

Cultural transfer and Orientalism in Palestine

Alexander Baerwald, Technion, Haifa



Alex Baerwald, Technion Haifa, Jüdisches Institut für Technische Erziehung, Haifa, 1914

Israel is a young country and has seen immigration from many European countries. One of the newcomers was the architect Alexander Baerwald (1877-1930), who was instructed by the “Aid Association of German Jews” in Berlin to design the first higher technical school in the Middle-East (fig. 1). How did his travels and studies of oriental culture influence the final design of the “Technion”?

James Simon, a textile trader, and Dr. Paul Nathan, a politician and journalist, had the initial idea of constructing a higher technical school in Eretz-Israel. They were both active in the non-Zionist “Aid Association of German Jews” (Hilfsverein Deutscher Juden). This organization established kindergartens and schools in Eretz-Israel with German-educated instructors. They decided to build the first higher technical school for education in Haifa, because of its international values, flourishing economy, and also to develop the harbor town.

Alexander Baerwald, Berlin-born Jewish architect, started in 1909 to design the school. As an immigrant, he brought his standards, professional values and architectural concepts from Germany to his new homeland in Palestine. First, Baerwald studied the local methods of construction and vernacular architecture with its ventilation systems. About his later finished Technion he states, that “the building [...] is a structure of the strictest symmetry, with a monumental entrance and a polygonal dome on the central axis.”¹ The architect adapted the vernacular architecture with its pointed arches, cupolas, ventilation openings over the windows, crenellations, and local building methods to his design (fig. 2). He adapted these after his travel to the Orient and molded them into a “New Hebrew Style”.²

Around the same time, the then Bauhaus teacher Paul Klee also traveled to the Orient, first to Tunisia (1914), later to Egypt (1928). He was very much influenced by his experiences and impressions of this oriental culture. Within his art there is a noticeable change in usage of color and techniques. He was inspired by arabesque ornaments, letters and structures.

In his watercolor “Pyramide” (1930) he reflected his visual impressions gathered at his travels to the Orient (fig. 6). After ten years teaching at the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau the watercolor demonstrates a combination of strict forms. Rectangles scaling towards the center, where crossing lines of triangles which signifies pyramids. A certain depth is created with the colors blue and rose, which intersect through the overlapping of the rectangular and triangular forms. In the very center, at the tip of the two pyramids, no color is used. The further in the center of the watercolor, the less overlapping of dark and light, day and night, color is found. It is more a window, framing the upside down blue and the upright rose pyramids.

A cultural transfer are in both, the Technion and the watercolor “Pyramide”, visible. These are examples European work with inspiration from the Orient.

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¹Medina Meyer-Maril, From a new „Hebrew Style“ to a moderate modernism. Alexander Baerwald (1877 - 1930) in Eretz-Israel, in: *Asaph, Studies in Art History*, vol. 13-14, ed. by Hana Taragan and Nissim Gal, 2010, p. 537-546; Gilbert Herbert/Silvina Sosnovsky, *Bauhaus on the Carmel and the Crossroads of Empire*.

²Gilbert Herbert and Silvina Sosnovsky, *Bauhaus on the Carmel and the Crossroads of Empire: Architecture and Planning in Haifa during the British Mandate* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Yod rzhak Ben-Zvi, 1993), 28.



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Fig. 2, 3, 4, 5: Detailed Fotos: pointed arches, cupolas, ventilation openings over the windows, crenellations

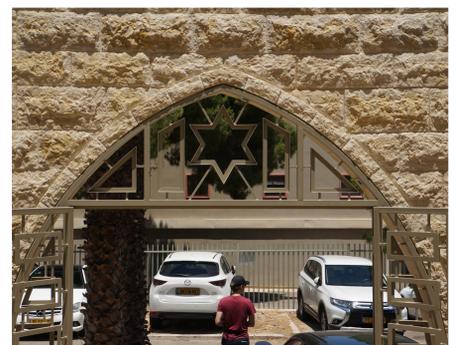


Fig. 4

Fig. 5



Fig. 6 Paul Klee, Pyramide, 1930. Bern, Zentrum Paul Klee

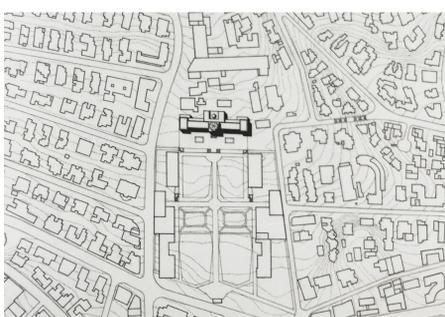


Fig. 7 Technion, Haifa | urban situation

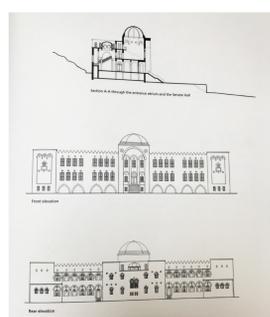


Fig. 8 Technion, Haifa - section | elevation

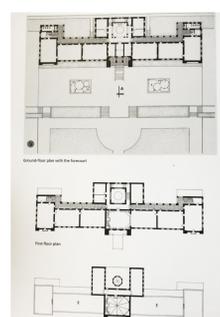


Fig. 9 Technion, Haifa - floor plans

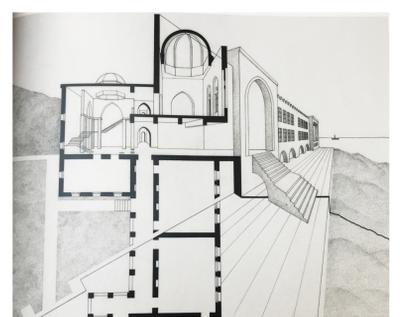


Fig. 10 Technion, Haifa - section