

TEL AVIV NEVER STOPS

A PATRICK GEDDES PLAN GAVE
THE CITY ITS FORM. THE SEASIDE
PROVIDED THE SPARK.

BY ELISSA ROSENBERG



LEFT
Tel Aviv's *Ficus*-lined
boulevards provide
a network of public
space that connects
its civic spaces.

TEL AVIV is not a beautiful city. Israel's second-largest city is situated on the Mediterranean coast within a sprawling metropolitan region of some three and a half million residents. Tel Aviv is everything Jerusalem is not. Its seaside location gives it a sense of expansiveness and freedom, and the city is known for its secular, relaxed leisure culture. Jerusalem is a spiritual center, an inland city set into the Judean Hills; Tel Aviv is the center of the arts and of finance, whose cosmopolitan, tolerant culture is characteristic of coastal cities. While ancient Jerusalem is built of stone, Tel Aviv is a 20th-century city of plaster and concrete.

The city's moments of grandeur are to be found not in its monuments but under its trees in the sublime towering *Ficus* allées that line its boulevards. And more compelling than its architecture is the city's raw energy, generated by its active street life and public spaces. The city exudes a dynamism and urbanity that far exceeds its size.

Everywhere you look in Tel Aviv, huge cranes dot the skyline. The city is under construction. New high-rise towers will add thousands of apartments and offices to its downtown core. Detours abound owing to the excavation of a new 14-mile light

rail line, much of which will tunnel underground through the central portion of the city. While Tel Aviv has been reinventing itself through massive new construction, in recent decades the city has also seen the impressive restoration and expansion of its public realm: its historic boulevards, parks, and squares, as well as its seaside promenade.

Tel Aviv has been hyped as the "nonstop city," a slogan coined in the 1980s ad campaign launched to lure back former residents who had left for the suburbs. The catchphrase stuck. Tel Aviv's mythic self-image is almost always defined by the city's

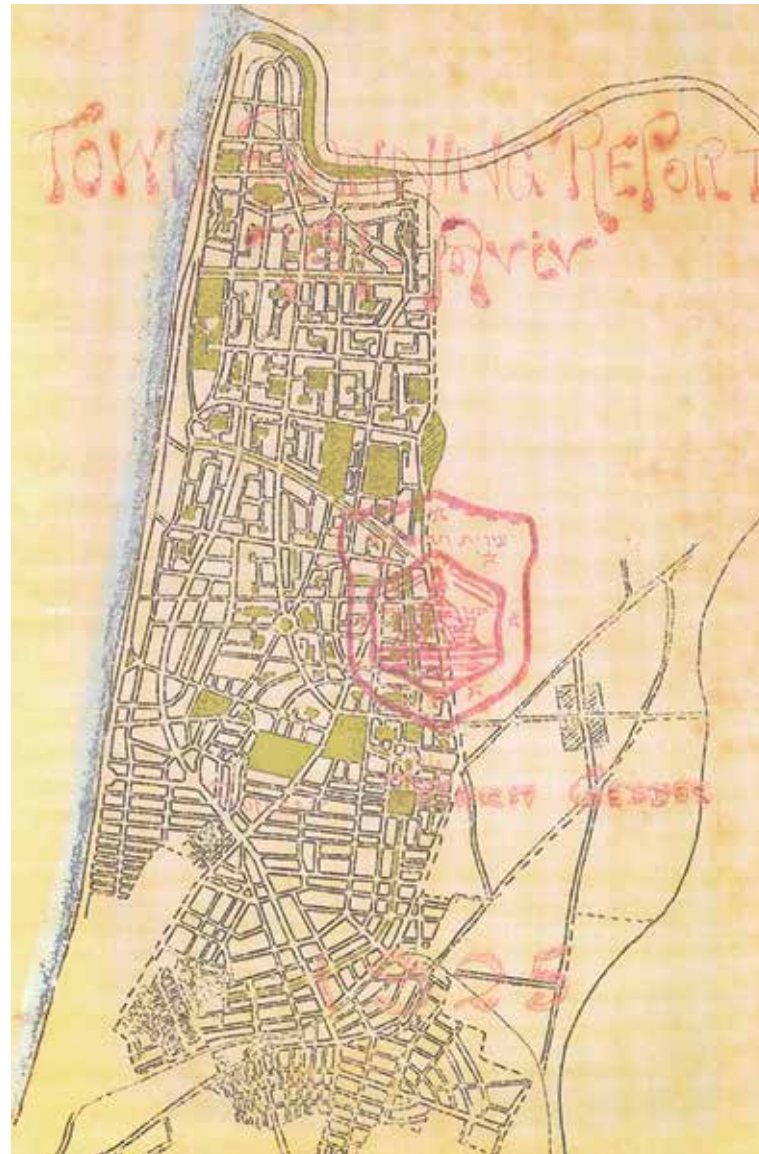
frenetic pace, its partying nightlife, café culture, and the endless festivals, parades, and events that cram its public spaces. Along with long-standing cultural reasons for Tel Aviv's urbanity is a distinctive urban design legacy that has critically shaped its growth and character.

From a spatial perspective, Tel Aviv's vitality might be explained by the observation that it is a city of streets. The Geddes Plan, based on the 1925 General Town Planning Scheme by the Scottish botanist, sociologist, and town planner Sir Patrick Geddes (1854–1932), shaped the growth of the city and accounts

for its unique form of urbanity—not just as a leisure city of one-off events, but also as a city of walkers and encounters in an environment that is ever-changing yet intimate, familiar, and surprisingly livable.

Tel Aviv originally developed as a suburb of the Arab city of Jaffa, an ancient harbor city that was a thriving commercial center during the late Ottoman period, surrounded by citrus groves and vineyards. By the late 19th century, Jewish neighborhoods had already begun to spring up outside Jaffa's city walls; however, official history marks the founding of Tel Aviv in 1909, with the

establishment of the first Hebrew neighborhood planned according to modern principles. Lacking a master plan, Tel Aviv grew rapidly and in an ad hoc manner following the transfer of Palestine to British Mandatory rule after World War I. In 1925, Geddes was hired to create a plan for the expansion of the city based on a projected population of 100,000. Geddes's urban vision was based on garden city planning concepts that blended rural and urban values: the gardens and scale of a village with the civic aspirations of a cultural center. He addressed the complex existing conditions of topography and other natural features, the patchwork



RIGHT
Geddes Plan for
Tel Aviv, 1925.

of new Jewish neighborhoods and existing roads, as well as the existing fabric of Jaffa.

Geddes produced a report later that year outlining the planning principles that would be quickly translated into a physical plan by the town planning department staff. The plan established an open-ended urban framework, proposing a road layout,

a new block type, and guidelines for the individual parcel. He laid out the roads in a hierarchical irregular grid that was inflected to the topography and to the existing road pattern and agricultural divisions. The system distinguished between the primary vehicular streets, which he termed “mainways,” and a secondary grid of “homeways,” or residential interior streets. This secondary sys-

tem formed a modified superblock, which was already a common pattern in early 20th-century planning in England and the United States, but unlike the more common garden city cul-de-sac system used to access their verdant superblocks, Geddes’s residential block was organized by a series of narrow secondary streets arranged around a central square. These voids were to form the nucleus of the neighborhood and were set aside for gardens, orchards, or small public buildings. Between 30 and 50 detached, two-story houses with front yards and rear vegetable gardens were to line the perimeter of the blocks, modeled on the image of a “garden village.” This residential block pattern formed a nonhierarchical urban fabric, punctuated by a “central city feature,” an acropolis-like cultural center proposed on one of the topographic high points of the region, as well as a network of green boulevards that linked key urban locations.

The Geddes Plan was never fully realized. By the 1930s, Tel Aviv’s population had tripled. The influx of immigrants fleeing Europe before the



LEFT
Rothschild Boulevard
around 1930.

outbreak of World War II created an intense demand for housing, and in 1938 the Geddes plan was amended to increase its density. The original two-story garden village houses were replaced with taller buildings with a larger footprint within the original parcel. These freestanding four-story apartments were eventually designed by European-trained émigré architects in the International style, establishing what would become the iconic Tel Aviv apartment house. Few of the proposed central gardens were actually built, and the proposed rear vegetable gardens were never planted. However, the implementation of Geddes’s road layout, block, and parcel succeeded in creating a unique urban fabric. The heavily planted front gardens remain a hallmark of the Tel Aviv residential neighborhood, contributing to the city’s significant tree canopy. (According to MIT’s Treepedia street tree canopy index, Tel Aviv ranks higher than either London or Paris.) The road layout established the delicate relationship of commercial and residential uses that are adjacent though separate, allowing for a unique equilibrium between public

and domestic life, and the parcel size has effectively curtailed the dominance of any individual building in favor of a uniform scale and rhythm that gives coherence to the urban fabric. Today Geddes’s narrow streets can hardly accommodate the glut of cars in the city, and the even narrower sidewalks can occasionally require walking single-file around tree pits or parked bicycles. At the same time, the scale of the streets, their tree canopy, and their comfortable proportions all contribute to the city’s walkability and give the city its unusual mix of intimacy and openness.

The city’s history has become an important feature of its urban identity in recent decades. In 2003, Tel Aviv was added to the UNESCO-supervised ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) World Heritage List for its historic core of International style buildings, known as the White City. A series of large-scale initiatives addressed the renewal of its historic public spaces: its boulevards and squares—the legacy of the Geddes Plan—as well as its promenade. These projects

have each taken different attitudes to history, raising complex questions about preservation, nostalgia, and urban reinvention. Together they underscore the importance of the city’s open spaces for shaping Tel Aviv’s evolving urbanity.

Rothschild Boulevard, Tel Aviv’s main boulevard, was built in 1910, predating the Geddes Plan. Like many open spaces, it came about as a solution for an urban leftover. The boulevard was built on a gully that had been filled with the sand removed to build the city’s first neighborhood. Unstable and unbuildable, the filled gully was to become the ground of a European style boulevard, planted with a double row of cypress trees along its edges and grass and flower beds in the center. In the 1930s, *Ficus* trees (*Ficus microcarpa* and *Ficus sycomorus*) were planted that were to become the majestic signature trees of Tel Aviv’s boulevards. Benches and playgrounds were also added, and it became a popular urban garden and promenade, eventually lined by the city’s most prestigious housing and public buildings.

MASTER PLAN FOR TEL AVIV, 1925. BY PATRICK GEDDES (COVER OF GEDDES 1925 REPORT)

ROTHSCHILD COLLECTION, PROFESSOR SHAUL LADANI, PIKI WIKI, PHOTO NUMBER: 45651



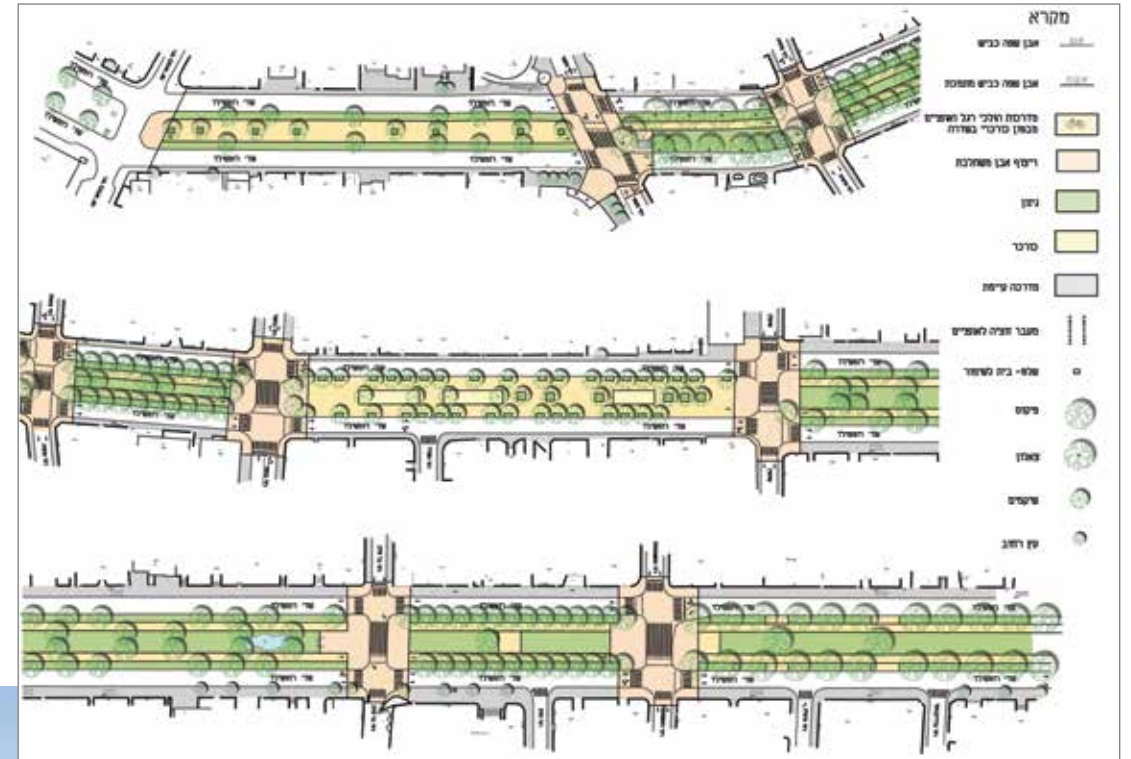
ABOVE
A section of Rothschild Boulevard planted with royal poincianas (*Delonix regia*).

Like so many parts of the city, the boulevard fell into decline in the 1960s. As the spacious apartment buildings became vacant, offices took over. Negative urban growth was reversed in the city only in the late 1980s, mirroring global trends, and the return to the city brought with it a renewed interest in its existing historic fabric after years of urban-renewal-style clearing and demolition. The renovation of Rothschild Boulevard was one of many policies aimed at encouraging the protection of the city's historic buildings and landscapes, and proved to be a significant trigger for renovating and preserving the rich stock of

International style buildings along the boulevard and maintaining their thriving mix of uses.

The boulevards project was initiated in 1999 by current Mayor Ron Huldai and completed in 2002. Along with Rothschild, four other boulevards were renovated to renew the Geddesian green structure that linked key cultural buildings to the central business district and the beach. The office of Gideon Sarig Lev Vaxman Landscape Architecture redesigned three of these, including Rothschild. The success of the renewed Rothschild Boulevard lies in its simplicity and restraint.

The design improved access and visual continuity while maintaining variety among its diverse sections. In lieu of the existing sand surface, two separate paths were paved for walking and cycling. A strip of shade-tolerant Durban grass was added under the trees and in some sections of the median, making the boulevard feel like one long park. Utilities were buried, and benches, small playgrounds, and sculptures were added, which manage not to overwhelm or distract from the sense of the whole. Small café kiosks were added at several key intersections, recalling the original pavilions. These have had a huge



RIGHT
A plan, by Gideon Sarig Lev Vaxman Landscape Architecture, to renovate Rothschild Boulevard focused on reconnecting civic spaces.

BELOW
A characteristic confluence of boulevards, commercial, and residential architecture endures in the shadow of new construction.



GIDEON SARIG

GIDEON SARIG LEV VAXMAN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE & URBAN PLANNING LTD., TOP; WWW.SHUTTERSTOCK.COM/ELBUD, BOTTOM

impact, drawing steady crowds and restoring the boulevard's urban role as a casual everyday meeting place for all ages—from the ritual Friday morning coffee date at the start of the Israeli weekend to sunbathing on the strips of lawn, or simply moving through on foot, bike, or the ubiquitous electric rideables of every kind that have taken over the city.

Another significant renewal project is now under way in Dizengoff Square. Geddes had called for a central commercial area to be centered on a public square surrounded by trees and a continuous facade of four-story buildings with stores on the ground floor. In 1933 a competition was held for the design of the square. The winning scheme, designed by

the architect Genia Averbuch, was dedicated five years later. The square, named for Zina Dizengoff, the mayor's late wife, realized Geddes's vision and became a fashionable commercial center. The "continuous facade" of enclosing buildings was eventually built in the International style, blending the classical design of the circular plaza and a large central fountain with modernist architecture. Dizengoff Square was a popular Tel Aviv landmark for many years, and an iconic image of the city until the 1970s; with the ascendance of traffic engineering over urban design, the plaza was dramatically reconfigured in 1978 to accommodate the automobile. It was raised up to bridge over newly widened, sunken roadways, becoming little more than a traffic island that had been disconnected from its surroundings.

The pendulum has now swung back. A preservationist ethic has gathered momentum in Tel Aviv since its

RIGHT
Dizengoff Square,
photographed between
1940 and 1946 in its
original state.

BELOW
The raised square (left),
done in 1978, will return
to street level in the
Moria-Sekely plan (right).



“White City” designation. A project by Moria-Sekely Landscape & Architecture is now in construction that will restore the square at grade. Last winter bulldozers demolished the raised plaza in what appeared to be a dramatic act of urban performance art, and the reconstruction is proceeding in stages. Yael Moria, one of the firm’s partners, observes: “What is significant about the project is the willingness of the city to address its big ‘mistake,’ to touch an open wound, as it were. This takes courage. It is a brave act to rethink the city and to update its spaces according to current needs. In the end the power of this project is greater than the sum of its parts.” Moria had struggled with the program: “To return a space to the way it was in the 1930s raises fundamental questions,” she says. Instead of de-

signing a nostalgic reconstruction, based on a naive re-creation of an “image,” she describes the design process as a search for the essence of the space. In the end, the design alternative that was approved is a close approximation of the original plaza—reflecting the more conservative and literal approach of the city to urban preservation.

Geddes had recognized the sea’s climatic effect on the city and oriented streets and buildings to maximize sea breezes, but surprisingly, the seashore was not a central feature of his plan. Tel Aviv has a subtropical Mediterranean climate, with short, mild winters; long, hot, humid summers; and no rain for half the year. In 1939, the first seaside promenade,

RIGHT
A new beach-level
promenade runs
along the edge of
the sitting terraces.



designed by the municipal engineer Jacob Shiffman, was built with the hope of transforming Tel Aviv into a Mediterranean resort city, inspired by Nice, France; Naples, Italy; and even Odessa, Ukraine. The promenade became a magnet for Tel Aviv, but its success was relatively short-lived. The release of increasing amounts of untreated sewage into the sea finally led to a 1949 ban on swimming at Tel Aviv beaches due to contamination.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the seashore was revitalized upon the completion of new infrastructure. The Lahat Promenade, completed in 1984 by the office of Rechter Architects, followed the completion of a regional sanitary waste system and a series of eight breakwaters to nourish and widen the beaches. These large-scale investments laid the foundation for a growing international tourist industry focused on the seashore. At the same time, a diverse beach culture took root that supported varied subcultures and identities, and in some cases created new traditions and informal communities—of folk dancers, drummers, prayer services,

yoga practitioners, and more. There are religious beaches (with alternating schedules of gender-separated swimming), gay beaches, and even beaches for dog owners. A pluralistic culture has evolved on the beach, perhaps more so than in any other public space in the city.

The 1984 promenade, whose distinctive paving pattern was reminiscent of Roberto Burle Marx’s Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro, is undergoing an ambitious renovation by the architecture firm Mayslits Kassif, winners of the 2010 Rosa Barba International Landscape prize for the regeneration of Tel Aviv’s port. In addition to refurbishing the promenade’s amenities—with new paving, lighting, shade pergolas, and a variety of seating types—the project provides a more porous edge between the city and the sea. The original promenade

had been set at street level, perched above the beach. Access to the beach was limited to the stairways and ramps located near the end of each city street. In redesigning a mile-and-a-half-long stretch of the promenade, the designers have removed the retaining wall that separated the two levels and replaced it with terraced seating and stairs along its length that allow for a freer flow of movement. The extensive seating also creates new gathering spaces facing the sea. Principal Ganit Mayslits Kassif imagined a new openness and mixing that could result from integrating the promenade and the beach. “We had a vision of a new type of urban space in which the beach crowd and pedestrians are interweaving, forming a unique waterfront urban culture,” she says. A new 10-foot paved path has been added on the beach running along the foot of the stairs, making the

ILAN ARAD, LICENSED UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION-SHAREALIKE 3.0 UNPORTED (CC BY-SA 3.0), LEFT; LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION, G. ERIC AND EDITH MATSON PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, LC-M33-13309-A, TOP RIGHT; MORIA-SEKELY LANDSCAPE & ARCHITECTURE, BOTTOM RIGHT

OMER MESSINGER

beach wheelchair accessible. The rooftops of the cafés that are located on the beach level have become extensions of the promenade, adding a new “topography” of curving ground planes surfaced with wood decking that forms a series of urban balconies that look out on the sea. The redesign of the promenade with its vivid, playful detailing, surfaces, and materials has created a more varied and sensual experience of the seashore, with new places to walk, sit, gather, and gaze at the sea.

The first phase of the renovation opened in 2013, and the project is ongoing. It is part of an expanded system that is transforming Tel Aviv’s beach to an extended waterfront—a continuous, linear system for walkers, joggers, and cyclists, almost nine miles long—based on a new metropolitan vision of connectivity.

These three projects highlight the inherent tensions between the preservation and reinvention of Tel Aviv’s historic public spaces. Each is a critical site for the calibration of Tel Aviv’s unique brand of urbanity that is not characterized by monumental

civic spaces or singular architecture, but by the city’s everyday open spaces and the pluralistic public life that they enable. These projects point out the important custodial role of landscape architects working in a historic urban fabric. Yael Moria has noted that as a landscape architect her goal is not necessarily to make a statement or create a work of art. She assumes the more modest role of a caretaker, seeing her work as part of an ongoing process of urban housekeeping, maintaining and updating the existing urban fabric and its social life through small but strategic interventions. Tel Aviv’s unique history has established its place as a Mediterranean garden city, a green city of streets, trees, and sea breezes. The intensive development now occurring across the city must be carefully controlled and sensitively designed so as not to destroy this remarkable legacy. ●

ELISSA ROSENBERG IS ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR EMERITA IN THE DEPARTMENT OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA AND CURRENTLY TEACHES IN THE GRADUATE URBAN DESIGN PROGRAM, BEZALEL ACADEMY OF ARTS AND DESIGN, JERUSALEM.

OPPOSITE

The rooftops of the beach cafés were transformed into curving terraces, extending the promenade and adding dynamic plazas.

