**The Changing Kibbutz Dining Hall**

**An Empty Heart of Prolonged Trauma**

**A Dialogue between an Architect and a Psychoanalyst**

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**Introduction:**

In 1972, at age twenty-one, I traveled to Italy to study architecture. The more I immersed myself in my studies and the more I learned about the local culture, the more I came to realize that my future architectural work would concern the connection between past and future, and the creation of a new architecture that flowed from that which was already present – that is, working to preserve structures’ heritage, not only out of a desire to perpetuate and remember, but to build new living environments that integrate past concepts into our future lives.

Upon my return to Israel, the more I studied and came to know the history of the place, the more I realized that there exists a tremendous divide between the story we tell ourselves (and in the wake of which we continue to create, to plan, and to build) and reality—as perceived by someone not in thrall to the grand Zionist idea.

For the past twenty-five years, I have combined my professional planning and preservation work with continuous instruction in the School of Architecture.

Between 2010 and 2012, the preservation studio under my direction engaged in research and planning in the formerly Arab Manshiyeh quarter of Jaffa (today part of Tel Aviv, west of the Neve Tzedek neighborhood), which was largely wiped out following the city’s capture in 1948. Since the 1950s and 1960s, the Tel Aviv Municipality has been developing ambitious, and sometimes destructive, plans for the area.

Following research and documentation of the quarter, whose residents were expelled and became refugees, the students chose to undertake a re-planning of the ruined areas (which had become public parks and parking lots). In these areas, only two monumental structures stand today: the mosque, saved from the total destruction visited on the rest of the neighborhood, today a place of prayer with no associated congregation; and the abandoned Dolphinarium building, built at the end of the 1960s on a strip of land reclaimed from the sea adjacent to the ruins of Manshiyeh.

These two buildings contain traumas and difficult memories for every member of the population groups affected by, and dwelling in, this place. Muslims bear the memory of the occupation and ethnic cleansing of the Tel Aviv area, and Jews the memory of the murderous suicide bombing of high school students gathered at the Dolphinarium nightclub.

After my students and I became aware of this traumatic space and the difficult memories it held, I turned to my old friend Gabi Bonwitt, a psychologist and psychoanalyst who studies and treats patients suffering from symptoms of post-traumatic stress, and has published articles and even produced and directed a film on the subject, and asked for him to come and help us understand the psychological significance of planning in this damaged area.

Gabi and I embarked on a course of research, and in due course turned to the study of kibbutz society in Israel, in particular the kibbutz dining hall, which constitutes the central structure of each kibbutz and through which the kibbutz’s developmental processes can be understood—from the moment of its founding to its current dismantlement and privatization.

Gabi Bonwitt, Psychologist

Amnon Bar-Or, Architect

**Preface: The Kibbutz and Trauma**

The kibbutz dining hall constitutes the center of the kibbutz from the moment of its establishment. As such, the kibbutz imbues it with both the changes taking place on the kibbutz and the processes affecting kibbutz society.

The Israeli kibbutz, a unique phenomenon on the world stage, was founded on the socialist ideal “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” Cooperation constituted a central value of kibbutz life. The kibbutz dining hall, then, constitutes the center of cooperative life, both geographically and socially.

The dining hall was the center of life for the kibbutz and became, over the course of the years, a problematic, sometimes vacant, structure – a white elephant that could be neither used nor destroyed. Moreover, it embodies a sad and grim reflection of a social, political, and cultural ideal that, at its peak, captured the public mind and acted as rallying point and compass for an entire society, one that put its complete trust in the kibbutz ideal and, therefore, allowed its members to serve as the shepherds and leaders of Israeli society. At its peak, the kibbutz was called “**the spearhead of the Zionist vision**.”

When considering the changes made to the dining hall over the years, it is possible to identify traumatic characteristics both in the process of the hall’s initial planning and during its time in use. Moreover, within our contemporary state of division, characterized by ever more ambivalent attitudes towards the kibbutz idea, the dining hall has transformed from a structure fostering connection and unity, a universally desired meeting point and place of pilgrimage, into the very embodiment of this division.

To the point, we argue that there exists an irrefutable link between the processes that took place on the kibbutz and parallel processes that took place in Israeli society and the world at large. The kibbutz idea collapsed in tandem with the collapse of socialist ideals as a potential political-social solution—especially, after breakup of the Communist world in the 1980s. Kibbutzim underwent a social and economic rupture during these years. Just as the kibbutz is a uniquely Israeli phenomenon informed by a global idea, so too was this rupture both unique to Israeli society and influenced by global processes. Political and social processes can be clearly identified with the contemporary condition of the dining hall on the disintegrating and individualizing kibbutz.

We chose as a test case kibbutz **Sha’ar ha-Golan**, located near the Sea of Galilee in northern Israel. Sha’ar ha-Golan and its neighboring kibbutz, Masada, were abandoned by their members during the War of Independence in 1948. Through diligent examination, it is possible to discern the wall of silence and suppression lying at the basis of these kibbutzim’s relationship with the memory of the past.

The “abandonment” of Sha’ar ha-Golan and Masada during the Israeli War of Independence distinguishes them from many other kibbutzim. Indeed, while it is possible to identify traumas in nearly every kibbutz forced to cope with Israel’s various wars, these kibbutzim, and a few others, bear the unique trauma of being branded “defeatist,” a stance opposed to the ethos of steadfast perseverance characteristic of other kibbutzim and the Hebrew *Yishuv* during the war (as a side note, it should be pointed out that one of the kibbutzim was named after Masada – another Israeli myth of resisting the enemy until death – and that a dichotomy is created between the two Masadas due to the kibbutz’s failure to play out the myth of “heroism”). This experience of abandonment would leave its mark on the following decades, which saw the rebuilding of the kibbutzim and their attempt to establish themselves in the new state.

It should be pointed out that the motif of abandonment constitutes a central element in the process of settling and developing kibbutzim in Israel:

* Those who founded kibbutzim abandoned their European culture, their families, and the bourgeois Jewish society of the pre-World War II era, while establishing a society largely founded on universal socialist principles, keeping in mind the words of “The Internationale”: “we will destroy the old world unto the foundations.”
* A not insignificant portion of kibbutzim were built on Arab land. Frequently this involved a concerted effort to obscure any memory of the Palestinian settlement whose residents were expelled or forced to abandon their homes during the 1948 war, although a keen observer could easily identify agricultural terraces, fruit trees, and sometimes even the ruins of village buildings.
* During the great kibbutz crisis of the 1980s, a significant portion of the young generation abandoned the kibbutz, leaving behind their aged parents.
* The dining hill’s abandonment as part of privatization initiatives caused it to be seen as a monument caught between life and death, between memory and forgetting, a symbol of the loss of the original kibbutz idea. Many kibbutz dining halls today stand empty and unused; some are rented out (for example, as dialysis centers); and a few changed function, as, for example, the case of a dining hall converted to a practice space for the kibbutz dance troupe.

We seek to examine whether the dining hall on kibbutz Sha’ar ha-Golan was imbued with traumatic characteristics, both during its foundational stages and throughout its lifetime. This can be identified in the religious/ritual-like architecture of the present dining hall, built in a number of stages beginning in 1952, and designed by the architect Shmuel Mestechkin, a student of the German Bauhaus school, in conjunction with the artist and kibbutz member Chaim Bergel. In planning the monumental façade, Mestechkin decided on a series of arches, a kind of expressive allusion to the tablets of the covenant at the front of a synagogue. It can be assumed that by integrating “spiritual” elements into Sha’ar ha-Golan’s dining hall, the architect sought to leave behind the horizontal and restrained rationalism of the Bauhaus style, preferring to contend with the kibbutz’s trauma through an optimistic, upward-directed design – whether consciously or otherwise.

The façade seems to almost rise above quotidian constraints and concrete questions about the struggle that took place there and left behind such painful wounds.

A survey of the dining hall’s history reveals that the kibbutz’s dining halls were built in seven stages, from the date of founding in 1937 to the 1960s. Each was built on top of the last, as if engaged in an eternal effort to treat a particular symptom. The result: a forever inexplicable polyphony, a sort of “monument to aspiration.”

**Trauma and Architecture: A Dialogue between Languages**

A few words on trauma:

Trauma is an event that can be neither contained nor opposed. This mental event leads to mental disintegration, which leads in turn to an experience of mental death. This experience is a kind of “internal explosion” in which the emotional infrastructure collapses, leaving no *self* that might be able to deal with the event. Furthermore, external reality gains control over internal reality to the extent that, in fact, the opposite of a psychotic event take places, the internal reality taking over the external. Thus, people in states of trauma are sometimes erroneously diagnosed as psychotic. The result is an experience of chaos that blurs the line between two realities, internal and external, forcing the self to cease existing as a distinct essence. It is important to remember that trauma is connected to processes of internalization – but an internalization that occurs as part of a violent act that “penetrates” and conquers the consciousness from within.

In order to arrest this destructive process, the dissociative mechanism is activated, thereby displacing the event (and its emotional meanings in particular) to the unconscious portions of the psyche.

It is important to note that not only the victim, but the violent party too, can suffer from post-traumatic stress. The exposure and realization of the violent aspects present in every self can activate the very same dissociative mechanisms at work in the victim. There are no small number of Israeli soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder in the wake of being exposed to their own violence against Palestinians in the occupied territories.

In trauma, what replaces memory and processing is the mechanism of repetition compulsion.

Our fundamental hypothesis is that the traumatic event can be experienced not only by the individual, but by the group, the community, and society as well. A group too can employ the same mechanisms used by an individual in the face of events the group or community is incapable of processing and remembering. The society or community makes particular use of dissociation at times when aspects of its identity do not concord with one another: past with present, ideal with reality, collective moral and ethical values with violent aspects of a particular community or society’s history.

The connection between architecture and psychoanalysis, between the two of us, grew out of the space of trauma, as it became clear that it would be impossible to speak about the reconstruction of a Palestinian village, or about a Jewish kibbutz destroyed during the War of Independence, without leaving room for trauma. This connection is equally valid when it comes to researching the kibbutz dining hall. The challenge is that the connection is not a simple one.

A few words on the dialogue between languages:

Architectural language and psychoanalytical language are different from one another in a number of parameters.

**Architectural language** is founded on the empirical. Every idea must be supported by proofs with an objective dimension. Every metaphorical representation must flow from an observation that functions as proof of either an idea or the representation’s validity.

**Psychoanalytical language** is entirely composed of representations and metaphors built on experiences for which subjectivity is the central, and sometimes only, dimension. “Learning by experience” is a foundational and central expression.

There are also similarities between these languages. Their mutual point of origin is **thoughts**: an analyst turns thoughts into words, while the architect turns them into spaces. Architecture and psychoanalysis both deal with the psyche and the human spirit. Both are simultaneously science, art, and craft (Nina Coltart)

Consequently, the attempt to forge a connection between psychoanalysis and architecture creates an arena in which it is possible to build something **neither discipline could build on its own**. That is what makes this connection unique.

A few words on boundaries:

The discussion of boundaries is important in two respects:

* The boundary between psychoanalysis and architecture
* The boundary between historical, social, cultural, and ideal aspects that are difficult to connect to one another, when the way of contending with this difficulty is to build a wall as a boundary.

I customarily distinguish between two types of boundary:

* The **thick boundary**
* The **thin boundary**

The **thick boundary**is a clear line that cannot be crossed. This boundary is typified by the experience of **“oppositionality”** and **binarism**; on the opposing sides of the border, there are two entities that create a contradiction between themselves.

The thick boundary is represented by the wall and constitutes an expression of social dissociation. The dissociative wall is intended to provide security by not allowing hostile forces to penetrate one’s territory and cause injury. But in practice, it prevents whomever is inside the wall from leaving and encountering the “Other” beyond it. The result is that the region beyond the wall is dark and unfamiliar, and thus a source of suspicion, fear, prejudice, and aggression. This is the essence of the dissociative delusion.

Is this how the kibbutz related to its surroundings?

Is this how the kibbutz attempted to erase portions of its past?

The **thin boundary**is not a clear line, but rather a space beyond, defined by change and constant motion. This constant motion creates two sides **beside one another**. Due to this “besideness,” they discuss and **mutually observe** the boundary between them. In the area of the thin boundary, neither side is the “Other.” The Other is not external, but internal. At times these two sides of the boundary have a mutual Other. In our research, language is the space in which the boundary, and the discourse, exist. Language is both boundary and a means of mutual observation – for a boundary is, among other things, the result of different viewpoints of the same territory.

Let us return to the connection between psychoanalysis and architecture in the space of trauma:

One of the points of contact between architecture and psychoanalysis in the realm of trauma is the use of terms like “deconstruction” and “reconstruction” as methods of analysis and development. In other words, both the observation of the constituents of the psyche and the study of the history and characteristics of an architectural structure involve deconstruction and reconstruction. So too does an analysis of the kibbutz dining hall.

Trauma is characterized as, among other things, a developmental break, on both the personal and collective levels. This mental break is paralleled by an architectural one.

In the course of our research, on more than a few kibbutzim, we found buildings, including dining halls, that made use of the hewn stones taken from destroyed Arab houses as building materials. Thus, the representation of history appears in unexpected and surprising places. The layer beneath which denial attempts to hide the traces of the past is thin indeed, and every careless movement disturbs it and exposes the signs of trauma beneath.

**Utopia and Trauma**

Last year saw the 500th anniversary of the publication of Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516). In the book, More describes the Utopians’ houses as having flat roofs of mortar, which would be mixed with additional materials for resistance against fire and storms.[[1]](#footnote-1) In More’s system, concrete constitutes an essential component for the building of Utopian society, one of whose foundations is **eternalness.** And yet here we already see an inherent paradox: concrete is not at all eternal – it cracks, breaks, and crumbles away in relatively short order.

The establishment of the first kibbutzim and moshavim had a utopian, architectural basis. In the unconscious of most of these places could be found the basic element of utopianism, an egalitarian society striving for perfection.

From its very outset, kibbutz design in the Land of Israel included genuinely utopian elements, seemingly above and apart from reality. When Richard Kauffmann designed the workers’ moshav Nahalal in 1921, the centralist plan reflected an egalitarian utopia around a common denominator located in the center of the settlement’s “circle.” Kibbutz design in those years was carried out slightly differently, but drew from the same utopian ideas.

The most explicit expression of utopia was the abandonment of Jewish religion in favor of the “religion of labor.” On the new religion’s altar were sacrificed the kibbutz’s children and family values – and consequently, intimacy. In the name of cooperative existence and the religion of labor, kibbutzim erected unique buildings such as the children’s houses, the communal laundry, the dining hall, and others.

Yet the kibbutz era’s design could never be entirely free of characteristics of the founders’ lands of birth, no matter how hard they tried to shed every memory of the old country. Thus, after existing for a number of years, the utopian dream began to slowly fade away. Riots had been part of kibbutz life in the land of Israel from the outset, but the members had been prepared to pay the price. The outbreak of the Arab Revolt in 1936 led to substantial losses and a posed a significant threat to the continued existence of the *Yishuv* – which brought about the development of a new initiative: **wall and tower.**

The “wall and tower” settlement program, which began in 1936, constituted one of the first expressions of the “new Jew” in his native land. The construction technology, duration of building, and design methodology were the antithesis of those employed by the ancient Palestinian Arab community. Instead of a vernacular construction – “architecture without architects” – developing in accordance with time and place, in response to the local climate and culture, an old-new style of building came into being: fortified construction, urgent in nature and foreign to its surroundings. The fundamental principles were simple: planning and building construction frames from wood in another place, bringing the materials to the desired site, and building immediately – within the space of a night. Groups of people from all over the *Yishuv* would volunteer to take part in the task. The new settlements included an encircling wall, a watch tower, and buildings for lodging and dining.

Fifty-two settlements were built according to this technique between 1936 and 1939, most of them kibbutzim. The fortifications surrounding the new settlements included two walls of wooden planks, the space between them filled in with stones and gravel. There was nothing utopian about the wall: **its very essence cried “ghetto.”** The moment the *Yishuv* felt true existential danger – as the European Jew had – it hurried to fortify itself. The Arab-Jewish clashes constituted a trigger for history to repeat itself. Segregation and anxiety were eternal, an infinite cycle.

After 1948 (the State of Israel’s independence), Jewish society in Israel and around the world felt that, after two thousand years, the “first flowering of redemption” had begun. The establishment of the state was perceived by many observers as a utopia coming into being: the realization of “the two-thousand year old hope / to be a free people in our land,” as the new state’s anthem put it. This embodiment of utopia had an inherent flaw, however: it was necessary to erase the trauma of the last war, and the one before it, and so on and so forth. How could utopia be built in a dystopian place, especially for the Jewish people, for whom dystopia had long constituted an integral part of existence?

Thus, came to be a wall of denial, cast in concrete. Kibbutz dining halls were built from low-quality concrete, yet sometimes in an expressive manner, with a care that could bring to mind spiritual structures instead of functional ones meant to serve as mere factories for sustenance. The next stage would see the construction of fortified buildings lacking any expressiveness whatsoever, true “concrete domes.” The fortress on the hilltop was well-built, but its foundations were rickety; beneath the surface, drama reigned, a story that could not be told, or even mentioned.

In their book on the architect Mestechkin, Muki Tsur and Yuval Daniel wrote:

In the 1950s, the Brutalist style, the style of exposure, arrived in Israel. Concrete stripped of all plaster and coating appeared. Mestechkin internalized the need for directness, but he oriented it towards a slightly different path. […]

After 1967, a revolution occurred in Israeli architecture. It returned to fortification. It was suppressive and defensive. Open to neither the landscape nor dialogue with its users.[[2]](#footnote-2)

It is interesting to consider the paradox inherent to a community that strictly forbade the building of fences or boundaries between residents’ homes, in keeping with the supposed ban on individual possession – yet at the same time built a fence separating itself from its environment. One of the effects of this dichotomy was that human and emotional resources were maximally invested outward, leaving the care and cultivation of the kibbutz’s individual and social components, which required looking inward, by the wayside. Defending the kibbutz from the outside world all around, while also forsaking the individual’s emotional needs, contradicted one of the central values of the kibbutz movement: “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” Kibbutz members’ testimonials make clear that one of the expressions of kibbutz society’s absence of internal reflection and investment was the lack of intimacy between members.

The denial of these aspects was a milestone in the development of kibbutz trauma, especially because we know that denial, by its very nature, does not allow for events to be processed and internalized. This trauma is not allowed to become a personal or collective memory that provides an opportunity for learning and development possible; what emerges instead is the destructive potential for recreation according to Freud’s formulation of “repetition compulsion.”

Let us return to the dining hall. During my youth, I would visit my family on kibbutz Mizra. To me, the dining hall seemed a secular temple in which the children of the gods dined. Everyone was tall and strong, fearlessly walking about barefoot, even on rough ground. I remember the ascent to the dining hall along the paths that cut through the great lawn before it; the soda fountain at the entrance, which amazed and excited me, city boy that I was, especially because you could drink your fill without paying; sitting at the long tables with the tall and powerful farmers; the way the salad was diced and mixed with white cheese looked to me like the holy service of the priests in the Temple. Years later I would travel every summer with my fellow youth group members to volunteer on kibbutzim, which would set us to work on the hardest jobs, like loading bales of hay onto the tractor. How proud I was, this short and weak boy, this product of Israeli “Yekke” culture in Haifa, when I managed to summon all my strength and load a bale of hay without collapsing.

Thus, when the deep cracks running through kibbutz society began to show themselves, I could sense the ambivalence of my emotional response: on the one hand, I felt a kind of schadenfreude at the downfall of these children of the gods, at their transformation into fragile and vulnerable human beings; on the other, I felt a profound dread over the first signs of the destruction of the secular Temple in the State of Israel.

A few words on selfhood, individuality, private property, and their connection to the dining hall:

As we have said, kibbutz life was characterized by, among other things, the fact that the collective exerted unlimited authority over the individual. The individual was the property of the collective and its values.

This expressed itself throughout several spheres of kibbutz life. The first, and perhaps most consequential, was the rearing and education of children. The children grew up in children’s houses, only visiting their parents for a short time every afternoon. There were many reasons for this. I shall touch on only two:

The first, apparently practical, was to allow parents to go out and work, each according to his ability. Moreover, the principle of gender equality provided an additional impetus for the children’s collective lodging. Today we know that, on a deeper level, equality existed in theory, but in practice, it was largely women who filled domestic roles such as cooking, laundering, and the like.

The second reason was opposition to the Oedipal paradigm as the basis of various neuroses. The basic assumption was that the Oedipal conflict originated in European society. The collective method of child-rearing was meant to avoid Oedipal dilemmas and build an emotional system that would confront the traditional patriarchal structure that set the father at the apex of the pyramid.

Conceptual authority, and the authority of the ideological and human collective, replaced that of the father. The dining room, therefore, was not a family meeting place. Rather, it was a place that separated children from adults. The adults went to the dining hall, while the children took their meals in the children’s house.

Thus, in effect, the family was denied an intimate meeting space that would allow it to exist as an autonomous entity for fostering emotional relationships. This was the space in which one of the questions asked might be: “Do I belong to a family, and what is my place there?” In interviews we conducted with kibbutz members in dining halls, our interviewees, particularly the men, who had remained on the kibbutz, had obvious difficulty relating to emotional issues.

In many aspects, the kibbutz dining hall resembled the dining halls of totalitarian organizations discussed by the theoretician Erving Goffman, such as militaries and prisons. The kibbutz member’s level of belonging was expressed through the place in which he sat, and through the experience of entering the dining hall.

In a study conducted several years ago, hundreds of kibbutz members were asked to complete the following sentence: “For me, the dining hall is….”

The responses lacked the word “I.” We will not elaborate extensively, but one possible conclusion is that in a place in which the exclusion of the individual’s every subjective expression maintains a collective narcissistic vulnerability, the way to make the self’s presence known and distinguish it from others is to describe the great vulnerability that accompanies the act of entering the dining hall.

In surveys and interviews we conducted on kibbutzim, we repeatedly encountered kibbutz members, particularly women, who described the act of entering the dining hall as an experience charged with shame, narcissistic vulnerability, and a deep need to disappear and not be seen.

Chen Rotem, a singer who grew up on a kibbutz, wrote in a poem about visiting the kibbutz as an adult:

What do they say when you walk into the dining hall barefoot

“She’s not really that thin,

She’s not that pretty”

And the tank’s always full, I can escape

Now that I have a car…

**The Architecture of the Kibbutz Dining Hall**

Kibbutz society required a means of providing sustenance to members. At the outset, the kibbutz dining hall was rooted in an existential need: sating hunger. Those who built the dining halls on the first kibbutzim ascribed to a communal model of dining as a practical response to the economic and operational difficulties they faced, long before they declared communal dining a value. It was only after kibbutzim and their locations were firmly established in their “final” places that the central communal structure was organized. Site plans always designated a central location for the dining hall, and put a great deal of thought into its design.

The establishment of the first dining halls failed to attract a great deal of support – whether in planning or budget – from Zionist organizations, which saw the kibbutz as a temporary creation of the settlement period that would eventually yield to more familiar village-style mode of settlement, which would not require the kibbutz’s communal institutions. This would change in 1929. The outbreak of the Arab-Jewish riots throughout Palestine emphasized the need for a central building that could provide protection for members, particularly women and children. The typical tiled roof of the village gave way to a flat, concrete, fortified roof. Thus the principal fortified buildings on the kibbutz – then as now – were always the dining hall and the childrens’ houses.

The modest, village-style appearance of the first kibbutz dining halls, a result of an effort to meld with the surrounding landscape, was suddenly replaced with the heavy look of a hybrid structure, reminiscent of the first urban structures of the Modernist movement. Several dining halls added a watch tower. In the next set of dining halls, built in the 1930s, the communal motif was already quite prominent. The modernist ribbon windows resembled firing slits, and the smoking chimney sometimes appended to the kitchen wing gave the dining hall an even more militaristic air. An anomalous building arose in the heart of the kibbutz, whose other buildings retained their tiled roofs and village-like appearance.

Kibbutz Sha’ar ha-Golan was founded on March 21, 1937 as a “wall and tower” settlement. The settlement planner was Richard Kauffmann. The kibbutz’s first dining room was a shed, built of bricks up to the upper window line, with a wooden extension above and a wavy tin roof – a typical “British army shed,” identical to the barracks that housed the soldiers of the British Mandate. The dining hall occupied the shed until 1948.

The dining hall was destroyed during the Syrian occupation as part of the “Great Burning” of 1948 (it should be noted that the expression “burning,” commonly used by members to refer to their four-day abandonment of the kibbutz, brings us back to the days of pogroms and the *Kristallnacht*). After returning to the kibbutz, members first used a temporary dining hall located in the partially destroyed infants’ house. Afterwards the old dining hall was rehabilitated and restored. The cornerstone of the new dining hall was laid in 1952, with planning by the architect Shmuel Mestechkin. The hall was designed according to a “trousers” plan, featuring two wings with an open entry plaza, with the kitchen occupying the connecting section. The dining hall was dedicated in 1956.

The structure would change repeatedly throughout the following years. Around 1966, the old dining hall was destroyed. The dining hall’s new wings each lent their distinct impression to the whole. Every time the dining hall was expanded, its façade faced a different direction. At first, towards the lawn and the stage thereon. Afterwards, towards the kibbutz entrance. In the final stage, the wing with the row of expressivist arches was built, with planning by Mestechkin, in conjunction with the artist and kibbutz member Chaim Bergel. This wind supposedly faced the kibbutz’s central “Great Lawn,” but in reality came to an end at a broad expanse of concrete and row of trees and vegetation that separated the structure from the lawn.

Sha’ar ha-Golan’s dining hall revolves, in fact, around itself, seeking a view towards which to turn and an ideal to magnify. On this kibbutz, that lies beyond the realm of possibility. A certain shame, the shame of abandonment, weighs down the atmosphere of this kibbutz, so proud of its wall and tower, and assimilates itself into its design.

This is hardly unique to kibbutz Sha’ar ha-Golan. Kibbutz **Yad Mordechai**in southern Israel, on the border with the Gaza Strip, has a nearly identical story of abandonment during the War of Independence. But at Yad Mordechai, the myth of heroism was magnified and memorialized at the kibbutz’s “battle site.” Yet despite this, the kibbutz’s new dining hall (also planned by Mestechkin, at the beginning of the 1950s) does not face the battle site and historic water tower, and it lies far from the site of the original dining hall. Adjacent to the dining hall is one of the most monumental concrete structures ever built in Israel – the Yad Mordechai Museum. Yad Mordechai’s juxtaposition of its dwarf-like, low dining hall with the museum beside it, together with the fortress-like arches and windows added by Mestechkin to the dining hall in the 1980s, creates a space charged with an abundance of meaning.

Despite all this, when the artist Michal BarOr (who happens to be my daughter) attempted to confront the kibbutz’s members with the story of wartime flight and abandonment in an artistic work she presented in 2016, she was met with a powerfully emotional response, entirely different from the accepting and inclusive responses we saw in our interviews on Sha’ar ha-Golan. In southern Israel, the myth of heroism is clung to as a justification for existence, and kibbutz pride is the result. In the north, the kibbutz works and functions, but does not constitute a point of pride for its members – as if the kibbutz is something of a default choice.

One might say that while those in the north concern themselves with the question of “how to live with the shame,” those in the south turned the source of shame into one of pride.

On both kibbutzim, the structure could not remain empty. The myth of heroism on one, the shame on the other, require a continued hold on the dining hall, which is the beating heart of the kibbutz community. Therefore, it is precisely in those places where the story is emotional, difficult, and complex that the dining hall continues to function, whether it is privatized (as in Yad Mordechai) or cooperative (as on Sha’ar ha-Golan). There is no monument silently crying out here. Instead, the discussion focuses on the foundations of the dining hall, the foundations of kibbutz society and its character.

**The Dining Hall Monument:**

In a documentary series on the kibbutz, the creator remarked:

In the 1950s and 1960s, most kibbutzim rebuilt their dining halls, only this time they were built as fortresses, without intimacy. They built their fears, because they understood that the idea was crumbling.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**The kibbutz dining hall could be a monument to the kibbutz idea.** The monument, as an architectural concept, constitutes an expression of denial and dissociation, and thus further constitutes a social embodiment of unprocessed traumatic elements. First, in its attempt to deny death, there is a traumatic basis, expressed through the fantasy that the monument might protect us from death, from its significance and its terrors.

According to the important theoretician Henri Lefebvre, only with recourse to the monument, to the architect’s intervention as a tool of repudiation, can the space of death be denied, be converted to the space of life – that which is common to the needs of religion and of political power and knowledge.

Moreover, the monument, by its very nature, minimizes the individual and in so doing diminishes his sense of independence to the point of nothingness. The person standing beside or within a monument constitutes part of a romantic reality that flattens the past and its complexity, and allows for the “exportation” of feelings and portions of the past that do not accord with the monument’s explicit and implicit presence and purpose.

In this social space that encompasses all collective aspects while still leaving room for each of the community’s individuals, everyone fully participates (under the basic condition of a shared consciousness of the selected and accepted authority of strength and wisdom). Those who visit must be aware of their steps, of the general stirring of the space; they must take in the smells of cooking and food and immerse themselves in a unique world – that of the cooperative. They part in an ideology, they carry out all the necessary activities (plate, utensils, main course, sides, final course, soda), they discover and attempt to decipher the people and symbols surrounding them in space – and finally, through their body and their efforts, they experience **total existence in a total space**.

Monuments have various qualities that constitute aspects of their design: not just plastic qualities, or those that can be perceived by looking. For example: acoustic qualities such as the silence of the space, the various rhythms that occur within (such as ceremonies) and their musical reverberation, and the focusing of the space’s attributes on a particular point (such as a throne or altar).

Over the course of the years, the kibbutz dining hall has continuously swollen in size, turning from a shed to a concrete structure presented as an acropolis, something between fortress, synagogue, and temple. The dining hall is placed on a hill, generally at the kibbutz’s highest point. Ascending to it involved crossing the “Great Lawn,” upon which most of the central ceremonies in kibbutz life were conducted.

The grand structure contained more than a few narcissistic elements that contradicted that modest way of thinking that undergirded the establishment of the kibbutz. The kibbutz was caught up in an experience of cultural and social (to say nothing of religious) power. The dining hall’s size was determined by the number of members and visiting guests who took part in the traditional Passover seder. Doubtless there is a need to explain and stress the social and cultural environment in Israel – but as we understand narcissistic progression, the large and ornate buildings and elevated location papered over the kibbutz’s feelings of defectiveness, shame, and the exclusion, and the fear that they might be exposed.

In the Sha’ar ha-Golan dining hall’s dedication ceremony in 1952, the following declaration was made:

May the house that arises on this hill be a firm one, filled with the bustle of life throughout the generations, a house in which the kibbutz movement’s spirit of vision and action shall flourish. **Heavy is the weight, but we shall bear it aloft**. With the same effectiveness and aptitude with which we built and restored it, may this house gloriously stand for us and our children.

Thus, one might say, the dining hall became a monumental structure that diminished and dwarfed man, but magnified the collective, in a manner conforming to the romantic-utopian kibbutz idea itself.

**Conclusion:**

For many, the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 constituted the realization of a utopia. Zionist ideology, rooted in the era of nationalism that spanned the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had borne fruit. After decades of efforts at finding a path and ideological consolidation, the Jews finally came upon a solution, one made possible in large part by the aftereffects of World War II. The recently concluded war brought about the strengthening of the effect of “incipient redemption,” as well as the utopian feeling. And what better way for the eternal utopian society to cast its foundations than in concrete?

Was it a way out of the compulsive cyclicality of Jewish history and the way it was expressed through the new settlement of the Land of Israel? Was a remedy possible for the historical perpetual motion machine that wandered endlessly back and forth? This we cannot know, but psychoanalytical thought indicates that the human longing for a historical memory free of contradictions and paradoxes stands at the root of denial.

As we have learned, after all: history and its memory are not homogeneous. Memory is always composed of elements that do not accord to one another – memories tinged with love and quiet, for example, alongside memories colored with violence. Only by holding them together can they be processed in a way that does not establish human memory, and the maintenance thereof, atop a mechanism of denial. The human tendency to delude ourselves, which offers the possibility of erasing scraps of memory that do not accord with our self-perception, can be critical and destructive to anything related to our development.

The dividing wall – between the dining hall and the kibbutz, the kibbutz and its surroundings, the kibbutz and its past – constitutes a symbolic wall as well, dividing internal social spaces, preventing processing and integration. What we have here, if so, is the use of social dissociation on a massive scale.

One can identify a clear line between the planning of the Sha’ar ha-Golan dining hall and the need to contend with the crisis that befell the kibbutz’s members in 1948. The expression of trauma flows, in its first stage, from the plans that seem to “ignore” the building blocks of the new kibbutz, denying the departure from parents’ homes in the Diaspora and the abandonment of the kibbutz by its members in 1948.

The denial also encompasses the trauma of the aggressor. Sha’ar ha-Golan’s dining hall was built by Arab laborers, who had not long before undergone the greatest disruption of their lives. Stones taken from Arab houses sometimes served as the basis of the “wall and tower” plan’s fortifications. The Jewish conqueror bore past and present traumas, and the conquered and expelled had no choice but to build for him.

In the next stages, the trauma would become ever clearer. More and more new wings were added to the dining hall as the years went by, as if a kind of therapy or attempt to treat only the symptom, one which had lingered for nearly seventy years – a bandage on top of a bandage.

Yet the attempt to connect the utopian and the monumental to the denial of trauma does not work; indeed, from outside, the Sha’ar ha-Golan dining hall looks like a synagogue facing the godhead. From inside, to one’s great disappointment, the rift is exposed: in the Sha’ar ha-Golan dining hall, there is no cry, no sense of splendor. Utopia is not present, nor is any trace of euphoria. From inside, the structure is modest, sheltering itself from shame. The pictures one sees do not fully testify to the disappointing and impersonal space within; the outside arouses expectations only to leave them unfulfilled. There is no acropolis on the kibbutz, there is no pilgrimage to the dining hall, there is no therapeutic process on the way to a meal; there is no feeling of satiety.

Hence, this is the general question of the study: **is there a connection between trauma and architecture? Is it possible to discern post-traumatic phenomena and symptoms in architecture overall, and in kibbutz dining halls specifically?**

In this lecture, we have endeavored to demonstrate how one can observe with a historical architectural gaze, and show how the repeated traumas of kibbutz history are conveyed through the story of the kibbutz dining hall.

The encounter between architecture and psychoanalysis engenders a number of challenges related to different languages, methods of inquiry, and the difference between the concrete house, with its double meaning, and the symbolic house, but as we have endeavored to demonstrate, the space of trauma is not one that is merely optional for cooperative research, but rather necessary – that is, if we are to understand the dynamics of trauma and its physical manifestations as expressed by the sad tale of the dining hall. This tale recounts the rise and fall of the kibbutz movement in Israel. We feel that we are only at the beginning of the path, and additional expressions of shared spaces in the study of trauma and its significance will be revealed in time.

1. Quoted in: Forty, Adrian. *Concrete and Culture.* London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tsur, Muki and Yuval Daniel (eds.), *Livnot u-Lehibanot Bah: Sefer Shmuel Mestechkin – Adrikhalut ha-Qibutz be-Yisra’el*, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bar-On, Modi and Anat Zeltzer, *Ha-Kibbutz*, Channel 8, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)