

Surroundings / Unrealistic heights

An Interior Ministry study shows Israel lacks the mechanism to guarantee proper high-rise maintenance.

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"The Guide to Skyscraper Construction," the final chapter in a multidisciplinary study commissioned by the Interior Ministry, was presented last Tuesday at a conference held at the Azrieli Center in Tel Aviv. It is difficult to think of a more suitable venue for a discussion on a phenomenon that is "gaining momentum in Israel" as the authors of the guide put it.

It "completely changes the scale to which we have been accustomed." Just a few years ago the Azrieli Center inherited the title of the tallest building in the Middle East from the Shalom Tower, built 40 years ago, only to quickly lose it to the Aviv Tower in Ramat Gan - who knows for how long.

The competition over which tower is tallest is an inalienable part of the construction of such buildings. At the conference, the Netanya city engineer, Paul Vital, related that among city engineers in Israel, a common subject of conversation is, 'How high have you gone?' And the competition has become part of local folklore.

Israel has held professional and public debates on high-rise construction for many years, although not continually, and studies have been conducted on this subject whose reports and recommendations are gathering dust in various official drawers and archives.

Hundreds of projects have been built and are now being planned for increasingly taller office and residential buildings, dozens of floors high. After the planned skyscrapers are built in the Sumeil compound in Tel Aviv, the Shekem building on Ibn Gvirol "will become a low-rise building," said architect Amir Mann at the conference.

Mann headed the research team with his partner Ami Shenar. In Israel, construction has been going high-rise both for residences and businesses, not only in the center of the larger cities, but also in relatively smaller towns and outlying areas. This is an unusual phenomenon in comparison to the Western world, where high-rise construction is typical of the downtowns of large cities.

Skyscraper construction is often exciting and thrilling, and it comes with many advantages as well as disadvantages, but as the authors of the study noted, it is always an extreme phenomenon. A 50-floor building is not a five-story building times 10, but rather a very complex machine whose planning and operation require special deployment, even in countries in which the planning and construction quality is high - and all the more so in Israel.

The study, which took three years, is very comprehensive and seeks to "ask the difficult questions," as architect Naomi Angel, Tel Aviv district planner in the Interior Ministry says.

The questions are divided into several categories and include issues such as the location of the high-rise construction, its concentration or dispersal, accessibility, the existing urban fabric, architectural excellence, climactic effects and more.

A number of researchers from the Technion also participated in the study. The guide that sums up the study was not intended, as its authors state, "to determine policy for high-rise construction in Israel or in certain cities, and does not presume to teach the planners or government representatives how to plan," and perhaps rightly so.

Aspirations of this kind no longer have their place in a democratic, pluralistic and privatized age. The source of inspiration, says the former head of the planning administration, architect Dina Rachevsky, who initiated and advanced the study, is the British model. In Britain, says Rachevsky, "they work according to these guidelines. They are too gentlemanly not to need laws and regulations. This is a new step that may perhaps replace the loose-leaves full of regulations. The idea is that the recommendations not be engraved in stone, but rather require initiative."

Perhaps this is so in view of comments made at the conference - for example that "the engineering calculations for high-rise construction are behind the times, and ignorance concerning fire-safety regulations is obvious. These are determined each time anew, in accordance with the last fire, and are released as amendments to the previous amendments which never became effective." Apparently acting gentlemanly and having initiative are far from being sufficient for Israel, at least for the time being.

Another issue is preparedness - or rather the lack thereof - for the maintenance of high-rise buildings, especially apartment buildings. This does not refer to cleaning the hallways or entrance, but rather periodical renovations that require special organization and a large budget.

The study differentiates in this matter between office-building and apartment-building construction. The study, conducted by Prof. Rachel Alterman of the Technion and legal expert Tal Zafrir, shows that there is no legal mechanism to guarantee the proper maintenance of tall residential buildings over time to prevent their deterioration. This does not refer to upscale, expensive constructions for the wealthy, but rather to building for the average citizen, which comprises most of the residential high-rise construction in Israel. Many praise the advantages of high-rise construction because of the land shortage and the need to preserve open spaces, but the quality of life that can be expected over the long term in buildings of "average quality" as the guide states, without proper maintenance, is frightening.

The issue is very serious and particularly worrying in view of the dozens of ventures based on the demolition of existing buildings and the construction of new ones in their stead that is planned at present as government initiatives for very tall construction. Most are planned for weak urban neighborhoods. They are sold under the euphemistic name "urban renewal," but in fact serve to enrich the developers more than the residents and the public. Otherwise, it would be impossible to explain the overcrowded and so very high building for people whose socio-economic state is least suitable for this type of construction, as the authors of the guide point out.

This construction costs about 40 percent more than standard construction, but even more important, the cost of its maintenance is four times higher and suitable only to better-off populations. There should be a resolute demand to prohibit such construction by law before it turns into a nightmare. The study is clear, to the point and practical. It does not contain wordy discussions on subjects such as justice and planning rights as reflected in the open spaces and allocations to high-rise construction. The sense of urgency that would appear self-evident from the contents is lacking.

Numerous alarms should be going off if only now that the relevant authorities are seeking, very politely and civilly (as if this were no more than a guide to the good life and how to get it) to examine basic issues such as whether high-rise construction is at all justified in certain locations, or how to minimize the climactic repercussions and the adverse effect on the environment and the public space - and these are just a few examples.

The location of the conference enabled the participants to observe the last issue from up close. While the greatest part of the attention in the planning of the Azrieli Center was devoted to the private areas and its attractive appearance, especially of the towers, the public space at the foot of the towers is unfriendly. You only have to try to walk around there to realize what the priorities were.

The Center presents an ugly, uncaring face to the main street - its ventilation system and the entrances to parking lots. The question is whether in such cases one can count on the initiative or good will of the developer or planner or whether unequivocal official intervention is needed to safeguard the public interest. Without it, the failures will duplicate themselves in other projects currently being built in the area and in other locations.

In discussions on high-rise construction, there is much talk of the "skyline" and fear of harming it. However, far more important in high-rise construction is the ground line, which sadly, many planners do not know how to deal with. There are hardly any high-rise construction projects in Israel whose meeting point with the public space and the street level is properly dealt with. In high-rise construction plans, as the guide's authors note, the importance of transparency and public participation in setting policy and the planning process is far greater than for conventional construction, in accordance with the intensity of the repercussions. But it would appear that in this area, Israel does not have appropriate civil norms that manage to keep up with construction and that the relevant authorities are not prepared or are unwilling to adopt such norms.

Even the guide does not underscore this subject. It may be no coincidence that a film on high-rise construction in East Asia was chosen to be shown at the conference. The purpose of the film was to bring examples of architectural excellence and to point to the dizzying success. Clearly, the rate of construction in cities such as Shanghai is very admirable, and the skyscrapers look good in photographs. But the rapid construction was made possible by the trampling of the civil rights and lifestyle of millions of people who were uprooted from their homes, forcibly transferred into the intimidating residential towers far from the glittering business centers, or were left to crowd into the shadows of the buildings, unseen by the camera.

By chance, the conference was held on the very day the sewage and drainage system in the Greater Tel Aviv area collapsed due to force majeure - the huge amount of rain that fell that day - but in fact because of a very human planning failure. It is ironic that many of those present only learned of the extent of the infrastructure crisis when they went down to their cars after the hours they spent closeted in the conference hall on the 10th floor, high above reality.