

Original article

Silicatescape — preserving building materials in the old urban center landscape: The case of the silicate brick and urban planning in Tel Aviv-Jaffa

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Abstract

In November 20th 2007 Tel Aviv-Jaffa Municipality confirmed its list of buildings earmarked for conservation. The confirmation was related only to Tel Aviv cultural heritage, the city that was founded in 1909, along the Mediterranean seashore, next to old Jaffa. The list was published 4 years after part of the old urban center of Tel Aviv was nominated as World Heritage Site for its architectural uniqueness (Tel Aviv the White City). The list and the nomination were focused on architectural styles, which are based on building material, the silicate brick, used in Israel throughout the years 1918–1948. This building material and technology left its imprint on Tel Aviv's landscape and is also a part of Tel Aviv's history and development. In spite of its importance, all concerned in Tel Aviv-Jaffa municipality and urban planning, have totally ignored this phenomenon.

The thrust of this discussion is that the silicate bricks phenomenon, a building material and technology, due to its importance to Tel Aviv heritage and its vast distribution in Tel Aviv landscape, should be integrated into the current urban renewal development process in the old city of Tel Aviv. The discovery of its history and its role in Tel Aviv cultural heritage will change the attitudes of Tel Aviv-Jaffa municipality to this building material; instead of a vernacular phenomena, a common brick or a frequent building technology, it will get a better appreciation. Urban landscapes of many cities around the world are based on vernacular phenomena, which are ignored by the urban municipalities. The silicate case should serve as an example of the role of a vernacular heritage, and in this case a common building material, in the urban renewal and conservation process.

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1. Research aims

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the important role of a building material in the development of urban areas; a material which had an impact on the historic events, the economic process, the social ideology and architectural styles in Palestine before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. I refer here to the silicate bricks, which are extensively exposed in the urban and rural landscapes of Israel, particularly in the old urban center of Tel Aviv-Jaffa (Fig. 1).

The claim of this paper is that the planning authorities in Tel Aviv-Jaffa are unaware of the historical importance and

the architectural expression of silicate brick and therefore do not include it in preservation and conservation projects [1]. Since the silicate brick is exposed in old and neglected buildings representing mostly mundane culture, and since it is regarded as a widespread technology and a common building material, the planning authorities developed a negative attitude toward it. Only an increased awareness of the relationship between the historical value of the silicate brick and its impact on Tel Aviv's architecture and developments [2] can change its status in the eyes of the municipal planning authorities and citizens of the city. This awareness can be achieved by exposing the role of the silicate bricks in Tel Aviv's history and its imprint on its landscape.

In order to understand the importance role of vernacular heritage in urban development and the status of silicate bricks

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Fig. 1. Location map of Tel Aviv-Jaffa.

in Tel Aviv's heritage, this paper will discuss the definition of vernacular heritage concerning building material and technology; the attitudes of Tel Aviv urban authorities to Silicate bricks and the lack of reference to the silicate in Tel Aviv nomination as a World Heritage Site (WHS) by UNESCO. On the other hand the paper shows the distribution of the silicate bricks in the old center of Tel Aviv; its physical and architectural expression; the historical events – the economic developments and the social ideology – related to the brick and its production.

2. Introduction: vernacular built heritage, its values and status in urban planning

In the past few years, research on historical remains on the urban landscape has been gaining momentum, focusing primarily on three issues: 1. the representative role of the remains, their symbols and values [3–5]; 2. the remains location and distribution in urban areas [6,7]; and 3. the functional changes and the integration of the remains in planning in the urban renovation process [8].

The decisions to choose objects of the cultural built heritage and leave them in the landscape, as well as classify and integrate them in the development of urban and rural areas, are driven by a number of motives:

- Reinforcing communal identity and patriotism, nationally or locally [9,10].

- Conservation for economic purposes: utilizing the volume of the old building for new functions; to refer to historical building's cultural value as an 'added value' (which increases the property value and the economic value of its newly chosen function) [11]. This topic has been extensively researched, especially the tourist attractions and uses of historical buildings for leisure and entertainment purposes [12]. In the past 10 years new economic functions have been observed in structures listed for residency, high-rent offices and economic services [13,14]. This process is also part of an accelerated demand for inner-city living, mainly by middle class groups [15].
- Politically motivated preservation: current use of cultural built heritage to advance the interests and power of a specific group, to represent its ideology or to glorify its deeds and leaders [16,17].

The influence of the three motives is not uniform and changes from one period to another and from one institutional planning framework to the next. They are dependent on the historical and economic status of the assets, on their appearance and the political atmosphere. And therefore, exposing the story and values of the historical objects can alter their status for the present and future generations and encourage their preservation and integration in urban renewal. This approach also holds true for vernacular heritages. The importance of vernacular heritage was described in 1997 by Groth and Bessi: 'Ordinary Landscape denotes the interaction of people and place: a social group and its spaces, particularly the spaces to which the group belongs and from which its members derive some part of their shared identity and meaning' [18]. According to Groth, building technology and building material are part of the community's heritage, and like any cultural landscape are worthy of being researched, evaluated and preserved.

The explanations and demands for preserving building technology or building material can be found also in different documents, such as universal and local charters. One of those was ICOMOS decision in 1999 to adopt a new charter concerning the protection of vernacular landscapes and sites. The need for a separate charter was explained in the treaty: 'The built vernacular heritage is important; it is the fundamental expression of the culture of a community, of its relationship with its territory and, at the same time, the expression of the world's cultural diversity. The vernacular embraces not only the physical form and fabric of buildings, structures and spaces, but the ways in which they are used and understood, and the traditions and the intangible associations, which attach to them' [19]. Since then more countries became aware of their vernacular heritage, but mainly in rural areas, where there are buildings which represent old crafts, agricultural work or rural lifestyles, of which some were left as monuments to commemorate the past, while others became tourist attractions, or for entertainment and commercial uses [20]. In urban areas, particularly in the old historic centers, vernacular cultural heritage is hardly preserved.

Based on the universal and local charters that were adopted in various localities throughout the world, the Israel Charter

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