Are residential high rises the solution to Israel’s housing shortage?

The social protest considered apartment towers as a symbol of corruption and inequality, but they may actually be the way to create affordable housing.

By Keshef Rosenblum | Feb.34, 2013 | 1:08 AM | 3 Tweet

Most Bat Yam residents will not be able to avoid the profile of the third Ashdar One Tower, a highrise residential building that will be built in the coming years in the city’s Gan Ha’ir neighborhood. The building, which was designed by Canaan-Shenhav Architects, will stand 42 stories, over 150 meters above sea level. But it won’t be the only one: Five towers of the same height have already been approved for construction, with an option for more. In front of it stands the Neveh Tower, which is already under construction, and alongside it the Azorim and Amirai Bat Yam firms will build additional towers of the same height.

The short history of the project’s route through the municipal offices and planning committees reflects the Bat Yam municipality’s residential concept: At the start of this century the construction of four 16-story high-rises was approved, but they underwent a change of plans in 2005 to three 26-story high-rises. Four years later, before the first of them was completed, the district planning committee approved the raising of the height of Towers One and Two to 42 stories.

For most urban residents, residential towers have become a dirty word mixed with envy, a feeling that increases with the amount of effort it takes to lift your head up. Those sold in Tel Aviv really are unequivocally designed for the rich 0.1 percent, with the luxury services and extreme privacy they offer. But in other cities, such as Yavne, Holon, Ramat Gan, Ashdod, Rehovot and even Be’er Sheva, the towers of the future offer a variety of apartments, some of them at a more affordable price.

In the Ashdar One Tower the apartments will be sold by means of an open tender to the general public, enabling potential buyers to offer a price that will be higher than the stated minimum — similar to the way we buy things on Internet sales sites. For architect Gil Shenhav of Canaan-Shenhav, this is the fulfillment of a vision of offering the “product,” which until now was built only for luxury, to the general public.

“Building a highrise for the rich is like being a sculptor,” he declares. “Ostensibly it’s an easier task — because there’s a lot of money, you design your grandest dream and there’s someone who will pay.” In Bat Yam, which is considered a city that is friendly to highrises, they are encouraging vertical construction. “It meets several goals at once,” explains attorney Erez Podamsky, director-general of the municipality.

“First of all, it’s a solution for the lack of supply and for increasing the density in the city — you create more units in the same space, and that’s a great need today. Second, the quality of the housing is better thanks to the advantage of the view. You no longer have to live next to a park or the sea in order to be able to see them.”

The planners also see increasing density as a supreme value, and the numbers are in their favor: The Israeli family has an average of 2.4 children (only up to the age of 17 — actually there is a larger number of young people who live with their parents) and the land reserves are steadily dwindling. Added to that are the psychological considerations that dictate an increasingly large apartment, and taking financial risks out of what sometimes looks like real estate gluttony.

“We’re always trying to compensate ourselves for something we lack,” says Shenhav. “The 1960s project apartments offered one bathroom and a small kitchen? So the first thing all the Israelis want is two bathrooms and a large open kitchen.” In the cheaper highrises they are trying to deal with the public’s budget limitations by adapting the size of the apartments to the residents. “Sometimes an apartment that is too large or too small by 10 meters spoils the entire experience,” continues Shenhav.

Punishing the contractor

Construction firms invest all their energy in statistical segmentation of focus groups so they can offer every family an apartment tailored to its size. As far as the entrepreneur is concerned, there is nothing worse than a highrise that is abandoned by its residents, and even worse — one in which they rent out the apartments. “All the buyers know that a rented apartment attracts poor maintenance,” explains Prof. Rachelle Alterman of the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, who tells of a case in which residents in a new project wanted to “punish” the contractor, and hung “For Rent” signs from the balconies. Alterman, a specialist in urban planning and law, harshly attacks the phenomenon of residential towers, which she considers “terrible disasters.” A research report she published in 2009 in a book called “Migdalim Koshim” (“Pavly Towers”), addressed the long-term maintenance problem in those buildings, especially those designed for the middle-class market.

“There’s an illusion that the more residents there are in a tower, the lower the maintenance costs,” she says. “In fact it’s just the opposite — the taller the building, the higher the cost. The true maintenance costs are thousands of shekels per year per meter. She claims that while in an apartment house of average height the payment to the tenants’ committee represents the costs of cleaning the stairwells, gardening, and tarring the roof once every few years, in the highrises, in addition to the ongoing maintenance, there is a need to replace or upgrade engineering or structural systems, such as elevators, pipes and air conditioning — repairs involving unexpected expenditures that cost far from negligible sums. “So in fact, the actual calculation of the tenants’ committee is $400 to $500 a month,” Alterman notes.

Podamsky disagrees. “There’s drama surrounding these maintenance costs, which stems from being unacquainted with the facts. If they didn’t renovate buildings on main streets such as Ibn Gvirol and Dizengoff in Tel Aviv, would that look good? Wouldn’t the plaster fall? Wouldn’t they turn into dangerous buildings? In the end it’s nothing more than a 40-story highrise — that’s four 10-story buildings one on top of another, and it’s divided among the tenants.”

But even architect Avner Yashar, one of the principal designers of highrise buildings in Israel, contradicts this claim: “A tall building is a building that is more expensive to construct, there’s no argument about that. When there are over 40-50 stories, construction is far more expensive.” The maintenance, accordingly, becomes more expensive.

But the question remains: By what criteria do cities decide on the height of the highrises?

“Once they used to build up to nine stories, because beyond that you have to add another stairwell, and slowly it grew,” says Yashar. “So now people say, okay, so we’ll build 20 stories instead of 12, great. Then then say, why only 20, why not 37? That’s linear thinking, and there’s no daring or original idea about how we live here.

“It’s evolution,” asserts Shenhav in a more forgiving tone. “Over time more people understand that density and building upwards are the tool in a country without land.”

Shenhav has another title — chairman of the Israeli Forum for Skyscrapers and Urban Construction, the Israeli branch of the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat, which has existed since 1966. The Israeli representation is new but constantly growing — at the international conference in Seoul two years ago, it was established with only seven representatives, including Shenhav, chairman of the Israeli Association of Construction and Infrastructure Engineers Danny Marian, and chairman of the Israel Association of United Architects, Prof. Baruch Baruch. At the most recent conference in Shanghai there were already 45 designers participating.

Shenhav emphasizes that the forum is not involved in preaching in favor of highrise construction, but tries to deal with the questions and dilemmas that accompany the planning by making knowledge about what is being done internationally accessible to planners here, as well as to municipal bodies and entrepreneurs. “The highrise building is narcissistic by nature — it would like to stand on a desert island in the center of
the Yarkon River, because then it can be seen best, as an solitary entity. But a proper highrise knows how to connect the street, the city. We drag the designers to these conferences all over the world to demonstrate: Here is a building that destroyed its surroundings, here is one that promoted them. After all, every one of us asks himself if he is doing the right thing."

Forget the small village

Alterman also shatters the myth of density: "It's not true that very tall buildings save land. They have to be distanced from one another, because they create high solar radiation and wind tunnels, and require landscaping as well. Presenting a highrise as a multiple of the lot on which is the easy way out — the calculation must be done for the entire square."

When asked what other ways there are to populate cities more densely, Dori replies: "The density in Europe is achieved by entirely different tools, not highrises." She thinks the European model — construction buildings at the street line and creation of contiguous facades without small yards between them — is a method that has not been sufficiently examined in Israel.

Is it actually possible, using the existing tools for increasing housing density, to double the density in a city without adding highrises? "It's enough — in a communist country," replies Yashar firmly. "I don't see how an entire city can organize and add another two to three stories. Nor am I certain that all the small streets of old Tel Aviv are suitable for eight-story buildings on both sides, there's a certain slicing up of the Tel Aviv street."

Yashar is also now planning a 42-story residential highrise in Bat Yam. In Givatayim, on the border of Tel Aviv, a similar 60-story highrise will be built — almost like the Moshe Aviv Tower in Ramat Gan. Bat Yam, Givatayim and Ramat Gan openly encourage the construction of highrises. "The buildings being constructed in Tel Aviv at the moment are a product of over 20 years of planning," says Yashar. "The permits were given without any overall thinking, so that some of the situations that have been created are really less successful. Because of that and also because the highrises were labeled as luxury buildings, there is antipathy — and somehow as part of the social protest they received a very negative image."

The Ashdor One Tower will include 165 apartments of various sizes. In addition to "prestigious" functions such as a swimming pool and a wine cellar, it will have services that residents are looking for today, such as a small fitness room and a residents' clubroom. The subject of maintenance, which Alterman researched, was taken into account. "If we design a 42-story building whose external components will require some kind of renovation every 10 years — we have caused those people distress, we have caught them in a trap," admits Shenahav. "In such a building the elevators have to operate 365 days a year, the facade has to be durable and not require constant renovation and cleaning."

All those things require the involvement of professional maintenance companies, and a private residents' committee that collects monthly fees from the residents. "There is an internal failure of human economic behavior," states Alterman. "In economics it's called the 'hitchhiker's effect': After all, who buys a highrise apartment in Petah Tikva? A family with children. After a few years there's a change, you have to upgrade, to add another room. Everyone would like to leave the highrise if they only could, especially if there's a sum of money that has to be paid soon — like replacing elevators."

Shenahav thinks that in the not-so-distant future, the entire present model of ownership will change. "I expect that a person will buy the right of use in a building and during the first years he'll have a small apartment because he lives alone, and afterwards he'll get a large apartment in the same complex and raise children there. When the children leave he'll take a smaller apartment. Who says that I have to buy a 4-room apartment, which won't suit me for half my life? Maybe we also won't buy an apartment that's cheap or expensive — but we'll pay for overall cost of living, with the building offering additional services such as cars and laundry service."

Above all, the problem of highrise buildings in this country may stem from the public's hatred of them — along with the desire for their clear advantages, mainly when it comes to purchasing. "The subject of highrises, if you remove the bad name that has attached to it, is something we have to arouse awareness of," says Yashar, who begs the municipalities to free the reins holding back highrise construction. "We have to have a symposium about highrises, to think how to make them, to teach the subject. The entire world is moving towards living in cities, this small and charming village of Tel Aviv no longer exists. It will never be like that again."