Streets Are for People – An Israeli Case Study

By Geoffrey Clarfield

As an undergraduate I studied anthropology and music. At the university bookstore in the anthropology section, I discovered the work of Bernard Rudovsky, an eastern European émigré to the United States who was a student of what has come to be called vernacular architecture, or, as was so simply stated in the name of one of his books, **"Architecture Without Architects."**

Photo of private entrance to Israeli house.(Geoffrey Clarfield)

Rudovsky believed that before the Industrial Revolution different urban and rural cultures around the world created private and public structures that used local materials, in local designs that expressed local cultural values and that reinforced them in the way things were built and the social networks that they supported.

He followed up **Architecture Without Architects** with books and exhibits called **The Prodigious Builders** and **Streets are for People.** Naturally, Rudovsky was an arch critic of the theory

of modern architecture whose aggressive grandees such as Le Corbusier called buildings and houses, “machines for living,” thus contributing to the soulless massivism and alienation that characterizes most modern bank buildings, office towers, government edifices and high-rise apartment complexes.

Even gifted Israeli followers of Rudovsky such as Haifa-born Israeli architect Moshe Safdie, who despite his lifelong dedication to affordable housing and modular apartment structures where every unit “has a garden,” has sadly accepted that at the end of the day, his experiments have only worked out for the super wealthy.

I am not an architect nor am I an urban planner, but as an anthropologist who had travelled in various Mediterranean countries before I made my home in Israel in the 1990s, I was keenly aware that there is a pan-Mediterranean of style of building that can be easily imitated by modern architects and builders using the latest materials.

And so it was with some trepidation that my wife and I passed the screening that allowed us to buy a house in one of the villages of Misgav, in Israel’s Lower Galilee region.

Our village is perched at the top of a large hill covered with indigenous forest and some olive trees. From points in the village you can see the Mediterranean sea to the West and the Sea of Galilee to the East. Karmiel is the service town that exists in the valley below with is clinics, supermarkets, restaurants and all the accoutrements of a mid-sized Israeli city.

Wikipedia (no friend of the Jewish state) tells us that:

*The **Misgav Regional Council** (Hebrew: □□□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□, romanized: Mo’atza Azorit Misgav) is a regional council in the Galilee in northern Israel. The regional council is home to 27,421 people, and comprises 35 small towns, mostly community settlements but also*

several kibbutzim and moshavim. The population of 29 of these is primarily Jewish, and some are Bedouin. The region is noted for the way that communities and non-Jewish communities live side-by-side.

The first series of houses that were built in our village are draped across a hilltop with beautiful views of the Galilee hills and glimpses of the Sea of Galilee to the East. Each homeowner was given a temporary structure and one dunam of land. Through hard work and saving they replaced these temporary structures and built beautiful low-lying houses covered in local stone, each designed by a different architect, but that in the end blended into one another and the landscape around it.

Our units were located across a small valley and seemed to be designed by a failed student of Moshe Safdie. Even though our area had houses at different angles and heights, there was only one design to choose from. At the end of the day our area looked like one of those Museum dioramas of cramped modular houses in ancient Babylon or Ur.

The next development was set to be built on the northern side of the village on a sloping hill. The lots would be less than the half dunam that we had received and the range of housing designs was even more limited. Some sort of collective "close the door behind me" attitude was taking place, and I did not like it.

Most of the couples who had bought houses in our development were our age at the time (early 40s) and some were much younger. All of them had served in the military and many had volunteered for extended service. They were a self-selected, above average bunch of people from different parts of Israel, different ethnic backgrounds, and different professional groups.

None of them had criminal records and they were the kind of

citizens that give to the State. They do not take from the State. They were aware that culturally, Jews like to live in exceptionally large cities and that if Israel were to thrive, it needed to spread its Jewish citizens across rural as well as urban areas. We liked the peri urban feel of this series of villages that had the city of Karmiel at its epicenter, in our case no more than a ten-minute drive by car.

Despite the fact that we had two energetic teenage boys to raise and I had a full time job, a part time teaching job, and membership in an experimental musical ensemble, I was irked by the fact that our housing development and the one to come, did not take into account any of Rudovsky's insights as had the first builders across the valley. I was determined to do something about it.

And so I made an appointment with the representative of the village planning committee. I asked her who and how the decision to develop our village had been made. She looked at me incredulously as if to say, "What right have you to ask?"

I had done my due diligence and discovered that our village had the rudiments of an elected government that dealt strictly with local issues. She told me. "The plan was designed before you even arrived." With a bit more prodding I was shown a map with what is called in Hebrew a "tochnit meitar" or simply put, a development plan with all the plots worked out in advance.

I had noticed that one contracting company had built our houses, and it appeared that the next stage contract would go to the same company. When I asked how and why this was the case I was brushed off. Everything seemed legal but it did not seem fair. And so I did an informal survey.

I visited newcomers like me, and they agreed that the next plan would be worse than ours and that this would diminish the beauty of our village, but everyone was too busy working,

raising their kids and when they had time resting on the Sabbath.

And so I put together a voluntary committee, which included an urban planner, a lawyer, a spokesperson (as my Hebrew was not fluent) and we put together an alternative development plan that we tabled for the next community meeting. I discovered that although the accepted development plan was a near fait accompli, that with sufficient opposition it could be scrapped and a new plan adopted.

From Spain to Turkey residents of the Mediterranean are known to be argumentative and to have no problems raising their voices at meetings. And this is what happened when this was brought to our local government meetings. I would have liked all participants to have behaved like polite Anglo Canadians but that is not the culture here, and so like a good Canadian I led from behind.

After many vituperative meetings when those in charge finally realized that the decisions they had made could be changed, they suddenly gave up, like a Mediterranean family argument that goes on for hours and then dies off for lack of energy. I saw it with my own eyes.

It was decided to throw out the old plan and allow each new household to design their house as they see fit, as was the case with the first development. Our architectural fate had been sealed but at least the next group of young householders would live in a house of their own design.

I enjoyed our life in our village and used to go for long walks in the nearby forests and olive groves as the paths are quiet, rural, and Biblical but life took us somewhere else and we sold our house, sadly, and went to live in a different place.

During Covid my wife and I were in Israel while I was working on a book. We rented part of a house in a village a forty-

minute walk from our old place. Every afternoon I would go on a three-to-four-hour ramble and then return home to write. I walked through our old village a number of times.

The houses of the third division are all built now. They drape the northern hillside of our village. Some are one, and some are two stories high. They face different directions, and they have different styles. But at the end of the day they are all variations of Mediterranean designs.

It is a delight to walk the streets and paths of this new neighborhood filled with handsome young couples and numerous children, living in houses of their choice. There is no sign or mention of the effort that I and others made so that this new community could live in houses of their choice and design, nor do I expect one.

I take great pleasure realizing had I not made the effort; these families would have lived in boxes built by bureaucrats. When our battle was over and we had succeeded, an Israeli born friend from our village, and with whom I went on my long weekly hikes, said to me incredulously, “Geoffrey, you are a winner.” That was my reward, for this is the startup country that admires and respects “winners.”

Yes, I won that very small battle and so did so many other families whose fight for decent housing I had made my own. I would like to think that I acted with some patriotism for like Rudovsky I believe, “Streets are for people.”

First published in The Times of Israel