all workers, including several leaders of the city's labor movement, left town on this account.

The decision to build Bet Hapoalim and the Amphi-Theatre was made by the Hadar Hacarmel committee several years earlier and the land for the project was set aside on May 1, 1923.¹ In view of the escalating crisis, construction was expedited on the rationale that the jobless needed the work and that the power of “together,” reflected in the construction of a building that would be “Our Home” (in Hebrew: Betenu), would create something to identify with. Bet Hapoalim and the Amphi-Theatre kept their promise. They became institutions in the deepest sense of the word—places of encounter and focus for all forms of civic activity, transcending the bureaucratic context of party affiliation by far.

Work on the building did not stop after the dedication; both the Amphi-Theatre and Bet Hapoalim saw continual improvements in ensuing years. In 1929, wooden seats were affixed to the stone benches. In 1931, a machinery room was set up on the ground floor and the Amphi-Theatre, which entered the cinema era—first with silent films and then with sound—was rented out to its management company for half of the week. Scores of posters, writings, documents, and photos attest to the activities that went on there: “Hehaluts Street is the living artery of the New City,” a journalist wrote. “It’s a pleasure to step through the gates [of Bet Hapoalim], which is “truly a center for the public around it.” In other cities, he continued, workers do not visit their labor council when

¹ To finance the project, the workers held a week of festivities on the Technion grounds. Architect Berwald submitted a proposal for a massive structure connected by a bridge over Hehaluts Street. City Hall rejected his proposal and adopted Ratner’s modest alternative instead. Construction was completed in 1926 and the Haifa Labor Council, headquartered on Allenby Street until then, moved into the new edifice on April 1, 1927.

jobs are scarce. “[But] that’s not how it is in Haifa—There’s something that attracts people to this place” even in the cold of winter, “[when] the movie projector doesn’t move.” [...] “The building is very successful” and the active institutions—the library, the reading room (set up in the waiting area), the Labor Youth club, and the kindergarten for working mothers’ children—are praiseworthy (Yitzhak Yatsiv, “To the Flank of [Mt.] Carmel,” *Davar*, February 8, 1932). By 1934, a third floor and balconies connecting to the exterior were added to the building. A 1936 photo shows Ratner’s building at its loveliest, before a fourth floor and an entrance colonnade floor were installed (Architect S. Dori, 1949) and before a fifth floor was clapped on and its façade was altered unrecognizably to reconcile it with that of the Haifa Labor Council building (early 1950s).



Bet Hapoalim, 1936. Photo: Fernbach and Fuchs, courtesy Solel Boneh

Experiencing the era: The workers’ kitchen and sundry activities at Bet Hapoalim

By means of contemporary photos and texts, we can experience something of the spirit and realia of the time. The Bet Hapoalim workers’ kitchen, inaugurated in November 1934, was described as “the country’s fanciest restaurant”—a spacious, airy, and well-lit venue that boasted electric elevators, walk-in refrigerators, and

swanky heating fixtures. The lavishly equipped workers' club and loan fund were about to open just then. "The veteran comrades in this city, who still remember the kitchen in the suffocating confines of a narrow Arab house, and the loan fund wedged into a corner of the Haifa Labor Council's apartment, greeted the building with tears of joy in their eyes and the *shehehiyanu* blessing [on their lips]" ("Dedication of the Workers' Kitchen in Haifa," *Davar*, November 14, 1934).

Thirteen years later, Yehuda Amichai described a magic moment at the kitchen (November 9, 1947)²:

At 3:00 p.m., I walked over to the workers' kitchen. (...) Suddenly the sun burst through the clouds, casting an abundance of light over each table. Hairs turned golden, eyeglasses glittered, eyes flashed, and the sky was dark apart from the slot of azure through which the sun protruded. Suddenly, almost everyone fell silent. Some stopped eating; others slowed the pace of their eating distractedly. The sun. the sun.

² Yehuda Amichai, Letter no. 32, November 9, 1947, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Archive. The letter was referred to me through the generosity of Nili Scharf Gold, who discovered a bundle of Amichai's letters dating to 1947–1948. The story of her discovery is told in her book, *Yehuda Amichai, Tsmihato shel Meshorer* (And the longings are closed inside me: Yehuda Amichai, the growth of a poet) (Jerusalem: Mineged, 2019).



Haifa workers' kitchen, 1930s. Courtesy Haifa Historical Association



At the workers' kitchen, 1930s. Unknown photographer. Courtesy Haifa Historical Association

Having a meal at the workers' kitchen was part of the daily routine of many Haifa-ites, women and men alike. The facility surfaced in interviews as a childhood reminiscence that penetrated the senses and the soul, accompanied by the presence of parents who worked near Bet Hapoalim and tied into additional activity at the club or watching a film at the Amphi-Theatre (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFKXVKhILs0>). Bet Hapoalim had a significance that exceeded the sum of its parts. Its matrix of conference rooms, non-bureaucratic activities, and its dining and cultural venues suggested a potential that left imprints. By nourishing its visitors, the workers' kitchen allowed cultural events

that could not be offered elsewhere to take place. As a case in point, the kitchen hosted an annual Passover seder for soldiers and recently arrived immigrant families. The person behind the idea was the director of the Culture Department of the Haifa Labor Council, Nahman Tamir,³ whose inaugural seder, in 1946, accommodated some 250 celebrants. In an undated press clipping in our archive, the Passover meal, prepared by and served at the workers' kitchen, "met all the rules and regulations, and the matzo balls were just like those at father's home." A special *haggada* (seder text) was prepared for the event and two members of the Habimah Theatre joined up to read from "the words of the elders and the more recent about freedom and the struggle to attain it."⁴



Passover seder, 1940s. Nahman Mirsky-Tamir archive.



Passover seder for newly arrived immigrants, year not noted. Nahmias archive.

³ Nahman-Numa Tamir-Mirsky (b. 1913, Pinsk, d. 1999, Jerusalem) immigrated to Mandate Palestine in 1934 and headed the Culture Department of the Haifa Labor Council from 1942 to 1949.

⁴ See also Eli Nahmias' archive: <http://www.eli2006.co.il/index.htm>



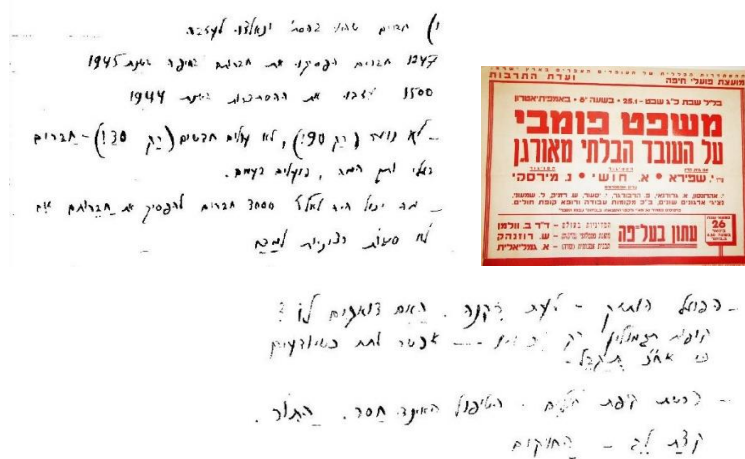
Nahman Mirsky addresses an audience, c. 1949. Nahman Mirsky-

Tamir archive.

Every society has the right repertoire of social activities for its time, and Red Haifa pulsed with a ramified assortment of activities including the integrated use of the urban space and the Amphi-Theatre for parades, dancing, and more. Writings, photos, and dozens of posters from Nahman Tamir's archive attest to the complexity of the cultural activity that also managed, in its way, to express criticism—for example, through the performative medium of the public trial.⁵ One of the posters in the archive documents a public trial that took place at the Amphi-Theatre at 8:00 p.m. on January 25, 1946, on the topic of "The Unorganized Worker." Abba Khoushy played the prosecutor, Nahman Tamir the defense counsel, members of trade unions as witnesses, and an attorney as president of the court. The trial exposed to the public to a rift and a trenchant struggle at the Histadrut in Haifa after World War II and gave Tamir an opportunity to rationalize the defense of non-unionized labor (against which the Histadrut inveighed) in various ways. In a draft that he prepared ahead of the trial, Tamir presented troubling data and described problematic aspects of actions by Histadrut representatives in Haifa, which, he thought,

According to Prof. David Defries, the public-trial tradition was invoked more in Haifa than in any other urban center and the topics chosen reflected preferences in the local political language. E-mail message to author, December 20, 2018. The matter needs further research.

deserved scrutiny. The theatrical setting of the dramatized trial allowed something that was repressed, that could not be developed directly in public, to be viewed in a controlled manner.



Tamir’s archive makes its public debut at the “Social Bauhaus” exhibition at an installation crafted by his granddaughter, the artist Orna Oren-Izraeli, “Reading Party.” In the installation, set up at the home of the Haifa Labor Council, where a Hadar Hacarmel cooperative group is active, the archive serves the artist as the point of departure for a contemporary reading of textual and visual material. Oren-Izraeli chooses to co-opt demographically diverse women and men from in the area of Syrkin and Hehaluts Streets into a reading of *Ushpizin*.

Closing the Open Space and Building the Home of the Haifa Labor Council

The public trial—set for 8:00 p.m. in January 1946— could not have taken place if the Amphi-Theatre had not been roofed. In 1942, it became a full-fledged movie theatre. Although this novelty

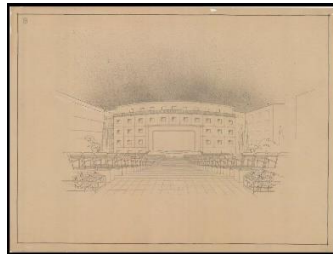
dimmed its splendor as an open space in a local landscape, it gave the venue broader potential for action. It happened due to the need to impose blackouts. Namely, the flickers that split the air when films were shown at the open Amphi-Theatre endangered the population, making roofing an urgent necessity. With building materials (mainly steel) in short supply, early plans by the architect Abraham Gerstenfeld⁶ for a temporary building using metal latticework elements were set aside. Also rejected, due to the threat of firebombing, was the inexpensive alternative of a wooden structure covered with rolled asbestos. Memories of the Ora Cinema fire were still fresh. The proposal that won the day included the construction of a skeleton of reinforced-concrete frames that would not be connected to the existing building—thus not burdening it with additional weight—and roofing of latticework strips.

The roofing of the Amphi-Theatre seems to have changed the perception of expansion plans for the Haifa Labor Council building. In 1938, the world war yet some time away, the Council decided to put up another building, one that would link the Kupat Holim premises—which would be expanded parallel to Syrkin Street—with the other side of the plot, where the Labor Youth movement had its rudimentary home. It was the Council's wish to house in this structure, in addition to the expanded Kupat Holim, the offices of the Tax Bureau and the Labor Youth clubhouse.

In early April, a contest for the architect of the facility was announced (“Expanding the Histadrut House,” *Davar*, April 27, 1938). Although the competition evidently had to be called off due

⁶ The architect Avraham Gerstenfeld, born in Galicia, did his studies in Vienna and practiced in Lwów. He immigrated to Mandate Palestine in 1936 and opened an office at 29 Balfour Street in Haifa. He designed multiple buildings in Haifa in 1941–1956.

to the dire situation at the time, Munio Gitai Weinräub's plan for the expansion appears to have been submitted under its auspices. The building that he proposed would also serve as the Amphi-Theatre's screen.



Munio Gitai Weinräub's and Alfred Mansfeld's Bet Hapoalim expansion plan, 1938.

In 1946, after the war ended, the Haifa Labor Council continued to plan the expansion of its headquarters. The architect Eugen Stolzer, then busy renovating the Ora Cinema (designed by the architect Oskar Kaufmann), submitted a detailed plan for this purpose. It rounded the Hehaluts Street façade to match the bend in the street and left the original Amphi-Theatre unchanged (as it would remain for years to come).

Stolzer's plan also included the construction of a bridge from Herzl Street to the building on Hehaluts Street—an idea that had surfaced earlier in Berwald's plan for Bet Hapoalim (plan not available).

Stolzer's scheme wasn't carried out for unclear reasons. The floors above the cinema were planned and built by the architects Munio Gitai Weinräub and Alfred Mansfeld. The building was arch-shaped and had staircases at its extremes that were linked by a hallway lined with offices.



Hallway at Haifa Labor Council House. Nahmias archive.

The building was dedicated in 1950 and again in 1952. Also designed and built by Weinraub and Mansfeld was a pedestrian bridge over Hehaluts Street, connecting the events hall at the Labor Council building with Herzl Street. The bridge boasted the architectural distinction of an innovative design with no supports, two concrete arches, and a steel balustrade.

Afterword

In 1982, the Amphi-Theatre Cinema was leased to Pesel, Ltd. (the operator) for a twenty-month term. It was shut down five years later; the Ora Cinema, leased to the same firm, met the same fate three years afterward.

For nearly ten years, the Amphi-Theatre remained shuttered and crumbling, the lessee refusing to hand it back to its owner, the Histadrut.

On October 4, 1996, the Mayor of Haifa and the chair of the Histadrut met and agreed to turn the Amphi-Theatre Cinema into a parking lot.

On December 9, 1996, the Municipal Inspectorate declared the building hazardous. The next day, the Histadrut and Pesel received a summary demolition / renovation order.

A year later, the Histadrut sued Pesel for having failed to make restitution. The court found for the plaintiff. The trial delayed the demolition, but in February 1998 the Municipality of Haifa sued the Histadrut for its failure to demolish the structure. On May 20, 1998, the wreckers showed up, the Amphi-Theatre went down, the slope was leveled, and the parking lot came into being. No preservation

file exists; also absent is detailed documentation of any of the buildings described here.



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