High on life

Divine wrath over the Tower of Babel did not put an end to the human desire for height. If anything, it only fanned the flames, and today tall buildings are a signature of modern Western culture, for better - and for worse

By Esther Zandberg | Jun.09, 2006 | 12:00 AM

Some years ago an Egyptian-American cab driver in New York immediately recognized our Israeli accents and asked when we would start building the skyscrapers of the Hashalom Center - now the Azrieli Center - which were then still in the planning stage. He was especially interested in knowing how much tail buildings would sink into the soft sands of Tel Aviv. New York, he explained, is built on a rock. When we told him that the intended buildings would not exceed 50 stories, he made a dismissive gesture with his hand and smiled with disappointed relief, like a child who discovers in the boys' bathroom that the class bully is really quite a midget in those areas that really matter.

While it is true today that building to great heights is both perceived and cleverly marketed as an ecological approach in a world whose population is growing and whose land resources are diminishing, the biblical story of the Tower of Babel already taught us that the forces, motivations and desires behind construction that reaches for the skies are not limited to concern for the earth and its land reserves.

"In those ancient days, there did not seem to be any special reason for the decision [to build the Tower of Babel]," writes architect Israel Goodvitch in his delightful book "404040," on towers in Tel Aviv, "except, perhaps, for man's primal yearning for height. Although we have no factual evidence for this, it seems likely that after the flood, humanity was still suffering from population density or land shortage, and National Master Plan No. 35, which encourages and dictates an excessive crowding of urban spaces and high-rise construction, was not yet in effect."

Even divine wrath over the Tower of Babel could not put an end to the human desire for height. If anything, it only fanned the flames, and tall buildings became the signature of modern Western culture, of competitiveness, of creativity and the drive for achievement; later it also became a means of gratifying greed. While the spires of the Gothic churches, the towers that Italy's elite built for itself in San Gimignano, or the Eiffel Tower in Paris are accomplishments that inspire awe even today; the American skyscraper - like the East Asian or the Israeli one - is the perfect emblem of the connection between the stupendous accomplishments of technology and architecture and the forces that drive the capitalist economy.

The skyline of a city with tall buildings, even the uneven line of Israel's "natural" tower city, Tel Aviv, is a magnificent sight. But, like the forces of nature, it is also terrifying, arousing both anxiety and horror. Well-reasoned as they might be, many of the public struggles waged against the construction of skyscrapers in Israel are often only the manifestation of a conditioned anxiety reflex.

"The public in Israel is deeply afraid of high-rise construction," said the late urban planner and social activist Sarah Kaminker, an American-born Israeli, at a conference on the subject a few years ago, "and any structure over eight stories tall is considered the work of Satan" - and often associated with such phrases as "concrete monster" and "real-estate sharks."

The American architect historian Spiro Kostof once warned that the landscape of skyscrapers in the big American cities was capable of neutralizing the political significance of the power wielded by the economic corporations that built them. You can hate corporations, he argued, and still love the art object that houses them. Towers, by virtue of their porosity, are always prominent landmarks, exerting a magnetic attraction for both willing and reluctant eyes. Paradoxically, a taller building does not overshadow the other towers, but rather happily joins their ranks.

Modern skyscrapers are the undisputed symbol of private initiative; they are usually built with no public goal in mind, representing only those who constructed them. However, "the height and symbolic value of towers have come to dominate the public image and have become the leading representation of public reality," as architect Talia Margalit writes in her doctoral dissertation on the history of high-rise construction in Tel Aviv. Margalit notes that the Tel Aviv Jaffa Municipality recently adopted a new emblem for itself, which depicts the urban skyline alongside the old symbol of the lighthouse.

Building as 'patricide'

The urban street system, by contrast, has not been similarly honored, perhaps because, unlike the skyline, it does not make money, but is handed to the public for free. Therefore, it has no one to save it, and remains run-down and tawdry. Not for nothing have most of the towers in Israel, topped today by American-style mall towers from the street - from the heights of the Azrieli Center, to the Elrov Towers on Tel Aviv's Pekus Street and so on.

The local planning authorities - which do not require an interface between the tower and the street, as it true for their counterparts in New York - play along with this trend.

Margalit's research exposes the historical conditions that have enabled the "towerization" of Tel Aviv over the course of decades, as well as the ties between the powerful, the wealthy and the luxury skyscrapers. Contrary to many Western cities, many Tel Aviv high-rises were built on public, municipal land (which makes up no less than 70 percent of the city's territory), either on property that was sold off to developers once the public or government institutions that previously owned them were privatized, or on the land of Arab villages that were annexed to the city after the establishment of Israel.

And so, for example, Israel's first skyscraper, the Shalom Mayer Tower, was built on the grounds of the historic Gymnasia Herzliya building. The necessary demolition of that historic school to allow for the new structure was undoubtedly a kind of "patricide" that liberated the first Hebrew city from its inhibitions and hurled it both forward and upward. Other examples are the Gan Ha'ir building, built on the grounds of the old city zoo; the Merkaz Hata'asiyum towers, built on the lands of Manshiya; the Basel Tower, built on the Basel market; the Azrieli Towers, erected on a former municipal parking lot; and the Akivin and Yo Towers on the land of the former Palestinian village of Jamusin, as well as the luxury neighborhood that is supposed to be constructed on the grounds of the old wholesale market.

High-rise construction in Tel Aviv, as Margalit's research suggests, is characterized by chaotic layout and is not determined by planning guidelines but instead by land availability, specified design elements, pressures and opportunities. While in many Western countries, even in the most capitalist among them, some planning logic can be detected behind a skyline, the same cannot be said of Tel Aviv, which - ironically - has an abundance of publicly owned land.

"The city, polarized, continues to rise higher at this point in time, basking in its own prestige," Margalit concludes.

From 1953 to 2001, 800 structures of eight stories or more were built in Tel Aviv, and defined as being "of unusual height" compared to other city structures - a prosaic administrative definition for the phenomenon, but a definition that has proved efficient and supple. This, however, is mere foreplay for the dozens of additional residential and office skyscrapers that have been added and will continue to be added to the city, as per existing and future plans. They will be built in every conceivable location, and in some inconceivable ones, thereby transforming the city.

A growing cluster of towers has already arisen alongside the Ayalon highway; architect Sharon Rothbard has dubbed this amazing urban phenomenon Ayalon City. Ayalon City is "a series of isolated objects built around one dense infrastructure, a project that is without a project and without a planner, the wild expression of do-whatever-you-like, free-market economy and globalization, and of the privatization processes that have overtaken urban planning." Rothbard writes in his book on architect Avraham Yaski. If Kostof gives permission to love the city's high-rise landscape, Rothbard admits that, "Although this city is built from endless specific construction plans, with no coordination, the result is remarkably coherent and uniform, much more than any other urban project created in Israel in the last decades."
Unholy trinity

The modern skyscraper is usually a tower of offices, and most of the skyscrapers built around the world nowadays are devoted to this purpose. By contrast, residential high-rises are less common, even at a time when they are perceived as a necessity imposed by the reality of overcrowding. According to Margalit, the proliferation of residential towers is found in a small number of cities and countries - Hong Kong, China, Tel Aviv-Jaffa. As the height of residential buildings has increased in recent years - often with the encouragement of environmental organizations, which hope that such buildings can help put an end to suburbanization and rescue open spaces - the debate over residential high-rise construction becomes more heated, whether among professionals or the general public, which finds itself fighting new looming structures every day, as they keep popping up unannounced around every corner.

"Towers are a new phenomenon, and fear of anything new is natural. Decision-makers have to understand this, but they can't act according to it," says architect Dan Darin, the former deputy mayor of Tel Aviv, who also previously headed the city's planning and construction committee. Darin is one of the leading figures responsible for the spread of towers in the city. "Cities need to be more crowded. To achieve this, buildings have to be evacuated and rebuilt while providing affordable housing at the same time, and there must be high-rise construction, in order to maintain green lungs outside the city. Otherwise we cannot live here. Of the two options for denser construction - six- or seven-story buildings throughout the city, or towers - I favor towers, because they allow us to have green spaces inside the city," says Darin. "What about the urban fabric? We are not living in the Renaissance, and Tel Aviv is not Acre."

"High-rise construction is good only for the rich, and it is a burden we will not be able to withstand," declares Prof. Rachelle Alterman, a jurist, city planner and head of the Center for Urban and Regional Studies at the Technion - Israel Institute of Technology. For years, Alterman has been warning about the dangers of building skyward. Residential high-rises, she notes, do not help the problem of overcrowding, because they require more open space, and it is a harmful error to market this form of construction as a solution. "It can cause tremendous damage. Israel is unusual for the West, in that most of the population lives in apartment buildings without shared ownership or management. And in very tall high-rises, there is no solution [to this phenomenon] and no relevant, recognized international practice for maintaining them over time."

There is no need to worry about the luxury towers, Alterman adds. "As far as I'm concerned, they can build them to the heavens. This is the top one-tenth of a percentile [of Israeli society], they will manage. The problem is that towers are also being built and planned for the middle class, in Haifa, Kfar Sava, Be'er Sheva and Netanya. What we are witnessing today is only the tip of the iceberg. The really tall buildings, 30 stories and more, are still at the initial stages, in the evacuation-construction projects; they just haven't been released yet."

Israel is going to be a very high country, Alterman predicts, because of the unholy trinity of local authorities, entrepreneurs who make a profit without worrying about consequences, and environmental bodies that support high-rise construction due to the alleged shortage of land. Alterman believes that "we should encourage construction of medium height and density and learn from the Netherlands, where there are no apartment towers or villas, but rather city blocks and economical row housing. That's the only way we can keep living in this place."