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## Geometrical Wounds: The Work of Zvi Hecker in Israel, 1990 and 2000

Timothy Brittain-Catlin

### More of a Story than a Monument

There is a character in a cartoon-strip short story by Etgar Keret and Assaf Hanuka who determines the immediate future nature of his relationships with the girls he meets by his ability to tell them how he felt when he killed someone during the Lebanese War.<sup>1</sup> If he tells her he felt nothing, it means that he is serious about her; if, on the other hand, he makes the story into a personal emotional drama, it means that she is to be a one-night stand. At the final frame, faced with what looks like being real love for the first time, he blurts out his story to his new girlfriend in its full horror and the reader is left wondering whether the hero cannot escape the ritual of self destruction, or whether in fact this is a happy ending in which his need to purge himself of the memories of violence and tragedy is enacted in a sort of flaccid transfiguration.

This tiny pathos-laden curiosity, six pages long, is more of a monument than a story; it is one of many demonstrations of Keret's astonishing ability to compress the moods, horrors and elations of emotional life in Israel in the 1990s into one short sequence laden with ideas compressed into symbols, or stylized text instead of dialogue. The theme that Keret here again captures so brilliantly is what has become the overwhelming characteristic of that decade, the way in which the personal and the egocentric became the determining factors of just about everything. It is the culture of the spiral, the one in which the tiny hot nucleus spins about to draw everything into a dance about its own centre.

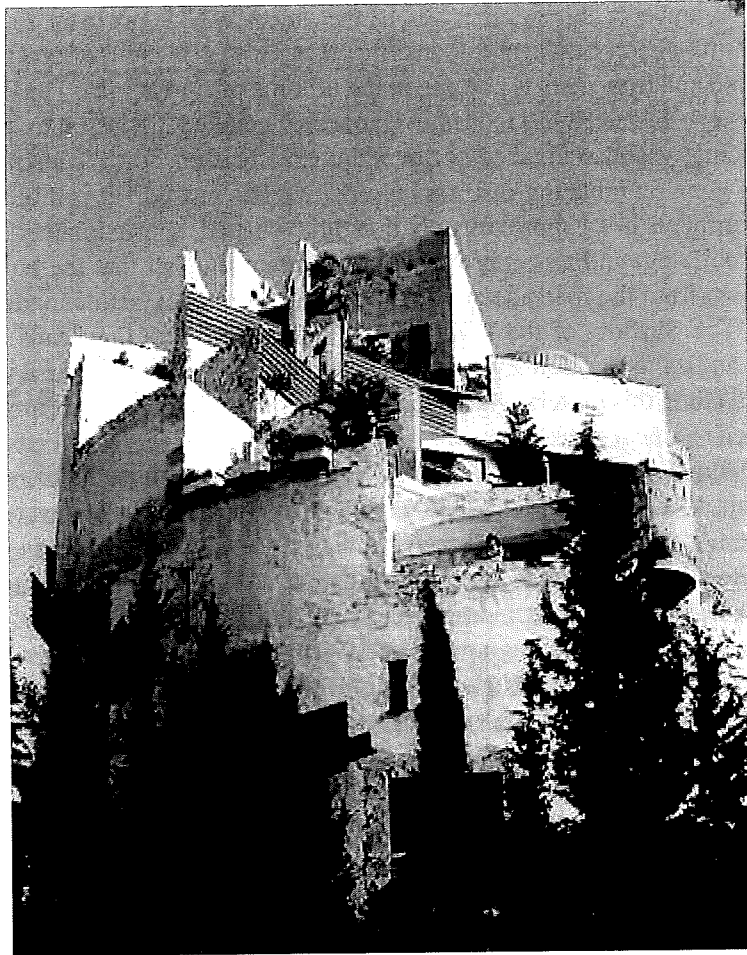
### *The Spiral House*

This chapter is about the way in which an Israeli sense of place is created not only out of the physical and national characteristics of its environment, but also from the voices, sometimes desperate and sometimes discordant, of its people.

First of all, however, that spiral: it was, by the way, A.W.N. Pugin in the England of the 1840s who first defined it as an original expression of architectural truth.<sup>2</sup> A hundred and fifty years is nothing in the lifetime of a great idea. The flats in Zvi Hecker's Spiral House in Ramat Gan were occupied in 1991 but whether the building was then finished or not is not exactly clear, for it is a structure that has gone on mutating over the decade that has passed.<sup>3</sup> It is a block of nine apartments in an approximately doughnut-shaped, approximately eight-floored building, and this approximation is due to the fact that the building slips down from the roadside at Tzel haGiv'ah – a romantic street name that means 'The Shadow of the Hill' – along a flight of steps that leads down at right angles to the Beit Zvi drama school (see Figure 11.1). The flats are arranged along this eastern side of the building, in an alignment that might be compared to a neat stack of bananas, pyramidal on one side, for as each floor digs down north-westwards into the hill, the banana above is slid or rotated a little bit, to a degree determined by its geometrical derivation, towards the south east. A pair of almost detached circular towers are situated to the north of the site within the curtilage of the doughnut, which is itself completed, or not, by various flying balconies and parapets, all of which are here and there supported by columns, pipes, spirals and various other bits and pieces.

What the above description does not provide however is any sense of the wildness of the construction, for every inch visible is covered in a wild assortment of materials, largely in irregular pieces of the pinky brown stone generally used for cheap cladding and not (as Peter Cook put it, when writing about the building for the *Architectural Review*) for 'serious architecture'.<sup>4</sup> Some of this stone clads whole walls, but elsewhere it provides a frieze, or an edging; it provides a tasselled fringe to the bottommost whirl of the spiral stairs. There are however many materials here which are less serious still, in particular the mosaic of broken mirror-glass, some of which Hecker apparently applied himself with the slap and the dash of the gentleman artist. More extravagantly, there are some cementy creatures lurking here, most magnificently a dragon somewhere above the entrance route, and various other semi-geckos sliding about the soffites. Of course the flats themselves, in spite of their curious slithery geometry, which actually is quite well suited to the climate, are painted white, like every other flat in Israel, and their owners seem to have made some effort to conventionalize them, crazy as they are.

There is an outstanding feature of the Spiral House which lies outside its own domain and that is its location opposite Hecker's Dubiner House, designed twenty years beforehand with Eldar Sharon. This Dubiner House is the block of flats where Hecker lives. It is the Hecker of his mentor Alfred Neumann:



**Figure 11.1** The Spiral House

angular, and classical in the sense of being a complete and unfaltering structure. From outside one can detect its polygonal grid but not, perhaps, the fact that it contains complex and magnificent internal public spaces of astonishing architectural control, with a full palette of variations of light and shadow extending and vanishing into different directions. Far from suffering from the usual problems of dankness and neglect that these unallocated spaces usually suffer from, these courts of Hecker's from the 1960s are airy and well-tended. Some people have put out rubbery plants in pots.

Hecker's Dubiner House brought something of Israel's heroic desert brutalism into the heart of the suburbs. It is at home there, not least because many of Israel's municipal and public structures of the 1950s and 1960s are composed of a vocabulary limited to various combinations of rough-faced overscaled concrete columns and shells, often in shades of ochre or pale brown, and when waiting at a bus stop in the sun in some suburb somewhere one can fancy, should one wish, that one is in the Mexico of Félix Candela, with strappy rubbery leaves sprouting out all over the piloti. It is this kind of work that creates the sense of place of the Israeli suburb, and it has often weathered very well. But there is always a difference between those architects who picked out and strung together their details from the magazines, and those who like Hecker were creating something altogether new. Hecker's Dubiner House entirely conquered the little street it sits over, with its scale and its panache but most of all with its discipline and its platonic conception, the benign *carceri* of the suburbs.

In fact, the immediate surroundings of the Dubiner House and its new neighbour on the other side of the road make up a picture of Israeli suburbia that has little equal anywhere, certainly for those who love the dusty green roads, the boxes on stilts, and tatty little low-lying villas, reached by jerking buses that feel as if they are made of tin, that almost scrape the boxes of nuts and seeds in the kiosks along the main streets of Ramat Gan or Givatayim.<sup>5</sup> Alongside 'The Shadow of the Hill' there is also of course that odd prominence itself poking up to the South, with an even odder monument on it; and down the alleyway past the Spiral House there is the straddling bulk of Beit Zvi, with its precious inmates having lessons which are intended to make them even more precious, and in fact almost grotesquely tuned into their themselves, in what for outsiders to the Israeli art of being Israeli seem like a parody of the conscious psychodrama of their daily lives. One can stumble down the public steps between the Spiral House and the school, as I did, and hear a fragment of a play being rehearsed just there, out in the open, and only the fact that the sequences are occasionally repeated reveals that this exchange of barked yet perfectly enunciated words and phrases is not a genuine conversation. The clothes that the actors are wearing are (in a country that has comparatively little native historical drama) more than likely the same ones that the characters in the play will be wearing, only to some degree more or less contrived. And it is because there is almost no difference between the form that a genuine conversation might take and that which is being spat out here (with the accompaniment of some rather stylized facial expressions) that the similarity between this and the architecture of Hecker, pushed up alongside at the time, could hardly be lost. Is the building serious or is it not? Is the *architecture parlante* reading from a script?

Given the time and expense required to create a significant building, it is surprising, and very regrettable, that more architects do not take the trouble to create a building that speaks in the coherent and symbolic manner that the Spiral House does. After all, the actor is paid to do in public a stylized version of what he does at home, and what he hears and knows about from home. Why not the architect? It should be no surprise that by far and away the most sophisticated, the most internationally recognized and most energetic and original art form in Israel is that of contemporary dance: dance is composed of the same processes that we saw with our student actors, the repetition of stylized sequences, and yet it generally succeeds in being far more disciplined than either acting or architecture. Where there is no discipline there is generally bad work, and that for the most part is what has happened to Israeli architecture. Hecker's discipline is his geometry, but it is also his alertness in identifying and representing the issues in modern life from which it draws its flavour, and giving them a comprehensible concrete form. No analysis of Hecker's architecture could be complete without investigating where his genius has trapped this fragrance – I would rather say this *nichoach*, a popular word in Hebrew literature – of modern life, and how he has left it to waft in the air to catch the nose of the passer-by.

When Peter Cook, one of the most sensitive of commentators, first met the Spiral House, he found himself appreciating its 'naughtiness': there was 'precious little naughtiness' in Israeli architecture, he thought. I do not entirely agree. There is a little naughtiness in Israeli architecture, even if it is not usually as blatant as it is in Hecker's buildings. I am not referring here to the self-conscious junkiness of much new building, usually of the speculative and commercial kind, but perhaps it would do to dispose of that particular subject as immediately as its pressing bulk demands. During the period when a very few large architectural practices dominated, architecture in Israel did have a certain discipline to it: within the overall mould of a Tel Aviv block of flats, with its restrictive building lines and heights, a talented architect might channel his originality into the most subtle of detailing, the most nifty of floor-plans, and achieve a building that had a great deal of austere beauty about it; some of the finest of these were built in the 1940s and 1950s around the Western end of Jabotinsky Street in Tel Aviv. Now of course all manner of nonsense is got up in all manner of colours; this is not 'naughtiness', but childishness, look-at-me-ness; actually, it is just a lack of discipline and of urban culture. There is a bridge erected somewhere in Jaffa a few years ago which is composed of entirely redundant archways of a sort of Arab appearance; and there is a block of flats on the Herbert Samuel promenade in Tel Aviv that is composed

of various peeling planes and angled struts in ice cream colours and with a demonstrable lack of ability on the part of its designers to create a coherent composition. These things were designed by the fancier architects who appear in architects' chatter and magazines, the prima-donnas from the architecture schools, and they inevitably spawn imitations in the industrial areas of the satellite towns and along the main roads.

No, childishness is not naughtiness; naughtiness is delicious. Some of it is lying about the most sacred temples of modern Zionism, waiting to be savoured or ravished by connoisseurs, and nearly all of it was perpetrated by the great names in Israeli Modernism. One of my favourite examples can be found in the complex of the Hebrew University in Giv'at Ram. This is Ze'ev Rabina's 'Beit Belgiyah', the functional purpose of which seems somewhat unclear, but whose cultural significance is far reaching.<sup>6</sup> For this is a building in drag. It has a delicate stone-clad surround, and a dainty doughnut plan, but just there at the window reveals you can see bold concrete reveals: it is like looking closely down at a woman's neckline and discovering what are unmistakably a man's chest muscles underneath. And there is another agreeable piece of naughtiness nearby: the men's lavatories in the university library nearby. They are like the stage set in a Joe Orton comedy. They are stupendously grand in scale, even compared to the various odd pomposities of the rest of the building, and yet rather disgusting in detail; they are a glorious contrast to the po-faced detailing of Dora Gad's period library interiors and they are thus rather naughty and extremely funny.<sup>7</sup>

There is that naughtiness in Hecker, but although it is authentically Israeli it is only a small part of a tremendous repertoire: it is an element in the sophisticated conversation of a practiced raconteur. The Spiral House is as much as anything else a building of shuddering pain: even its balconies are composed of horizontal wooden boards that pierce the flesh of the soft walls like a splinter. An architecture which sings loudly of its personal pain is rooted deeply in Israeli experience: disappointment, lack of certainty, lack of money, puritanism, hard work, rebellion. That is not, perhaps, a particularly unconventional type of experience, but it is very rare that an architect can echo it and draw it into a narrative form of architecture. This Spiral House is not one of those buildings that one sees and forgets instantly, for it leaves the track of its sharp forms upon your skin, cutting and slicing as if with a pastry cutter; wounding the earth with its sharp teeth; and of course its inevitable spiral motion brings us back to Pugin's search for truth again, an architecture where every component sings with the same voice.

### Voices in Israeli Culture

One of the critics to have identified an authentic Israeli voice in recent culture is Gadi Taub, whose 'A Dispirited Rebellion' was published in 1997, by which time the chaotic ugliness of the speculative architecture referred to above had established itself almost as a style. According to Taub, it is the inability of the young rebels to create an alternative, constructive worldview that makes their revolt 'dispirited'. Their revolt is merely a series of personal gestures, which are based to some degree on an ironic recycling of elements of an Israeli culture. The reemergence in the context of camp of 'Edna Lev, the High Windows, and Ilanit' (for example) has become acceptable to the new good-taste peddlers and critics of acceptable fashion because modern Israeli culture is certain enough of the quality of its more recent products.<sup>8</sup> The canvas from which to draw the elements of revolt is a broad one, and cannot be derived from European and American models, because:

... we are foremost Israelis. Primarily, speakers of Hebrew. And that includes hot sun and crowdedness, and Arabic and Russian and Romanian and Moroccan, and development towns, and pebbledash villas in untended moshavim, and orange and blue signs carrying advertisements for Agfa, and Freddie Buys Everything merchants, and the ultra-orthodox and Gush Emunim, and 'Dan' and 'Egged', and the singers on the cheap cassettes sold in the markets, and meditation sessions on the hills of the Galilee, and basic training and war against another people for the same little bit of land.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, he notes elsewhere that:

The things that are considered the most tasteless – tracksuits, pink fur, shirts decorated with Starsky and Hutch and trousers suited for charity shops – these are the things that the new rebels want to wear.<sup>10</sup>

For a direct translation into architectural terms of what Taub is describing one need only see the horrible recent building for the Kalisher School of Art in south Tel Aviv. This was a new structure got up by a very Tel Aviv type of architectural practice, the principals of which teach in the smart architecture schools, and it includes a sort of tower partially faced on one side with fancy arched aluminium windows, the architectural origins of which are in the improvised stone-clad shacks that disfigure the nineteenth-century estates of Jerusalem, but also in particular characterize the new synagogues that have escaped the planning regulations south of the Mahaneh Yehudah market there.

It is conscious kitsch: it derives presumably from lashing about and trying to find comically ironic elements to draw attention to itself. Any comparison between this type of thing and the facing materials or anything else at the Spiral House can merely be a superficial one, in the exact sense of the word, since it is restricted to a similarity in the types of cladding. There is never any echo of the spatial drama of Hecker's buildings in this type of work, any more than there was with the arabesque bridge at Jaffa or the flats on the Herbert Samuel Promenade. All of these appear to be products of Taub's 'dispirited' culture, a series of detached personal statements, and they are merely visual effects, like Taub's Agfa advertisements. These kitsch buildings are suffering from what Taub calls 'postmodern distress' – which is, as he says,

... primarily the distress of too much freedom and too many choices, of lack of limiting norms, lack of faith, lack of uniting myths and explanations, lack of order. The distress of floating in an empty space.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, from a lack of discipline: it is an architecture based on nothing in particular, derived from a method of teaching that is unable or unwilling to commit itself to an ideology of any kind.

Taub's critique of the youthful rebels of the 1990s contains much of relevance to architecture: he concludes that a type of culture has developed in which stimulation has replaced feeling, observing that writers such as Keret appear to yearn to reenter the genres of the old, such as the simple detective story, but could not do so.<sup>12</sup> So the alternative is to make a lot of noise. The result of the 'dispirited rebellion' is, according to Taub, the extraordinary amount of violence characteristic in modern Israeli literature, a culture of decadence:

Decadence is not only the basis for a change in order, but also a giving up of the very possibility of order. And when order ceases to be a stable rest, a basis for hope and plans, the satisfaction of the human urge is the refuge from it. A refuge which denies the possibility of stability, but nevertheless a refuge. A kind of consolation. Adhering to the refuge, more than being a subject in its own right, is the evidence of pessimism and introversion. A lack of willingness to cross the line between childhood and adolescence ... it seems that Erich Fromm's prophecy, the idea that in a crowd of society the individual becomes increasingly a 'cybernetic man' – a man who has stimulation but no feelings – is threatening at least partially to materialize.<sup>13</sup>

If he were an architectural critic, appalled by the violent ugliness of modern

architecture perpetrated by teachers and critics as well as by the draughtsmen of the building contractors, he might well come to the same conclusion. Certainly his observation regarding the postmodernists' frustration at their inability to reenter old genres carries a persuasive echo, although in fact at least one firm – Kimmel Eshkalot – has at least once most successfully reentered the genre of the classic north Tel Aviv block of flats.<sup>14</sup> But most of these architectural genres cannot be reentered, and some of those available to European and American architects – the neo-Classical, the neo-Gothic – have in any case never had a substantial presence here.

Taub's conclusion appears to be that contemporary writers and poets are primarily concerned with themselves and with their own knowing sense of detachment from the rest of society. It remains to be seen whether an undertaking as complex as a large building can incorporate not the disparate voices – these are the coarse shriekings we hear from the ugly buildings of the second-rate – but rather the sense of a culture that speaks with those voices: an architecture which represents the poignant cries of the rebellious and the lonely.

#### *Kitsch and Aesthetic Violence*

I have suggested that Gadi Taub's notions of kitsch and aesthetic violence are echoed in the architecture of recent years; but just as there is no attempt on Taub's part to imply that these notions are those which actually underlie modern Israeli society, it would be inadequate to claim that Zvi Hecker's architecture is composed even from a cacophony of individual voices. Hecker is not a 'new rebel'; nor is he making a simple transfer from one art form to another. Instead, it seems to me that he is making an architecture about a people that speaks about itself in individual and distinct voices.

One of the symptoms of a culture that revolves around individual self-centredness is the way in which the individual offers himself up as a victim time and time again. Although he seems to do this as a form of self-flagellation, his real purpose is to raise the intensity of an argument and to try to engage with it on emotional terms alone – preferably ones as far away from rational debate as possible. The politics of Israel has had many skillful practitioners of this art and in the mid-late 1990s Binyamin Netanyahu, for one, excelled at it. It is often astonishing how the behaviour of leaders permeates down through society, but it is possibly true that in Israel this kind of thing found particularly fertile ground. The debate of daily life, on the news, in the papers, in the post office, on the beach, revolves to an astonishing extent on the willingness of people to impress first of all their own sense of victimhood, and achieving

this by making themselves as open and exposed as possible: it is of course a form of emotional blackmail. It must surely be related to the strange culture in Israel not just of voyeurism but also of wanting to be the victim of the voyeur: in part it is simply a giving of oneself up to what is sometimes a fact of life, having to live amongst too many others in too small a place. The residents of Tel Aviv publish messages in the town's weekly papers trying to make contact with those they have seen undressing almost in front of their eyes, from the kitchen window. A few years ago, the illustrator Yirmi Pinkus published a story in comic book form entitled *Observable*, which is entirely concerned with the experience of feeling that one is being watched within an urban context so intense, and so beautifully derived by Pinkus from a real address in Tel Aviv, that it has something of the quality of a stage set.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the hero is virtually always naked, or nearly naked, whenever he is seen in his own house.

The concept of voyeurism in architecture is not necessarily either abstract or metaphorical. Ya'acov Rechter's Tel Aviv Centre for the Performing Arts, provided outgoing theatregoers with the astonishing sight of the stars of the evening's performance totally and brutally in the nude, for these latter were evidently quite unaware that the large windows of their dressing rooms were placed exactly on the corner of Da Vinci Street and Shaul haMelech Boulevard.<sup>16</sup> A lesser architect, or perhaps quite simply a foreign one, would have placed a grand lobby or stair at this intersection, the most prominent part of the exterior of the complex, but Rechter, an Israeli through and through, decided to place here naked bodies and the genitalia of the artistes, projected by neon into the unsurprised night sky of Tel Aviv.

A conventional architect wanting to expose, as it were, the private parts of a building would choose to display the construction's own intimate details, the bits that are normally hidden, the pipes and the wires, on the outside. Plenty have done so. The fact that Rechter (whether he was aware of it or not) chose to make so bold a move, and evidently no one questioned it, illustrates to what an extent it was taken for granted by the early 1990s that no one had any right to any personal privacy any more. There is none or almost none at home, and there is certainly none in the army, and so it is simply logical that a large public building should operate on the same basis. The building is an instrument in forcing its users to play to the rules that Israelis are used to. 'Golda', as the opera house is colloquially known, is the matron that takes the naughty children in hand and punishes them.

I was reminded of 'Golda' and her cruelty to her guests on reading 'Chrysanthemums', a story about the regular nightly humiliation of adolescent

boys by a boarding school matron, by the prize-winning writer Yossi Avni, who amongst his many admirers can apparently include Nissim Kalderon – the ‘friend and teacher’ of Taub. Avni, according to Kalderon’s note on the back cover of Avni’s book, ‘can move in his writing from reality to fantasy whilst giving substance to both’. It is a quality well suited to architecture:

Night after night Clara would pass through the rooms and fondle the erect penises of her students. The corridor was dark, and she would step through the rooms according in her determined order. The lads would already be waiting for her in their beds. When they heard the sound of her heels angrily striking the corridor and moving towards them, they would get into the right position and part their legs. The rustle of blankets told Clara that they were ready for her.<sup>17</sup>

Once one begins to look for this type of thing, an exaggerated humiliation of the individual centred about his own body, one finds they come in floods. ‘Everything, absolutely everything, is coming out of the closet’, as the veteran journalist Gideon Samet had memorably put it.<sup>18</sup> The radio editor Shy Tubali, not (unlike Avni) a writer of homosexual stories as such, won a prize from the Ministry of Science and the Arts for his short story collection *Body Language* in 1995. ‘Adolescence’, in some respects a conventional story, involves a boy fondling the naked body of his sleeping male babysitter; more brutally, in ‘Fertilizing the Test Tube’, a father, obsessively comparing and identifying himself with his adolescent son, ends by coming upon him in the night, drawing down his underpants, and pressing his fingers down towards his ‘swollen testicles, and the member itself’; and having to run away from the house on being discovered.<sup>19</sup> And indeed at least one television drama involving scenes in showers with fathers and sons comes to mind. There is a recurring element throughout the mid-1990s of forced bodily exposure as an implement of shame and confusion. Intimacy and voyeurism, voyeurism and exposure, exposure and vulnerability; and perhaps not unexpectedly the additional elements of the male obsession with maleness and the male body carrying with it a certain glide into the realm of the homoerotic, and also into homosexuality, whether desired or not. These seem to me to be the paths that the culture of the individual inevitably must take when it is expanded and developed so far that it becomes a caricature. All that is left now is to see how Hecker succeeded in generating a new architectural form that could speak for the voices of the 1990s.

### The Palmach House

Now that 12 years have passed since the inauguration of the Spiral House, the building has clearly begun to come alive. Its million faceted mirrors and stones have tarnished and weathered, and as with some kind of creeping fungus its spores have streaked across the building just as they fancy, usually but not, apparently, always in the way in which the light, or the damp, has called out to them. Its cutting edges have not blunted, and the actors on its doorstep still chatter away in dystopic fragments.

At the close of the decade over which the Spiral House ruled, the *Architectural Review* returned to Israel to record the changes that had come over Hecker’s architecture.<sup>20</sup> The Palmach House, completed in 2000, was designed by Zvi Hecker and Rafi Segal, and is located in the non-residential university area adjoining Ramat Aviv; it was founded to commemorate the fighters of the pre-State Palmach military unit.<sup>21</sup> When I visited it for the first time I had come almost directly from an exhibition at the Dvir Gallery by the now internationally recognized photographer Adi Nes, whose work has very often portrayed soldiers in Caravaggio-like poses or occasionally brought them out into the world of camp: they wear make up, and engage in sometimes apparently faux-heroic activities (see Figure 11.2).

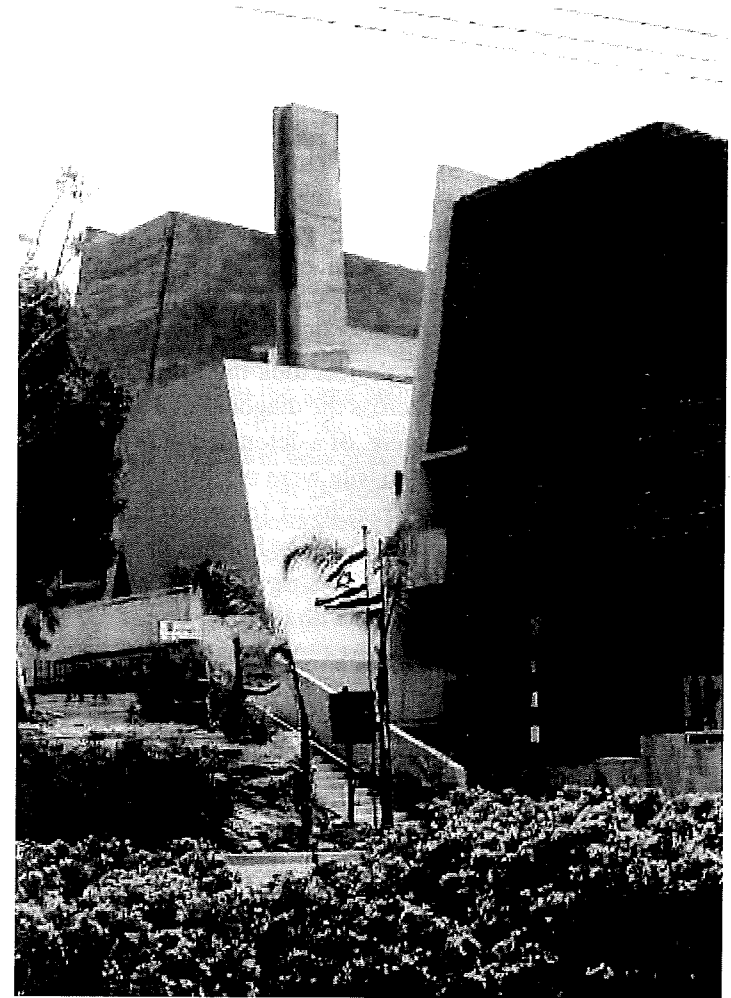
Immediately on arriving at the Palmach House I saw more crowds of soldiers, this time real ones, in purple berets and designer sunglasses, sunning themselves along the ramp of the entrance into the building. One does not have to look at Nes’ photographs to see that the sexy creatures drawn long ago by Yossi Stern, those Palmach soldiers of the soft pencil line with their rounded hips and perfect backsides, have long since walked up off the page and descended into the real life of 1990s Israel. Now that the male body had become the focus of much Israeli life, a cult of male good looks and vulnerable beauty was comfortably descending into conscious self-parody. The young men here had chosen a vulnerable place to enjoy the weather and be seen, for they were poking their heads over the parapets towards the noise of the main road. The building presents a series of west-facing terraces and ramps instead of a formal elevation, and it does not have the comprehensive geometrical curtilage familiar from Hecker buildings of previous decades. It is, in fact, a building which more than anything else is distinguished by the fact that it has no distinct boundaries, and as such, as I noted at the time, it is very different from the trophy buildings of the rest of the Tel Aviv university campus.

The overall form of the Palmach House complex consists of three long structures, each one about 5m wide and from about 45 to 60m long (see Figure



**Figure 11.2** Adi Nes, *Untitled*, 1996 (courtesy Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv)

11.3). Two of these run parallel to Chaim Levanon Street, the main northeast, southwest road; the third runs from the southeast of the site towards the northwest, crossing the second block about a third of the way down from its northernmost tip. The front strip, mainly two floors high above ground, is the only complete part of the project and provides the entrance to an exhibition in the basement. The rear, intersecting, strips will eventually contain an auditorium, a library and various meeting areas, and these are located for the most part in the external 'V's formed by the intersections. The dynamic of the geometry of the plan is echoed in the vertical forms themselves, which rise



**Figure 11.3** The Palmach House

and fall in counterpoint to the ramps; since the site slopes up and away from the main road, the elements of the structure further towards the rear project yet higher. Many of these are incomplete; the twin wheat sheaf symbol of the Palmach, cast in concrete, presides over what looks like an open theatre made from a Paul Nash landscape. The outstanding feature of the plan of the Palmach House is the fact that the central courtyard, between the front strip and the intersecting rear ones, has been painstakingly left exactly as was before construction began, a dusty, rocky, sparse grove of eucalyptus and pine.<sup>22</sup>



The building appears to have streaked or exploded through the landscape, fading away in all directions, sideways as well as up and down. The external finishes of the building, mainly strips of *kurkar*, were decided on through on-site experiment and so as at the Spiral House even the finished parts of the building altogether lack a sense of being completable.

Strangely enough, a harbinger of some of this had already appeared locally, in the form of a project at the architecture department of the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem by a student called Alon bin Nun as far back as 1991.<sup>23</sup> This had been the year of the Gulf War, and bin Nun took as his theme the phrase used by radio announcers when about to switch on the air raid sirens: 'Following a missile attack ...' His project took the form of a building lying in modish deconstructivist shards across the diagonal of a Tel Aviv residential block, following the outline, as it were, of a detonated but still partially intact Scud missile: the building and the missile were merged with one another.

Bin Nun's point was, I think, the fragility of Tel Aviv, which had not known aerial bombardment since the Italian raids of the Second World War; his project spoke of the actual shattering of the city's rigidly orthogonal form. Unlike Hecker and Segal, he was not engaged with the fragility of the whole of the Zionist enterprise and of its soldiers. At the Palmach House, the architects' experiments with constructional techniques are explicitly derived from or recalling the practical expediencies of battle, the bunker, the sandbags, the life-or-death improvisations; there are pile-caps cropping up as windows, paths and routes going nowhere, wall planes that look like planks running up the side of a dugout. There is no sense in the finishes of the materials used that the building has been, as it were, achieved: the concrete is cast into panels and strips as if the construction (or the war) were still going on. The building commemorates the fighters of the Palmach by precisely echoing their frailties rather than their conventional triumphs, for there is a denying of heroic forms in favour of an almost pessimistic lack of boundary or mass, each part not quite being what it appears to be.

For this is the extraordinary and painful truth of the Palmach House, a building erected to commemorate a genuinely heroic period in Israel's genuinely heroic past: it portrays the army as a symbol of weakness, not of strength; it portrays the soldier as lonely, isolated, afraid, under-equipped, instead of as a hero; above all, it portrays the military bunker as an exposed, vulnerable, dirty, transient place instead of as a fortress. In so doing it reverberates with the self-doubt of the Israeli male self-image, and with the shredding of classic Zionist history, well before these things became the common language of the street. It no longer has the actors' script of the

Spiral House: it is barking commands across the platoon; deafened by the battle and by the winds. It creates a sense of place which is un-place, but an Israeli un-place.

It was thus of the Palmach House that I was reminded when I read the pained testimony of a soldier called 'David' serving in a submarine, in the compilation by the psychologist Danny Kaplan, the terrible power of which is worth experiencing here at some length:

During my military service on submarines, playing about like gays was something well recognized and known ... it creates a massive sort of intimacy. However strange it may seem from outside, people would sometimes sleep in each other's arms in the same bed and certainly some people would feel each other up, for fun, laughing. There's a great deal of male intimacy here ... There were all kinds of tests of each other's gayness going on. First of all, you have to understand that the submarine was divided into an engine wing, which was the more masculine one, and the electronics wing, which was less so. The engine people were dirtier, covered in the grease and the filth of the machines ... so one of the soldiers from the men's wing, whose behaviour was somewhat worse, and was less of a friend of mine, and who had been in the army longer – I remember one really heavy incident with him, which he in fact started on one of the lower bunks, and he began to fondle me, like he was kind of massaging my penis. There were other people around, you're not alone, that's what stops it from being a seriously gay thing, and I, being young, had two possible reactions to choose from: one was to show him that yes, I was braver than he was, and let him get on with it until he got frightened and ran off, and the second possible reaction, which was the one I generally chose, was to try to get out of it somehow. And I remember that I said to him that time, 'stop it, that's enough', and his hand was right here, and although I was telling him to stop I was actually pressing his hand against my cock. I was doing exactly the opposite of what I was saying. He of course got it. He jumped out straight away and something in his expression which I saw as soon as he spoke seemed to show me that he understood. I remember it as a very frightening moment.<sup>24</sup>

This astonishing story, which is much echoed elsewhere amongst Kaplan's researches, and which also is matched by the anecdotal evidence of others, contains almost all the elements which lead to an understanding of the Palmach House. It contains the uncertainty of the balance between the heroism of the Zionist enterprise, and the delicacy of its operatives; it contains that recurring element, that is given voice by Avni, by Tubali, and in daily life, of the exposure of the individual's intimate parts and feelings both against his will but also with his complicity, and not to intimate friends but to near strangers; it

contains that agreeable Ruskinian contrast (was it Charles Ashbee that brought it here?) between tenderness and brutal force; it contains a curious hovering dichotomy that tends, as it were, towards a scrunching of the gears, between pleasure and self-sacrifice; it contains the exaggerated claustrophobia that life in Israel inevitably entails; it is on the edge of a kind of ejaculation: and if relief came, it would no doubt be accompanied by waves of guilt and filth. The story, the truth, the life, the building: none of these is striving for fulfillment. The whole point is the loss, the shame, the disappointment, the sacrificing of one's privacy for nothing. 'It's crowded here ... crowded'!<sup>25</sup>

## Notes

*For Asaf.*

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I am indebted to my friends Esther Zandberg and Gil Klein for their generous help and advice.

- 1 Etgar Keret and Assaf Hanuka, 'Pa'am b'Hayim', *Streets of Rage* (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 1997), pp. 27–33.
- 2 For which see, for example, Pugin's undated letter to J.H. Bloxam in the Magdalen College Oxford archive, MS 528/89.
- 3 Ramat Gan is a satellite town of Tel Aviv, directly across the Ayalon River to the north west.
- 4 Peter Cook, 'Spiral Hecker', *Architectural Review*, 188, October (1990), pp. 54–8.
- 5 Givatayim lies across the Ayalon River to the south east of central Tel Aviv; its architectural character is in general similar to that of Ramat Gan.
- 6 Opened 1967.
- 7 The veteran interior designer Dora Gad is mainly associated with her public and state projects, such as the Israel Museum, parts of the Knesset building, and the interiors of liners and passenger aircraft.
- 8 The archetypical example of this phenomenon was the reappearance in the late 1990s of the veteran songstress Shula Chen in a cameo role in the culturally aware television drama 'Florentin', after her prolonged absence from the fashionable stage. Edna Lev and Ilanit are middle-of-the-road singers of the 1970s: the former was also a tabloid gossip column celebrity, and the latter appeared for Israel more than once in the Eurovision Song Contest; the 'High Windows' was a late 1960s band closer to folk than pop.
- 9 Gadi Taub, *A Dispirited Rebellion: Essays on Contemporary Israeli Culture* (Bnei Braq: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House Ltd, 1997), p. 44. The original text of this extract and of all others referred to in this chapter are in Hebrew.
- 10 Ibid., p. 81.
- 11 Ibid., p. 82.
- 12 Ibid., p. 65.
- 13 Ibid., p. 77.
- 14 I am thinking of the block of flats at Mandelstam Street in Tel Aviv, under construction during 2000.
- 15 Yirmi Pinkus, *Observable*, trans. Noah Stollman (Tel Aviv: Actus Tragicus, 1998).
- 16 The Tel Aviv Centre for the Performing Arts opened in 1994.
- 17 Yossi Avni, 'Chrysanthemums', *Grove of the Dead Trees* (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 1995), pp. 119–22. Yossi Avni is a pen name.
- 18 Samet was prophetically deploying the enforced self-outing of a well-known academic as a metaphor for the new maturity of Israeli society. *Ha'aretz*, 5 February 1993.
- 19 Shy Tubali, *Body Language* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd, 1996). The quotation is from p. 107.
- 20 Timothy Brittain-Catlin, 'Geological Formation', *Architectural Review*, 207, (2000), May, pp. 50–53.
- 21 Ramat Aviv is an up-market residential suburb north of central Tel Aviv. The Palmach unit operated illegally during British rule but was, in effect, tolerated because of its close ties to the Labour movement and its enmity to various other nationalist paramilitary operations. Yitschak Rabin was at one point its commander. The Palmach's greatest triumph was the securing of the road from the coast to West Jerusalem during Israel's War of Independence in 1948. The full name of the Palmach House is the 'Palmach Veterans' Memorial Centre'.
- 22 The landscape architects were Zvi Dekel and Shlomo Ze'evi of Tichnun Nof, Tel Aviv.
- 23 Hecker won the Palmach House in a competition held in 1992.
- 24 Danny Kaplan, *David, Jonathan and Other Soldiers: Identity, Masculinity and Sexuality in Combat Units in the Israeli Army* (Bnei Braq: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House Ltd, 1999), pp. 131–2. Kaplan's book has now been issued in an English edition: Danny Kaplan, *Brothers and Others in Arms: The Making of Love and War in Israeli Combat Units* (New York: Southern Tier Editions, Harrington Park Press, 2003). The testimony quoted here partially appears there on p. 209.
- 25 Michah Sheetreet, Arkadi Duchin and Yossi Alfant, 'New World Order', from *Shinuyim b'Hergelei haZricha (Changes in Screeching Habits)* (Or Yehudah: Hed Arzi, 1991), track 7.