In the Shadow of Memory—Munio Weinraub Gitai and Shmuel Mestechkin

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Fig. 1 Munio Weinraub with friends from HaShomer HaTza'ir around 1923 Photograph: unknown

Fig. 2 Shmuel Mestechkin (top row, 1st from left) at the Mechanical Technical School of the Mizrachi Movement bauhaus centenary
bauhaus as a major german export
tel aviv as bauhaus' world capital

neues bauen [new building] social-utopian aspirations

bauhaus brand displacement processes gentrification

bauhaus' history of reception

processes of oblivion and repression

In its 100th anniversary year, the Bauhaus was celebrated as the «most successful German cultural export». In this context, the marketing of Tel Aviv as the «world capital of Bauhaus» with its purported «4,000 Bauhaus buildings» is particularly ambivalent.¹ It exemplifies and discloses the contradiction between the foundational ideals of this avant-garde art, architecture and design school and its current popularization in the spirit of neoliberal exploitation interests: Scant attention is paid to the political and social-utopian ambitions of *Neues Bauen*, which were also represented by the Bauhaus students who emigrated to Palestine in the 1930s to help build a Jewish homeland. Those ambitions have given rise to the exact opposite: Under the aegis of the «Bauhaus» label, processes of displacement and social disintegration are exacerbated, along with a de facto deterioration in the residential environment near the city centre.

The 2019 centenary year thus made clear that a critical examination of the history of reception, further chapters of which were written with the Bauhaus anniversary, still contains revealing insights.² Far removed from historical points of reference, «the Bauhaus» develops its own vibrant existence in popular city guides, photo books and estate agents' brochures.

«The Architects Who Brought the Bauhaus to Israel»

Moving beyond the «White City», this article focuses on the political stance of two less well-known Bauhaus graduates: Munio Weinraub (1909-1970)—who later went by the name of «Gitai» and Shmuel Mestechkin (1908-2004). To this day, while overshadowed by their renowned fellow student Arieh Sharon (1900–1984), both are considered to be among the «architects who brought the Bauhaus to Israel»,³ and, in terms of the scope and quality of their architectural work, they are also held to have a special position among the twenty-five students—eight of whom were architects active in the British Mandate area after time at the Bauhaus. They share Eastern European origins and strong Zionist and Socialist influences in their youth. They arrived at the Bauhaus in Dessau independently of each other, between 1926 and 1932, presumably attracted by the spirit of artistic and social renewal, as crystallized in what was known as Lyonel Feininger's «Cathedral of Socialism» on the title page of the 1919 Bauhaus Manifesto. The idea of socially committed building became associated with the Bauhaus

new political, social, and architectural awakening

bauhaus as a testing ground for socialism

socially engaged architecture

architecture as a collective practice

architectural education

social, functional, and scientific approach

bauhaus reception and geopolitics

emigration and exile

bauhaus as a testing ground for socialism

bauhaus and nation-/state-building

bauhaus school

with the establishment of structured architectural education under Hannes Meyer from 1927 and especially after he became Director in 1928. Meyer, his office partner Hans Wittwer and later also Ludwig Hilberseimer were part of the left-leaning wing of *Neues Bauen*. In their role teaching architecture at the Bauhaus, they represented a planning and design process based on scientific methods, as advocated by the Basel ABC Group.⁴ All this made the Bauhaus an obvious training option for both politically left-wing and Jewish students.⁵

Looking at the example of Munio (Weinraub) Gitai and Shmuel Mestechkin on the one hand reveals the decisive role played by political and ideological motives in the transfer of Bauhaus ideas to Palestine.⁶ On the other hand, this also allows us to shed light on the specific logic of Bauhaus reception in Israel today. The focus here is on the less well-known projects for the labour movement, which manifest a political-ideological stance and thus do not fit at all into the neoliberal marketing fairy-tale of «Bauhaus in Israel».

A Testing Ground for Zionism at the Bauhaus

Munio Weinraub was born on 6th March 1909 in Szumlany. He spent his youth in the industrial town of Bielsko, in eastern Silesia, where he came into contact with the youth movement *HaShomer HaTza'ir* («The Young Guard»), which he joined at the age of fourteen Fig. 1. *HaShomer HaTza'ir* was founded in 1916 by merging the Zionist scouting movement *HaShomer* («The Guard») with Socialist youth organization *Ze'irei Zion* («Youth of Zion»). Combining ideas from the British Boy Scouts, the romantic tendencies of the German *Wandervögel* movement and study of political and cultural theories, it prepared Munio Weinraub to emigrate to Palestine and participate in building a new Socialist Jewish nation.⁷

Weinraub, who began studying at the Bauhaus in Summer 1930,8 encountered Hannes Meyer only briefly and primarily in his role as Director.9 The extent to which he identified with Meyer's ideas became clear when he took part in political demonstrations by students against Meyer's summary dismissal and was suspended from the Bauhaus in October 1930. He did not return until the 1931 winter semester, after working for several months in Mies van der Rohe's Berlin office. One major focus for him was the housing and urban planning seminar with Ludwig Hilberseimer. 11

emigration and exile

labour movement kibbutz movement

bauhaus school

collective living and working

bauhaus as a testing ground for socialism

social, functional, and scientific approach

Shmuel Mestechkin, born on 12 May 1908 in Vasylkiv near Kiev, came from a family of convinced Zionists and Socialists who had emigrated to Palestine as early as 1923 as part of the Third Aliyah (1919–1923)—his eldest brother Mordechai had already joined the movement *Ze'irei Zion* («Youth of Zion»). Between 1923 and 1926, Mestechkin trained as a metalworker in Tel Aviv^{12 Fig. 2} and was politically active: In 1924, he was one of the founders of the *HaNo'ar HaOved* («Working Youth») movement, which was linked to the *Histadrut*, the General Federation of Workers in Israel, and maintained close relations with the labour parties and the kibbutz movement.

Against the advice of leading members of *HaNo'ar HaOved*, Mestechkin went to the Bauhaus in Dessau.¹³ Thanks to his manual training, he could begin his studies immediately. From October 1931, he completed two semesters of the preliminary course with an emphasis on the technical field of «bau/ausbau» and sat in on classes by Ludwig Hilberseimer.

Munio Weinraub Gitai and Shmuel Mestechkin are connected to Arieh Sharon by their Eastern European origins and the political influence of Labour Zionism. That probably also holds true of the attraction that the Bauhaus exerted on them. We know from Sharon that he hoped it would liberate him from conventions and develop new forms of living and production,¹⁴ and that he was reminded of his experiences with the youth movement HaShomer HaTza'ir through the emotionally powerful media appeal to young people: «I noticed on a bookstall a magazine bearing the title (Junge Menschen) (Young People), which I bought, faithful to my youth movement past. Reading it on the train to Berlin, I found that it was devoted to the ideas of the Bauhaus.»¹⁵ He was particularly taken with Hannes Meyer's social rather than formally aesthetic approach to architectural problems: «Regarded as a tough and uncompromising pragmatist, he based his architectural course on the analysis of all socio-economic problems involved in designing human environments. As a result of his thinking, we tended to aim in the new (Building Department) at the solution of social and human architectural problems, instead of concentrating on aesthetics and form in design.»¹⁶ Mestechkin is also reported to have found the atmosphere at the Bauhaus reminiscent of his youth with HaNo'ar HaOved: In particular, the work ethos is mentioned, along with a socio-critical consciousness and the aim of counteracting processes of social disintegration in the capitalist world.17

- [E] What are the political prerequisites for socially engaged architecture or design?
- [F] What are the social, political, and economic preconditions for Bauhaus reception? And how do they vary from one period or country to another?

Despite his ideological closeness to Hannes Meyer, Munio Weinraub was influenced by his architectural training under Mies van der Rohe as Director and his practical work for the 1931 building exhibition in Berlin. Ludwig Hilberseimer must certainly have given him the decisive stimuli in the field of urban planning for his later building activities in Palestine.

Weinraub left the Bauhaus in April 1932 after only two semesters at the school. He did not accept Hannes Meyer's invitation to the Soviet Union¹⁸ but instead emigrated to Palestine in June 1934 after further studies and practice-oriented trips to Frankfurt/Main, Basel, and Zurich. As the Dessau Bauhaus was closed in October 1932, Mestechkin initially spent a semester abroad in Vienna. It proved impossible for him to resume his studies at the Bauhaus, now in Berlin, as the school closed definitively under pressure from the National Socialists in July 1933. In 1934 he also returned to Palestine.

Building for the Labour Movement

The two former Bauhaus students had very differing experiences of arriving in British Mandate Palestine in 1934. Weinraub settled in Haifa as a new immigrant and founded his own architectural office, subsequently entering in an office partnership with Alfred Mansfeld in 1937. Mestechkin returned to his family circle in Tel Aviv and resumed his commitment to *HaNo'ar HaOved*. From 1934 he worked for architect Joseph Neufeld and in 1937 opened his own office, where he subsequently concentrated on building projects for the kibbutz and labour movement.

Planning and building for the Jewish community in Palestine were largely based on Zionist organizations' political and economic commitment: With support from the Jewish National Fund, land was acquired and developed by the Palestine Land Development Company. The General Federation of Workers in Israel, the *Histadrut*, became the most important client for architects. It was founded as the first overarching Jewish trade union for Palestine, but its work extended far beyond purely trade union activities. The *Histadrut* played a central role as a health insurance company, a cultural and educational institution and a business group. ¹⁹ When it was founded in December 1920, the *Histadrut* was already conceived as an organizational and ideological precursor of the state structure. This included a separate «Office for Construction

emigration and exile

kibbutz movement labour movement

societal projects of modernism

[E][F]

and Public Works», which was gradually absorbed into the *Soleh Boneh* company. Another subsidiary, *Chevrat Shikun*, concentrated on developing workers' and housing cooperatives. The various *Me'onot Ovdim* in Tel Aviv are among the best-known projects of this kind ^{Fig. 3}. They were built between 1931 and 1936 in conjunction with Arieh Sharon and today are the only buildings in the White City area that can be associated with the Bauhaus in formal and conceptual terms, as well as in terms of those involved in the project.²⁰ By the late 1940s, the *Histadrut*, with its numerous companies, had become the largest building contractor in the country.²¹

The *Histadrut* was also the most important client for Munio Weinraub and his partner Alfred Mansfeld, with whom he worked until 1959. They built workers' houses, administrative buildings, cultural institutions, and housing estates for the Histadrut mainly in Haifa and the surrounding area.²² Their commitment and design approach are particularly impressive in the Krayot, the workers' housing estates north of Haifa. They are based on Leberecht Migge's principle «everyone self-sufficient» and appear, as Ita Heinze-Greenberg puts it, «[...] as if someone had staged Gropius' (Baukasten im Großen) [full-scale construction kit] under the Mediterranean skies» Fig. 4.23 The first three self-sufficient settlements were established in the early 1930s: Kiryat Chaim (1930-1933), Kiryat Bialik (1934) Fig. 5 and Kiryat Motzkin (1935). They were planned as co-operatively organized trade-union estates and membership of the Histadrut was a pre-condition to live there, as stipulated in the statutes.²⁴ Organized within a strict grid, each of the narrow plots had 1,000 to 2,000 m² for cultivation. The terraced development that had originally been planned was replaced by detached, small-scale residential buildings to allow for later extensions, given the great pressure of immigration. In Hilberseimer's seminars Weinraub had dealt with minimal floor plans and the concept of the «growing house» and produced corresponding designs for the *Krayot* with approx. 60 m² living space.²⁵

In the 1940s and 50s, the Weinraub-Mansfeld team took on increasingly large projects in the *Krayot* and built most of the community centres, workers' clubs, schools, coop stores, cultural and administrative buildings. One impressive testimony to their work is *Beit Ha'am*, the community and cultural centre in *Kiryat Chaim* Fig. 6. Like all their buildings, *Beit Ha'am* is characterized by modesty of expression and efficient construction and detailing.

housing estates



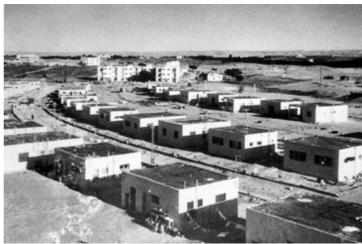




Fig. 3 Arieh Sharon, south-east façade of the Me'onot Ovdim IV, V, VI, Tel Aviv 1934–1936, Photograph: unknown

Fig. 4 «Self-sufficient settlement» Kiryat Chaim, 1930s, Photograph: unknown

Fig. 5 Munio Weinraub, House of Isidor Pinkus, Kiryat Bialik, 1937, Photograph: unknown

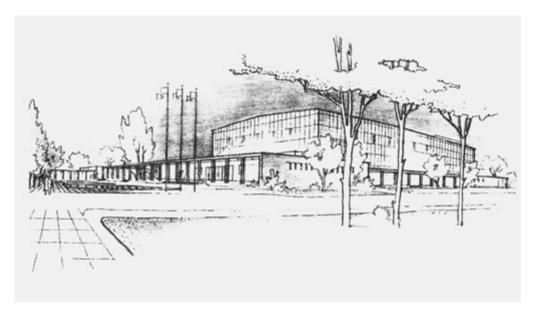






Fig. 6 Munio Weinraub/Alfred Mansfeld, Competition Entry for Beit Ha'am, Kiryat Chaim, c. 1947

Fig. 7 Shmuel Mestechkin, Beit HaNo'ar HaOved, Jerusalem, 1938–1939, Photograph: unknown

Fig. 8 Shmuel Mestechkin, Beit HaNo'ar HaOved, Haifa, 1944–1945, Photograph: unknown

- [B] What do we understand by taking a stand regarding architecture and design, and particularly of the Bauhaus and Modernism?
- [C] How can we explore the kinds of stand taken by Bauhaus and Modernist architects and designers and their consistency?

In including arcades and patios, the team not only responded to the Mediterranean climate, but also lent a restrained dignity to public buildings. Richard Ingersoll sees in this a synthesis of Weinraub's experience with Bauhaus pedagogy and the way in which Mansfeld was influenced by studying with August Perret: «The functional and sociological basis of Meyer's design approach, Mies's mandate to design within limits, and the practical and urban concerns of Hilberseimer were mixed with the classical planning and structural rationalism of Perret.»²⁶

[B] [C]

In the *Krayot*, Weinraub and Mansfeld created an architectural language for the ideal of a classless workers' republic through simple structures, serialized solutions for details and discreet monumentality. In the *Krayot* the uniform effect thus created, even in the most diverse types of buildings, becomes an impressive symbol of social commitment, cooperative community spirit and education in the spirit of Labour Zionism.

When he returned, Shmuel Mestechkin resumed his links with *HaNo'ar HaOved* and designed the movement's local branches in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa. The way in which he worked with topography becomes clear in Jerusalem (1938–1939)—in split-level construction with staggered levels—but at the same time he complied with British Mandate Government specifications and designed the building in the characteristic Jerusalem stone and with a pitched roof ^{Fig. 7}. In Tel Aviv (1941) and Haifa (1941–1949) ^{Fig. 8}, however, he turned to forms of *Neues Bauen*.

One of his «most interesting buildings», to cite Mestechkin himself, was built at the interface between the workers' and kibbutz movement in Na'an. It was the first kibbutz founded in 1930 by *HaNo'ar HaOved*.²⁷ Mestechkin designed the *Beit Berl* rest home Fig. 9 in 1944 as the embodiment of all the principles of «simplicity and care in proportions and forms of expression» he had been taught while training at the Bauhaus.²⁸ Similarities to Hannes Meyer's ADGB Bundesschule can also be identified in its embedding in the topography, its central seminar wing and the stepped design of the residential units.

In 1943 Mestechkin became Chief Architect of the Technical Department of *HaKibbutz HaArtzi*. He was involved there in devising general plans to establish or expand kibbutzim, construction of community facilities such as the iconic dining halls, but also in further developing housing concepts to meet changing demands for more comfortable living standards through growth, prosperity and individualization. The latter meant, inter alia,

relationship to landscape integrating buildings into their respective regions

[L] How did widespread ideas about the Bauhaus evolve? How do they relate to historical facts and which stances, interests and mechanisms do they reveal?

shared vs. individual living spaces

abandoning community ideals and thus shared spaces such as children's homes and a return to the nuclear family, which entailed expanding individual living areas, specifically the original residential cell («room), to attain the dimensions of a suburban home with a children's room and kitchen. In the process, the planning concepts associated with social utopian ideals were successively called into question.

Bauhaus Reception in Israel

Little attention is paid to planning and building for the labour movement, with the exception of work for the kibbutzim—which attracts particular interest in Germany.²⁹ Bauhaus reception in Israel dates back to the period when Arieh Sharon and Hans Maria Wingler became acquaintances. It adheres to a perspective that corresponds to Walter Gropius' myth formation and has moved away almost entirely from the historical institution and its social-utopian ideals. The collaboration between Sharon and Wingler gave rise to the *Kibbutz+Bauhaus* exhibition, which was shown at the Bauhaus-Archiv in Berlin-Charlottenburg in 1976, accompanied by a small catalogue and Arieh Sharon's extensive professional autobiography.³⁰ Although the exhibition travelled through Europe and North America, it received scant attention in Israel, as was also the case for Sharon's book.

The country was deeply unsettled and in the throes of an economic crisis following the Yom Kippur War in 1973, which was won only with massive military support from the USA. In the 1977 parliamentary elections, the Labour parties ended up in opposition for the first time since the state was founded. Under Menachem Begin, the victorious *Likud* set in motion a radical-liberal restructuring of economy and society in the following years. Consequently, the Socialist state became a testing ground for neoliberalism. There were extensive privatisations; the trade unions' social influence eroded dramatically and resulting from the economic turbulence the kibbutzim also fell into an existential crisis from which they could never recover.

The reception of *Neues Bauen* in Palestine unfolded simultaneously and both Shmuel Mestechkin and Munio Weinraub Gitai, together with Arieh Sharon, were principal witnesses to the Bauhaus' influence from the very beginning.³¹ However, while Sharon had secured his own historicization with

bauhaus reception

bauhaus myths

bauhaus reception and geopolitics

neoliberalism as a paradigm shift

reception of *neues bauen* [new building]

[N] How do our own cultural, social, and political beliefs and stances affect our understanding of the Bauhaus, Modernism, and modernity?

bauhaus and nation-/state-building

processes of oblivion and repression

loss of social-utopian aspirations

[N]

Kibbutz+Bauhaus and was recently celebrated as «The Nation's Architect»³², the first comprehensive monograph on Weinraub Gitai was only published in 1994 at the instigation of his son Amos,³³ followed by exhibitions at the Israel Museum (1994), the Centre Pompidou in Paris (1996/97)³⁴, and the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich (Architekturmuseum of Munich Technical University) (2008/09).³⁵ A monograph on Shmuel Mestechkin was published thanks to *Yad Ya'ari*, the archive and research centre of *HaShomer HaTza'ir*.³⁶ It cultivates not only the movement's ideals but also Mestechkin's legacy, in a library and seminar building that he designed.

However, the state that the Socialist-Zionist Bauhaus students Shmuel Mestechkin and Munio Weinraub Gitai identified with and whose construction they had supported in various roles had long vanished when Bauhaus reception tentatively began to develop. The promise that they had once pursued all the way to the Bauhaus of acquiring analytical design methods that would be useful in creating the «New Jew» and a «New Society» in the land of Israel had faded. There was no longer any scope in the newly emerging self-image of Israeli society for the ethos of social engagement and cooperative community spirit.



Notes

- Sascha Chaimowicz, «Weiße Stadt: Der Schatz von Tel Aviv», in: ZEIT Magazine, 04.04.2018.
- Cf. inter alia Ita Heinze-Greenberg, «Bauhaus Tel Aviv—Übertragung und Vermittlung», in: Entwürfe der Moderne: Bauhaus-Ausstellungen 1923-2019, Klassik Stiftung Weimar Jahrbuch 2019, (eds.) Hellmut Th. Seemann and Thorsten Valk, Göttingen 2019, pp. 279-299; Alexandra Klei, Wie das Bauhaus nach Tel Aviv kam. Re-Konstruktion einer Idee in Text, Bild und Architektur, Berlin 2019; Philipp Oswalt: Marke Bauhaus 1919-2019. Der Sieg der ikonischen Form über den Gebrauch, Zürich 2020, esp. pp. 292-323.
- 3 Michael Levin, «Die Architekten die das Bauhaus nach Israel brachten», in: Kav, 2 (January 1981), pp. 65–79 (Hebrew).
- 4 Klaus-Jürgen Winkler, Baulehre und Entwerfen am Bauhaus 1919–1933, Weimar 2003, p. 21.
- 5 Richard Ingersoll, Munio Gitai Weinraub—Bauhaus Architect in Eretz Israel, Milan 1994, pp. 19–21.
- 6 Cf. Jörg Stabenow/Ronny Schüler (eds.), The Transfer of Modernity—Architectural Modernism in Palestine (1923–1948), Berlin 2019; Ronny Schüler, «Forms, Ideals, and Methods: Bauhaus Transfers to Mandatory Palestine», in: Wolkenkuckucksheim, International Journal of Architectural Theory, 24 (2019), 39, pp. 11–33.
- 7 Ingersoll 1994 (as Note 5), p. 19; Ita

- Heinze-Greenberg: «Von Dessau nach Haifa: Neues Bauen im zionistischen Kontext», in: Winfried Nerdinger (ed.), Munio Weinraub, Amos Gitai—Architektur und Film in Israel, Munich 2008, pp. 30–50, here: p. 37.
- 8 Cf., Nerdinger 2008 (as Note 7), p. 10.
- 9 Cf. Ingersoll 1994 (as Note 5), p. 24.
- 10 Ibid., p. 26.
- 11 Ibid., pp. 26, 31; Nerdinger 2008 (as Note 7), p. 11.
- 12 Bar Or: *Kibbuz und Bauhaus. Pioniere des Kollektivs*, (ed.) Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau, Leipzig 2012, pp. 48–49.
- 13 Cf. Muki Tzur and Yuval Danieli (eds.), To Build and to Be Built. The Architecture of the Kibbutz, the Book of Shmuel Mestechkin [in Hebrew], Tel Aviv 2008, p. 22; Myra Warhaftig, «Sie legten den Grundstein»—Leben und Wirken deutschsprachiger jüdischer Architekten in Palästina, 1918–1948, Tübingen/Berlin 1996, p. 150.
- 14 Cf. Tzur/Danieli 2008 (as Note 13), p. 29.
- 15 Arieh Sharon, Kibbutz + Bauhaus. An Architect's Way in a New Land, Stuttgart 1976, p. 17.
- 16 Ibid., p. 30.
- 17 Tzur/Danieli 2008 (as Note 13), p. 31.
- 18 Cf. ibid., pp. 24, 153 (Chapter 2, footnote 11).
- 19 Heinze-Greenberg 2008 (as Note 7), p. 42.
- 20 Cf. Schüler 2019 (as Note 6), pp. 20–23.
- 21 Ingersoll 1994 (as Note 5), p. 41.
- 22 Heinze-Greenberg 2008 (as Note 7), p. 42; Ingersoll 1994 (as Note 5), p. 36.
- 23 Heinze-Greenberg 2008 (as Note 7), p. 45.

- 24 Cf. Ingersoll 1994 (as Note 5), p. 58.
- 25 Ibid., pp. 31, 53.
- 26 Ibid., p. 16.
- 27 Tzur/Danieli 2008 (as Note 13), p. 22.
- 28 Shmuel Mestechkin, quote: Warhaftig 1995 (as Note 13), p. 150.
- 29 Cf. inter alia: Jeannine Fiedler/Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau (eds.), Social Utopias of the Twenties. Bauhaus, Kibbutz and the Dream of the New Man, Wuppertal 1995; Bar Or 2012 (as Note 12).
- 30 On the relationship between Hans Maria Wingler and Arieh Sharon, cf. Ronny Schüler, «Sharon+Wingler. On the Establishment of a German-Israeli Bauhaus Reception», lecture at the Young Bauhaus Researchers Colloquium of the XIII International Bauhaus Colloquium in Weimar, 27.10.2016.
- 31 Cf. Miron Mislin, Schüler des
 Bauhauses, der Technischen Hochschule, der Akademie der Künste und
 ihre Einflüsse auf die Architektur und
 Stadtplanung in Israel, exhib. cat.
 Berlin 1980; Levin 1981 (as Note 3);
 Michael Levin, The White City.
 International Style Architecture in
 Israel. A Portrait of an Era, exhib. cat.
 The Tel Aviv Museum, Tel Aviv 1984.
- 32 Cf. Eran Neumann (ed.), Arieh Sharon: The Nation's Architect, exhib. cat. The Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv 2018.
- 33 Ingersoll 1994 (see Note 5).
- 34 Olivier Cinqualbre and Lionel Richard, Munio Weinraub Gitai. Szumlany, Dessau, Haïfa—parcours d'un architecture, exhib. cat. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 2001.
- 35 Nerdinger 2008 (as Note 7).
- 36 Tzur/Danieli 2008 (as Note 13).