

The Pink Sanctuary Comes to Life

Galia bar or

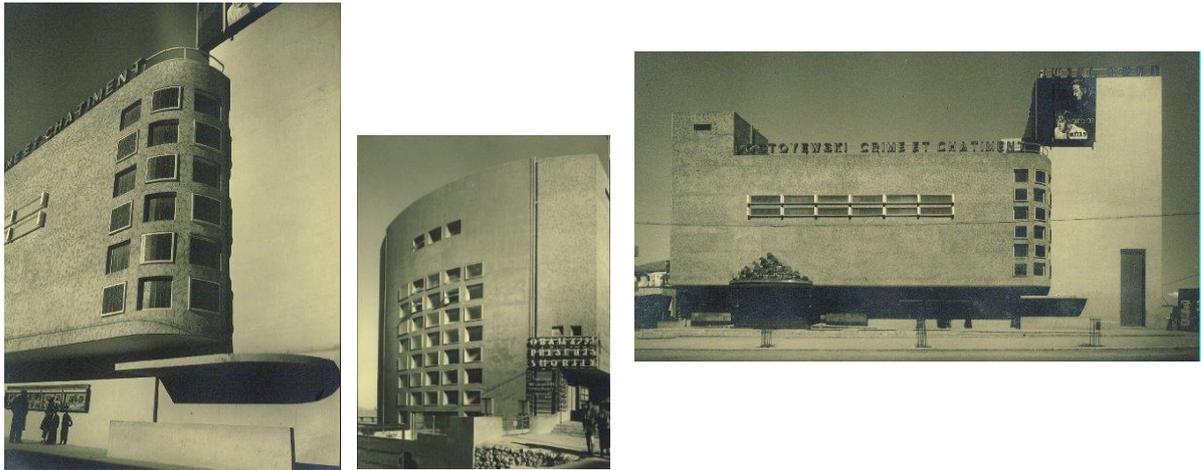
To passersby on Herzl St., the pink structure on the corner looks like just another half-abandoned building that's got nothing inside to search for. Well, they're in for a surprise. "Social Bauhaus" is bringing the place back to life for three days by opening a side gate to a staircase that leads up to the last remaining part the magnificent balcony hall of what was once the Ora Cinema. One can imagine this part of the route as it looked when the theatre/cinema building was dedicated almost ninety years ago; it was also documented in historical photographs (courtesy Yael and Yaron Granot). Watch the ascending stairs converge, some dressed in red mosaic as they lead to the balcony, and others in green as they pivot toward the spacious hall. Although the lavish approach to the Ora Cinema has become a toy shop, you can still identify the ceiling as it sprawls over the wall like a gigantic elastic cap. At the rear you'll find the glass light-admitting ceiling and remnants of what was once a snack bar, now paved with colorful ceramics.



Here's the Ora Cinema/Theatre in its full grandeur! In the background, festooned in Latin characters, the screening of the first film, *Crime and*

Punishment, is heralded. The balcony area that's been opened up for Social Bauhaus is at the top row of the windows on the protruding northwestern façade.

Although the black-and-white photography obscures the color of the building's walls, it is indeed the original paint, as the preservation expert Walid Karkabi tested and confirmed.

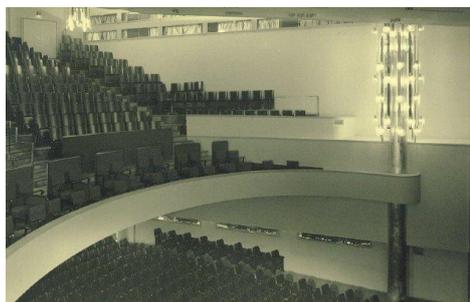


Yitzhak Kalter, a photographer who studied architecture in Haifa, was invited to photograph the building ahead of its dedication on December 23, 1935. Fortunately, the high-quality photos that he took were left in a forgotten loft at the Hadar and Rami Ron Architects' House and were discovered just as Yaron Granot was preparing the documentation file. Left to the imagination is the blast of the gong that signaled the opening of the event, the dimming of lights on both sides of the hall, and the purple velvet curtain drawn aside left and right to reveal the depth and the immense height of the stage. No one seemed to miss the khaki in the color scheme; the normative style was well received by the owner of the building, the Labor Movement in Mandate-era Red Haifa, which commissioned the work. Abba Khoushy, representing the Labor Movement, expressed his gratitude to those who contributed to the project, "from the simple laborer up to the artist, the author of the plan, Professor Kaufmann." The Hapoel Orchestra played, the workers' choir sang, and the audience in the hall cheered in its 1,100 seats for the Haohel Theatre actress, Leah Deganit, for "her oratory and her explanation" of Jacob Orland's "The Roofers" and for Leah Goldberg's "New Hora," with music by Verdina Shlonsky.

Truth to tell, the architect Oskar Kaufmann displayed modernistic restraint in the case at hand, relative to the much more regal theaters that he had designed in the capitals of Europe. His early structures, such as the Neue Stadttheater (1907) and the Volksbühne in Berlin (1913), seem to flicker from a world of legend.



The Ora hall bears a visible resemblance to Kaufmann's Renaissance Theatre in Berlin (1926). The beauty of the clean sweep of Ora's balcony railing compensates for the lack of the breathtaking artistry that bedecked the Berlin edifice. Indeed, it is the cleanliness of the International Style, disseminated by architects who reached Mandate Palestine in the mass immigration era, that made the wondrous miracle possible. With cheap materials and under difficult conditions, they created something truly new—simple and reductive, malleable, and inspiring.



Oskar Kaufmann and his veteran partner Eugen Stolzer built this structure as the Habima Theatre in Tel Aviv was going up. Both architects had been born in Hungary and finished their professional training in Germany (Karlsruhe and Munich, respectively); both emigrated to Mandate Palestine when the Nazis acceded to power. Kaufmann, twenty years Stolzer's senior (and already past

sixty when he reached the country), left Palestine in 1939 en route to Britain but got stuck in Europe and was unable to return. After the war, he enjoyed a rebirth in Hungary, where he practiced his craft until his death in 1956. Stolzer married the architect Yehudit Segall, who at an early stage joined his office; together they designed important buildings in Haifa and all over the country.

Here our story returns to the efflorescence of the Ora Cinema, as its managers wished upon it in their dedicatory benediction. May the structure, they intoned, “disseminate the culture of spirit and the psyche,” adding, “Our joint efforts made it possible to put up this building, the loveliest in the heart of Hadar Hacarmel, on a desolate plot that only a year ago was an obstruction to all passersby” (December 2, 1935, Lavon Institute, 1926–1931).

The movie theater indeed flourished. In 1940, however, as though nothing has changed since then, tensions in Red Haifa between ultra-Orthodox and secular Jews surged. The flaring tempers focused on two things: public bus service on the Sabbath and Sabbath desecration at the Ora Cinema, which, although privately owned, had been “built on Jewish National Fund land” (*Hatzofe*, December 26, 1940).

A year later, a disastrous fire cut the Ora Cinema down in its prime. At 2:00 a.m. on November 26, 1941, a blaze broke out in the auditorium. By the time it was extinguished several hours later, it had destroyed the performance hall and grievously damaged the rest of the building. Police opened an investigation.

After lying derelict for six years, the structure was rededicated on November 27, 1947. “In its beauty and its fine appurtenances,” a journalist cheered, “it surpasses the Ora Cinema of yore.” Said another: “Along with the abundant taste invested in it (by the architect, Stolzer, and the engineer, Y. Neumann), it has been modernized in its stage instrumentation and facilities and its modern projection equipment, imported from the United States.” Expressing the zeitgeist, it was emphasized that all the rest was locally made: the rubber carpeting, the meticulously crafted furniture, and all the accessories (*Hamashkif*, November 27, 1947). From then on, a gigantic sixteen-spotlight chandelier starred in the hall; dangling the ceiling, it was reminiscent of the

fixture at the Renaissance Theatre in Berlin, which Stolzer had designed in conjunction with Kaufmann. The impressive chandelier, which by dimming its lights signified the opening shot of the film being shown, remains engraved in the memory of anyone who experienced events at the Ora Cinema. The only change in the building's façade was the addition of a colonnaded entrance on the side facing Herzl Street.

The renovated Ora Cinema became the throbbing heart of Red Haifa, its schedule packed with films, theatre plays, lectures, and events, co-opting the Workers' House and the Amphi-Theatre in so doing. Much effort was expended on keeping it well maintained. It seems that even by obtaining a ruling from the Histadrut tribunal, the architect Munio Gitai Weinräub thwarted the tenants' initiative to place wall paintings in the auditorium (Ingersoll, *Munio Gitai-Weinräub*, 2009, p. 83).

In the 1980s, dozens of movie houses in Haifa (including fourteen in Hadar alone) began to shut down one after another. In 1986, it was reported that the Ora Cinema, which at the Mayor's behest had not operated on Sabbath eves until then, joined five other movie theaters in offering Friday night screenings (*Ma'ariv*, June 12, 1986). However, it was not only the worldwide shift in the perception of cinema houses that doomed the amazing concentration of cinemas in Hadar. The Hadar neighborhood itself collapsed. Its passel of judicial and governmental institutions was transferred to Wadi Salib; the ascendancy of malls dried up its businesses and took away local and national public traffic. Hadar was gradually abandoned and lost its place among City Hall's priorities.

The story of the Ora Cinema, however, did not end when the institution closed its doors in 1990. The company that rented it refused to return it to its owner, the Histadrut; similarly it held onto Ora's elder sibling, the Amphi-Theater (which had gone out of business three years earlier). As we know, the wheels of justice grind at their own pace. Thus, all that time the tenant continued to retain the abandoned buildings and abetted their growing decrepitude. In 2003, the Supreme Court ordered the restitution of the buildings to the Histadrut. The derelict Ora had been sold off a year earlier.

In an interview with the coordinator of the Council for Preservation in the Northern District, the movie-theatre scholar David Schalit tried to understand how the Ora had been left off the list of structures for preservation and added, “She [the Preservation coordinator] finds it hard to explain.” Unsurprisingly, due to this puzzling preservation policy, the district zoning board authorized the rezoning of the Ora and the construction of a commercial center in its place (David Schalit, *Globes*, September 19, 2001).

In a preservation survey commissioned by the new ownership, the architect Yaron Granot stressed the importance and architectural values of the building. (The architects Danny Tatsa and Tzvika Koren from Y.Y. Granot Architects participated in the survey.) Pursuant to this, the Haifa Municipal Preservation Committee demanded that the building be added to the preservation list and that proposed modifications that would make it fit for commercial needs be approved. In her talk with Schalit, the coordinator of the Northern District Preservation Committee noted that the committee’s two decisions, which “contradicted each other,” were symptomatic of its action at large and its blindness to the cause of preservation in Haifa. Those who persuaded the developers to preserve the façade of the building, Schalit notes, were the new owner’s architects (from the Granot office). However, the conclusions in regard to the interior of the building remain open in accordance with uses, because the structure did not appear on the preservation list at the time.

The outer appearance of the building has been preserved, as have the entrance lobby and the staircases, which are used today as a toy shop.

Did this process have to happen, and at what points in time? What process might have placed matters on a different course, and what can one learn from the past in regard to the future?

