

# The Myth of the White Bauhaus City Tel Aviv

Philipp Oswalt

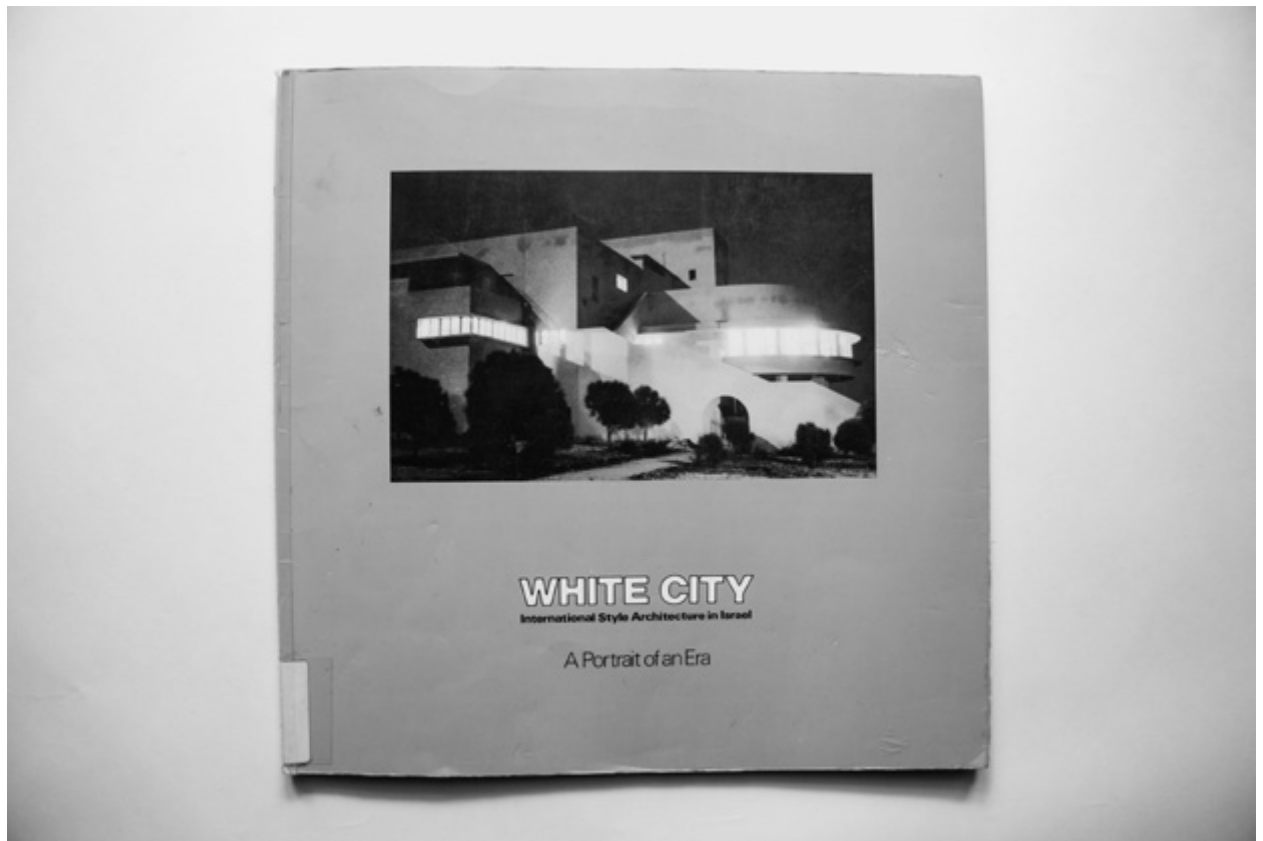


Fig. 1  
Cover of the catalogue for the exhibition  
«White City. International Style  
Architecture in Israel. A Portrait of an  
Era», in the Tel Aviv Museum, 1984, by  
Michael D. Levin. (Cover picture: Leopold  
Krakauer, Bendori House (Teltch Hotel),  
103 Derech Hayam, Haifa, 1934–35)

tel aviv as bauhaus' world capital  
«bauhaus» white city

social relevance of the bauhaus

bauhaus brand  
bauhaus myths

questioning bauhaus brand's  
«bauhaus» constructions

questioning entrenched  
value judgments

questioning modern design's  
power of resistance

«bauhaus» architecture  
bauhaus style

european avant-garde  
movements

rewriting history

identity formation

No newspaper supplement today can fail to mention Tel Aviv as a «Bauhaus city». Scarcely anywhere seems better suited to illustrating the Bauhaus' social relevance and impact. At the same time, almost nowhere else demonstrates more impressively how the myths surrounding the Bauhaus brand have become detached from historical realities and taken on an independent existence.

The White City is anything but a genuine Bauhaus city.<sup>1</sup> In terms of those involved, it is only marginally connected with the Bauhaus: Over two hundred architects worked in Tel Aviv in the 1930s, but only four of these had studied at the Bauhaus for some time.<sup>2</sup> The percentage of Bauhaus students involved in planning Auschwitz was higher: From 1940 to 1943, Bauhaus alumnus Fritz Ertl was active as Deputy Director of the Central Construction Office of the Waffen-SS and Police Auschwitz, which consisted of about thirty people.<sup>3</sup> It is virtually impossible to make the situation any clearer than by citing these facts: The Bauhaus brand generates new, constructed affiliations to the Bauhaus as a result of particular interests, while actually belonging to the Bauhaus provides «no measure of value» and does not necessarily correspond to a widespread conception of Bauhaus values.<sup>4</sup>

The large number of Bauhaus-style buildings in Tel Aviv is impressive. But they have little to do with the Bauhaus. The architects responsible for the Bauhaus-style buildings were trained in over a dozen European countries, as well as in Palestine and the USA, while the 25 students from Germany who were active in Tel Aviv came from a dozen different schools. What was dubbed the «Bauhaus style» already existed before the Bauhaus. It was above all architects of the Dutch De Stijl movement and the Viennese Modernists around Adolf Loos and Josef Hoffmann who built buildings in this style, which soon became the standard of the European avant-garde. Rather than the Bauhaus, it was the imprimatur of two specific architects that became inscribed in Tel Aviv's architecture: Le Corbusier and Erich Mendelsohn. The former inspired the elevation of the buildings on *pilotis* and the structural sun protection using *brise soleil*, while the preference for curved, round, dynamic forms references the latter architect. These influences formed part of the general understanding of Tel Aviv's defining style until the late 1970s. But why was Tel Aviv's architectural history rewritten in the 1980s?<sup>5</sup> Brands and myths serve to create identity. However, neither the French Le Corbusier nor the Jewish Erich Mendelsohn made suitable identification

- [D] How can we discover the social and political processes behind buildings and objects, planning and building activities as well as reception processes?
- [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?

figures: France had imposed an arms embargo on Israel in 1968 and adopted increasingly pro-Arab policies. Mendelsohn had emigrated from Palestine to the USA in 1941 and was considered a renegade.<sup>6</sup> The Bauhaus, on the other hand, developed into a globally successful brand—not least thanks to West Germany’s engaged cultural foreign policy—with Israeli architects and artists playing a prominent role.<sup>7</sup> For a long time, the Bauhaus was scarcely discussed in Israel. An early exhibition that Bauhaus-Archiv founder Hans Maria Wingler and the Tel Aviv Museum of Art attempted to launch in 1963 was prevented by Walter Gropius, inter alia because his successor, Hannes Meyer, was to play an important role in the show.<sup>8</sup> In 1980, the international exhibition *50 Years of Bauhaus*, which had been shown in various other destinations over a more than ten-year period, presented the Bauhaus in Tel Aviv for the first time.<sup>9</sup>

#### From the White City to the Bauhaus City of Tel Aviv—An Exhibition’s Trailblazing Impact

- [L] Four years later, an exhibition organized by the Tel Aviv Museum of Art for the city’s 75th anniversary in 1984 played an important role in Tel Aviv’s branding as the Bauhaus White City <sup>Fig. 1</sup>. Entitled *White City*, it focused on modern urban construction of the 1930s in Israel and was subsequently shown in New York, Berkeley, São Paulo, and Buenos Aires.<sup>10</sup> It had an enormous impact. The ensuing international appreciation led to initial efforts to preserve this architectural heritage. It was to a large extent reception of this exhibition that led to Tel Aviv’s 1930s Modernism being equated with the Bauhaus. This stance was soon also adopted by serious Israeli architectural historians such as Michael Levin, who was also the curator of the exhibition.<sup>11</sup>

- [D] The «White City» topos in connection with the Bauhaus offered the perfect narrative to hone Tel Aviv’s image as a modern Israeli metropolis. At the time Israel was seeking international recognition, and the Bauhaus brand offered exactly that. Ironically, it was West Germany, of all countries, that had shaped the Bauhaus heritage into an international cultural brand after the end of the National Socialist period, with a view to restoring Germany’s reputation abroad. Now the victims of the National Socialist regime were also making use of this brand. Conflicts within Israel played an equally important role. In 1967, Israel had conquered

«bauhaus» white city

«bauhaus» white city

bauhaus brand

bauhaus as nazi germany's  
antithesis

- [D] How can we discover the social and political processes behind buildings and objects, planning and building activities as well as reception processes?

the eastern part of Jerusalem in the Six Day War. In 1980, the government had declared all of Jerusalem to be the undivided capital of Israel. The city thus represented a religious and nationalist vision of Israel. Secular, liberal, and leftist forces, on the other hand, sought to push Tel Aviv's image as a modern, cosmopolitan city. The objective/progressive, social and internationalist orientation of the historic Bauhaus dovetailed neatly with this. In an analysis of the Tel Aviv myth, Israeli architect Sharon Rotbard has shown that «the White City became the elected headquarters of «Good Old Eretz Israel, and for European-oriented Israeli citizens the stoic purity of the Bauhaus Style» expressed «values of order and rationality»»<sup>12</sup>—in contrast to the government's construction and settlement policy. A «moral alibi that keeps Tel Aviv the city of the just, neatly separated from the «rabble» in Judea and Samaria and without any connection to the madmen in Jerusalem».<sup>13</sup>

bauhaus style  
bauhaus values

«white city» vs. «black city»

### Imbued with a Programme— Identity Building and Exclusion

- [D] The Bauhaus evoked the idea of a good life and a just society. Combined with the image of the White City, the ideals of Zionism could be merged with the ideals of the Bauhaus. In fact, after the founding of Tel Aviv in 1909, the young Zionists had imagined the new Jewish city as being white and called it the «White City» as an expression of a utopian locus and idealistic new beginning. However, the fiction of a blameless, pure Zionism, which finds its counterpart in Tel Aviv, could not be sustained. Tel Aviv emerged as a suburb of Jaffa, largely on land populated and farmed by Palestinians, and initially bought legally by Jewish settlers Fig. 2. The construction work was mostly done by Arab and Jewish Yemeni labourers. In the late 1920s, conflicts between Jews and Palestinians intensified. While Jewish architects such as Alexander Baerwald had previously tried to create a local style by adopting Oriental forms,<sup>14</sup> the International Style that emerged in the early 1930s served to distinguish white-hued European Modernism from the Oriental style.<sup>15</sup>

«bauhaus» white city  
social-utopian aspirations

international style

identity formation

Clear though the identity-forming role of this architecture was in 1930s Tel Aviv, its social content was minimal Fig. 3. The mostly three-storey apartment buildings were built as private investments by middle-class developers. The floor plans are largely conventional and have no additional programmatic content.<sup>16</sup>



Fig. 2  
Derelict old Muslim cemetery Sheikh  
Murad in southern Tel Aviv. Photograph:  
Philipp Oswald, 2015

Fig. 3  
Tel Aviv, 1935

Fig. 4  
Residential building in the Ein Shemer  
kibbutz, 1930/50. Architect: Arie Sharon

In the Shadow of the Bauhaus Hype:  
The Suppression of the Historical Bauhaus  
and Brutalist Modernism

«bauhaus» white city

processes of oblivion  
and repression

kibbutz movement  
bauhaus reception

collective living and working

utility value vs. bauhaus style

neoliberalism as a paradigm shift

Tel Aviv's branding as a «White City» in the Bauhaus style displaced the Bauhaus' actual influence in Palestine. The Muslim Bauhaus artist Selman Selmanagić, who sharply criticized the racist conflicts between Jews and Arabs in the 1930s, was not alone in being affected by this.<sup>17</sup>

A total of twenty-four former Bauhaus students, who lived and worked in Palestine, shaped Israeli culture—but in a completely different way than narrated by the myth of Tel Aviv as a Bauhaus city. From the 1930s on, the Bauhaus students Arie Sharon, Shmuel Mestechkin and Munio Gitai Weinraub were among the most important architects of the kibbutz movement <sup>Fig. 4</sup>. They were closely related to Bauhaus ideas, especially those from the time of Meyer's directorship, such as concepts of collective living and working.<sup>18</sup> Like Meyer's Bauhaus, the kibbutzim practiced radically user-oriented architecture and rejected any desire for style, which is why they had no inhibitions about building pitched roofs—in complete contrast to the International Style. If there was any testing ground for Bauhaus ideas in practice in Palestine, it was the kibbutzim. However, when the Bauhaus boom began in the 1980s, any mention of them was consistently concealed. They could not be exploited by the marketing strategies pursued by the tourism industry or the real-estate market.

Nor did the Bauhaus hype ever address how the Bauhaus students influenced post-war Modernism. After the founding of the state in 1948, Israeli architects moved beyond the imported International Style and discovered their own architectural language. In Tel Aviv, Sharon and Mestechkin realized remarkable large-scale projects, especially in the 1950s and 1960s <sup>Fig. 5</sup>—administrative headquarters, schools, university buildings, a hospital, a retirement home, a housing estate, and a concentration camp memorial. This architecture no longer corresponded to the imitative style of 1930s white-hued Modernism, but embodied a new, «grey», Brutalist Modernism, with definite programmatic aspirations, as an independent expression of the new state.

- [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?

### Marketing Campaign and Global City

international style

«bauhaus» white city

bauhaus as a marketing strategy

tel aviv as bauhaus'  
world capital

- [L] Ten years after the exhibition *White City*, the International Style had become the Bauhaus. After several years of strategic preparation, in 1994 festival weeks with a plethora of events were held in Tel Aviv under the motto «Bauhaus in Tel Aviv», the highlight being an international UNESCO conference <sup>Fig. 6</sup>. After a survey had shown that the term International Style, in contrast to the term Bauhaus, did not arouse any associations in the broader public, the spotlight was turned on the Bauhaus. The city provided billboards for a month-long advertising campaign and the conference was flanked by dozens of events—such as a Bauhaus fashion show and a performance of Oskar Schlemmer's Bauhaus dances.

In the 1990s, the Bauhaus narrative served to reframe Tel Aviv's image as a global city. That called for a business centre and a historical heritage. The «White City», now embodied the latter, and the business district Ayalon City was built along the Ayalon Highway to provide the former. The Azrieli Center, a complex of three skyscrapers and a gigantic shopping mall, was constructed as its centrepiece, referencing the «White City». The office towers form a square, a triangle, and a circle, each wrapped in a white facade grid. Ever since that period, a growing number of new building projects attempt to reference the municipal branding and set their architecture within the tradition of the Bauhaus White City. Current examples are Richard Meier's Rothschild Tower and the Frishman 46 high-rise residential building near Dizengoff Square.

### Postmodern Bauhaus—A Fictional Tradition as a Resource and Its Costs

postmodernism

bauhaus style  
identity formation

rewriting history

In the late 1970s, Postmodernism replaced post-war Modernism in Israel as elsewhere, in Tel Aviv in the guise of a white Neo-modernism that continues to this day. Architecture was no longer to be shaped by social programmes and functions, an avant-garde spirit and modern building technology, but rather by an *architecture parlante* that made use of mostly fictitious traditions—the Bauhaus style as a locally specific form of nostalgia, tradition and identity building. History was also rewritten when the «White City» of Tel Aviv was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2003: 58 of the 61 listed buildings in the application from the Tel Aviv-Jaffa municipality have no direct reference to the Bauhaus.





Fig. 5  
Headquarter of the kibbutz movement  
HaKibbutz HaArzi in Tel Aviv, built  
in 1969, Architect: Shmuel Mestechkin.  
Photograph: Christoph Petras, 2019

Fig. 6  
Urban advertising for the International  
Style Architecture Conference in Tel Aviv  
in May 1994. Photograph: Sergio Lerman

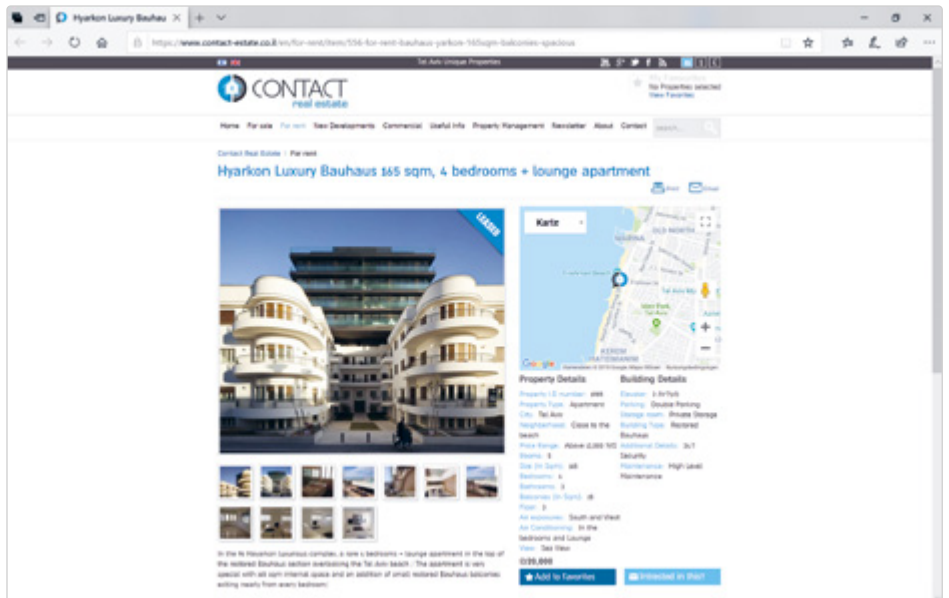


Fig. 7  
White Night Dinner on the occasion of  
the annual White Night in Tel Aviv in  
June. Photograph: Miriam Alster, 2018

Fig. 8  
Online property advertisement: «Bauhaus  
architecture» in Tel Aviv, 2019

politics of memory

Nevertheless, the ICOMOS statement notes that the «most important influences on Modernist architecture in Tel Aviv came from the lessons of the Bauhaus».<sup>19</sup> Regardless of its veracity, the narrative serves the longings of the present so well that it is kept alive extremely successfully with numerous activities. To name but a few: In 2000, the privately run Bauhaus Center Tel Aviv opened, offering exhibitions, books, merchandising items, and guided tours in seven languages. Once a year Tel Aviv celebrates the popular *Layla Lavan (White Night Festival)* with events throughout the city Fig. 7. And the Max Liebling Haus, built in 1936, was renovated with financial support from the Federal Republic of Germany and opened as «The White City Center», a visitor center and center for education, research, and exhibitions in Autumn 2019 to mark the Bauhaus centenary.

The Bauhaus hype in Tel Aviv has definitively had positive effects: It has contributed to preserving the architectural heritage, and German- Israeli dialogue has intensified. Above all, not only has a successful brand been created but also a locus of identification for secular, (leftist-) liberal, cosmopolitan Israelis. At the same time, however, the historical misrepresentation has considerable side effects: It ignores the Arab-Israeli conflict and non-European Jews as well as the actual history of the Bauhaus' influence in Israel. The impact on the kibbutz movement and the Brutalist architecture of post-war Modernism is repressed and replaced by an appealing but insubstantial Bauhaus surrogate. In the end, the real-estate industry profits from the Bauhaus brand in the form of classic gentrification Fig. 8.

processes of oblivion  
and repression

gentrification

bauhaus brand's  
ambivalent effect

politics of memory

The Bauhaus brand has eradicated the Bauhaus' progressive potential. Critical observations are taboo. In 2016, when the Paris Musée des Arts décoratifs referred in its exhibition *L'esprit du Bauhaus*<sup>20</sup> to the work of Bauhaus student Fritz Ertl in the Central Construction Office of Auschwitz concentration camp, Francis Kalifat, the President of the Representative Council of French Jewish Institutions (CRIF), sent a note of protest to the museum and the French Ministry of Culture: «The Bauhaus movement has enough lovely projects that make it unnecessary to insult the memory» of approximately one million Jews who were murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau.<sup>21</sup>

## Notes

- 1 This essay is a summary of a more detailed text: Philipp Oswalt, «Weiße Stadt Tel Aviv. Eine deutsch-israelische Fiktion», in: id. (ed.), *Marke Bauhaus 1919–2019: der Sieg der ikonischen Form über den Gebrauch*, Zürich 2020, pp. 292–303.
- 2 Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, Stuttgart and Technische Universität München (ed.), *Tel Aviv: Neues Bauen, 1930–1939*, Tübingen: Wasmuth, 1993, p. 247.
- 3 Cf. Adina Seeger, «Fritz Ertl—Bauhausschüler und Baumeister im KZ Auschwitz-Birkenau», in: *Hannes Meyers neue Bauhauslehre. Von Dessau nach Mexiko*, (ed.) Philipp Oswalt, *Bauwelt-Fundamente*, Vol. 164, Basel 2019, pp. 497–506.; Gideon Greif and Peter Siebers, *Todesfabrik Auschwitz: Topografie und Alltag in einem Konzentrations- und Vernichtungslager = Death factory Auschwitz = Fabryka śmierci Auschwitz*, first edition, Cologne: Emons, 2016, p. 36 f.
- 4 Cf. Winfried Nerdinger, *Das Bauhaus. Werkstatt der Moderne*, Munich: C.H.Beck, 2018, pp. 115 f.
- 5 On this point, see also Alexandra Klei, *Wie das Bauhaus nach Tel Aviv kam: Re-Konstruktion einer Idee in Text, Bild und Architektur*, Berlin: Neofelis Verlag, 2019.
- 6 Sharon Rotbard, *White City, Black City: Architecture and War in Tel Aviv and Jaffa*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2015, pp. 29–32.
- 7 *50 years Bauhaus*, exhib.cat. Stuttgart: Württembergischer Kunstverein, 1968 [Catalogue edited by Wulf Herzogenrath].
- 8 See on this point: Claudia Heitmann, *Die Bauhaus-Rezeption in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1949 bis 1968: Etappen und Institutionen*. Dissertation, Berlin: University of the Arts, 2001, p. 88.
- 9 Helena Rubinstein Pavilion: *Bauhaus—Academy for Design 1919–1933*, in cooperation with the Goethe-Institut, Tel Aviv 1980.
- 10 Exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York, accompanied by a conference with Michael Levin, Kenneth Frampton, Michael Graves, and Adi Karmi; reviews in the *Sunday New York Times* and *Herald Tribune* by Paul Goldberger on November 25, 1984 and in *Village Voice* by Michael Sorkin; exhibition at the Judah L. Magnes Museum, Berkeley, at the São Paulo Biennial and at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires.
- 11 Michael Levin, «The White City», in: *Progressive Architecture*, 11 (1984), p. 114. There we read: «In the 1930s, an influx of Bauhaus-trained architects turned Tel Aviv and other Israeli cities into a national experiment in the International Style».
- 12 Rotbard 2015 (as Note 6), p. 27; see also: Robert Flahive, «Producing World Heritage in the White City Tel Aviv», in: *International Social Science Journal*, Vol. 67, Nr. 225–226 (September–December 2017), p. 115, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/issj.12153> (Consulted on April 7, 2020).
- 13 Sharon Rotbard, «weiße stadt, schwarze stadt. architektur und krieg in tel aviv und jaffa», in: *Bauhaus*, Nr. 2, (November 2011), p. 39.
- 14 His design for the Technion in Haifa, built 1912–1924, is a good example of this.
- 15 Julius Posener, «Traditionelles und modernes Bauen in Palästina», in: *Das Werk*, 25, Nr. 9 (1938), p. 263; A Ratner, «Architecture in Palestine», in: *Palestine & Middle East Economic Magazine*, Nr. 7–8 (1933), pp. 293–296. I should like to thank Ines Sonder for the reference to this text.
- 16 This is also Winfried Nerdinger's assessment, in: Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, Stuttgart and Technische Universität München 1993 (as Note 2), pp. 10, 12; and Zvi Efrat's assessment, in: «Bauhausbauten ohne Bauhaus. wie die weiße moderne zum israelischen volksgut wurde—und langsam ergraute», in: *Bauhaus*, Nr. 2 (November 2011), p. 11.
- 17 Letter from Selman Selmanagić to Hajo Rose, October 1, 1935, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin, Selman Selmanagić, folder 2.
- 18 See on this point: Galia Bar-Or et al. (ed.), *Kibbutz und Bauhaus—Pioniere des Kollektivs*, to accompany the eponymous exhibition, Bauhaus Dessau, 2012, 1st edition, *Bauhaus-Taschenbuch 3*, Leipzig: Spector Books, 2012.
- 19 ICOMOS, «Advisory Body Evaluation (ICOMOS)», 2003, <https://whc.unesco.org/document/151735.57> (Consulted on April 7, 2020).
- 20 Elodie Emery, «L'architecte nazi qui fait polémique au musée des Arts Déco», December 11, 2016, in: *Marianne*, <https://www.marianne.net/culture/l-architecte-nazi-qui-fait-polemique-au-musee-des-arts-deco> (Consulted on April 7, 2020).
- 21 «Paris museum calls Auschwitz a «Bauhaus architectural achievement»», in: *Times of Israel*, December 16, 2016, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/paris-museum-calls-auschwitz-a-bauhaus-architectural-achievement/> (Consulted on April 7, 2020).