

ELI SINGALOVSKI: HERZLIYA MUSEUM, SOUTHERN FAÇADE

Curator: Dana Gordon

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The relationship between photography and architecture ... faithfully reflects not only the history of photography, or the history of architecture, but the “psychology” of the relationship between them. ... Photography has always sought to express and reflect, in one way or another, what underlies the language of architecture – scale, distances, relationships between bodies and forms, urban masses, and the essence of human environmental existence derived from them. The mutual relationship and co-dependence between the development of modern architecture and that of photography are therefore undeniable, almost obsessive. ... The differences seem to create the symbiotic interdependency: photography reflects a diminutive, limited, truncated two-dimensional image, while architecture is usually enormous in scale, three-dimensional, material, “environmental,” complete, and comprising spaces and between-spaces. The need for photography to “heighten,” to extend beyond its own limitations, to be a multidimensional means of expression, draws its inspiration from architecture. Ultimately, architecture and photography feed each other with information and relationships between truth and illusion, light and shadow, form and content, depth and height, breadth and area.¹

1 Meir Agassi, “Peeping into Pierre Koenig’s Living Room,” *Studio*, no. 2 (September 1991), p. 12 (in Hebrew).

Herzliya Museum was founded in 1962 by a group of art-loving residents, headed by Eugene da Villa. They donated paintings from their private collections to establish this cultural institution in the young town. In 1965, at the invitation of the city council and the developer Moshe de Shalit, the architect Yacov Rechter proposed a program integrating a Yad Labanim memorial hall for fallen soldiers and the Municipal Museum. He saw

2 Yacov Rechter, "Museum of Art in Herzliya", June 1, 1997, unpublished text, Rechter Institute of Architecture Archive, Tel Aviv, as quoted in Ruth Direktor, "The Herzliya Museum as a Parable: A Museum and Yad Labanim," in: Yacov Rechter: Architect, ed. Osnat Zuckerman-Rechter, exh. cat. (Herzliya: Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003), pp. 176–191 (in Hebrew).

the combination as providing the memorial hall with "a cultural-secular theme that would give the building a more vibrant public character, rather than leaving it as a mere monument of remembrance."²

Designed by Rechter, the new building, which was inaugurated in 1975, was of a suitable scale for its urban surroundings, which were still in their infancy. Despite its topographical location – at the top of a hill whose slopes border on Ben Gurion Street – and despite its proximity to major public buildings in the town, such as the city hall and the law courts, its design appeared to avoid the monumental, temple-like, demonstratively authoritative model that has been a dominant theme in museum architecture. The museum's structure refuses to be summed up at a glance as a Monument. It is not surprising, then, that Eli Singalovski toured the museum and surveyed it repeatedly from all sides after being invited to take part in an exhibition devoted to the art venues designed by Rechter's firm. Through his camera, Singalovski sought to re-examine the architectural statement expressed in this distinctive structure.

Since the early days of photography, photographers have been drawn to document architectural structures, in part because of their static quality and the dynamic action of light within them, which suited the camera's capabilities at that time. In the late nineteenth century, Frederick Evans (1853–1943) took hundreds of photographs of churches, capturing the buildings' mesmerizing and enigmatic beauty. In the first half of the twentieth century, Edward Steichen (1879–1973) documented the growth of new skyscrapers in the United States. Modernist architectural photographs, including Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956) and Lucia Moholy (1894–1989), expressed futuristic dynamics through formalistic use of shadow rhythms. In the 1960s and 1970s, Bernd and Hilla Becher (1931–2007; 1934–2015) produced a corpus of photographic typology that mapped, in a language dubbed *frontal objectivity*, industrial buildings that reflected the development of modern Germany after World War II.

From the outset, Singalovski has focused on urban environments – in particular, Brutalist architecture. He tends to focus on the structure itself, which is usually located at the center of the format, and uses a technique of night photography with long exposures, that removes human movement from the frame. He avoids digital

manipulation, which bestows his work with a direct validity. The documented structures, which reflect the dynamic potential of their construction and the inherent presence of urban menace and alienation, imbue the photographs with a social, economic, cultural, and poetic significance.

The Herzliya Museum building is cast in bare concrete of a rough material character, revealing the grain of wooden molds used during its casting. The building, which encompasses inner courtyards, has rounded corners, its rectangular and narrow windows hidden mainly in the barrel vaults of the roof, and pointedly bare of ornamentation. Its presence, which is spatially inward-looking, is apparent in the internal divisions of the concrete mass into small units, which obscure each other in a measured and considered rhythm, and in a highly organized compositional arrangement.^{fig. 1}



Fig. 1
Herzliya Museum, eastern
façade, 1975 (photo: Moshe
Gross - Keren Or)

The material modesty of the structure embodies, in the form of the exposed concrete castings, functional principles and an idealistic ethics of resistance to the old order. Brutalist architecture (after *béton brut*, literally: “raw concrete”, a term coined by La Corbusier) flourished from the 1950s to the 1970s, and Israel’s leading architects, led by Rechter, readily embraced it. Although Brutalism is perceived by many as ugly and alienating, it harbors discernible poetic values and formalistic aesthetics that make it possible to understand how these architects found it (besides its offering of fast and cheap construction) an embodiment of prevailing Israeli values at the time – namely, national fulfillment, security, direct simplicity, and material modesty.

Singalovski documented the southern façade of the Herzliya Museum in a large format black-and-white photograph mounted directly on the wall from end to end – as a starting point and end point for the visitors’ view of the architectural building looming in front of them in its full size. The southern façade of the building (facing 12 Sara Malkin Street) is used mainly for direct access to MUZA (the museum’s education department), the museum’s offices, the parking lot, and a hidden inner plaza, containing Santiago Sierra’s 2004 work, *Arrangement of Twelve Prefabricated Parapets*.^{fig. 2} This façade is a less familiar part of the museum, and Singalovski, in his inimitable manner, reveals a new beauty and meaning in it.



Fig. 2
Santiago Sierra, *Arrangement
of Twelve Prefabricated
Parapets*, 2004, concrete,
on permanent loan from the
artist to Herzliya Museum of
Contemporary Art

3 The museum's expansion was made possible thanks to a generous donation by the late collector Jacob Alkow and the support of the Herzliya Municipality.



Fig. 3
Herzliya Museum of
Contemporary Art, main
entrance, north façade, 2021

A photograph of the rear of the museum effectively depicts the extension that was added to the building in 2000 (during Dalia Levin's directorship)³ along its eastern and southern flanks. This new addition, which essentially tripled the museum's size, was built, in organic fashion, as an extension of the original design. Thus, although the museum gained a new façade and its own northern entrance^{fig. 3} – one that is new and distinct from the historic entrance through the Yad Labanim House – the overall proportions of the building as a whole were preserved and even enhanced, as was its architectural style and language, while completing the visitors' route to a full circle, linking together all the exhibition spaces.

In his photograph (p. 22) Singalovski chose to direct his gaze at the more obscure part of the building, focusing on the gray, material quality of the concrete, the rectangular, rounded proportions, and the rhythmic and measured formal vocabulary. At first glance, the museum's introverted, inward-looking and fortified appearance in relation to its immediate surroundings seems striking. As one looks more closely, however, an increasing number of familiar hallmarks of suburban urbanity become apparent, as external hints at the routine of the place – such as dark soot marks that have accumulated on the concrete walls over time; the nearby housing apartment block, across the street; a power pole next to a few trees; diagonal bands of shading made by white tarpaulin; an accessibility railing; a security camera; a water drainage outlet; and painted curbstones, indicating that parking is prohibited. These are all testaments to the bustling life surrounding the municipal museum, which was built in the heart of a residential neighborhood, and elements that cater to the needs of the visiting public. Despite their apparent violation of the perfect concrete geometry, the presence of these signs gives the building a human dimension, combining with it to produce a new composition: blocking yet bringing closer, concealing yet inviting, temporary yet stable.