

Mishkan Le'Omanut and the Ideal of the 20th-Century Museum

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A little known art museum with luminous interiors, established on a struggling socialist kibbutz in the 1930s, has inspired some of the 20th century's most iconic buildings.

IN THE FALL OF 1921, a convoy of 74 young Jewish émigrés arrived in the Valley of Harod, the storied Biblical spring where Gideon, judge of the Israelites, was said to have received the divine counsel that inspired his triumph over the forces of Midian. Traveling in cars, wagons and on horseback, and fleeing the poverty and anti-Semitism of Eastern Europe, the convoy was motivated by the hope of achieving an ideal community, liberated from the pain of the past. For these newcomers, Harod would again be a source of triumph, albeit an artistic one.

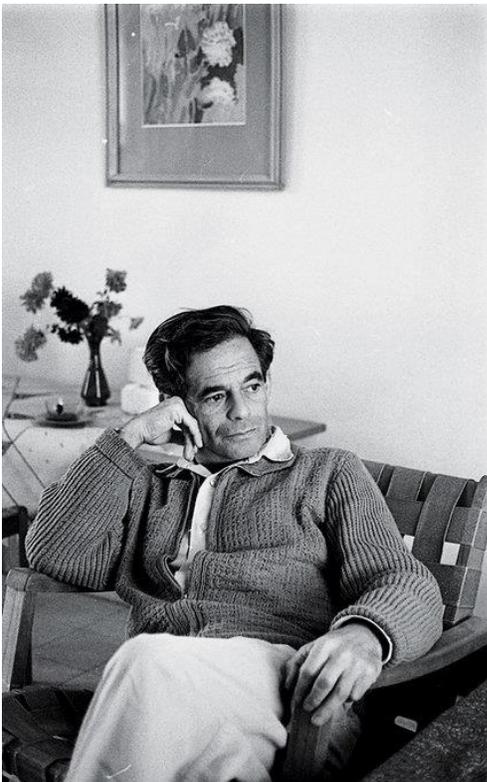
It Started in Ein Harod

From the beginning, Ein Harod, one of the first permanent collective agricultural settlements in Palestine, was a socialistic vision meant to reinvent not just Jewish life but the structure of human society itself, recasting traditional gender roles and the distribution of labor. In keeping with the Bolshevism they had seen in the Pale of Settlement, the earliest émigrés called themselves a “labor battalion,” and were determined to realize their revolutionary dream of an equitable, safe and secular community with fierce intensity.

The reality was less romantic. In the 1920s the fields of the Jezreel Valley were covered in bushes and rocks, and swarming with mosquitoes. Equally threatening to the community's survival was its members' growing disillusionment with the rules and demands of the collective, which many felt subsumed their individual needs. Having abandoned the

Orthodox world of the shtetl, the members of Ein Harod were rootless, with nothing but philosophical abstractions to guide them. “Leaving God behind caused a terrible shock to us all,” one member recalled. “We had to start from scratch and build a civilization from the very foundation. Yet we had no foundation to build on. We had no Ultimate.”

In that void, the denizens of Ein Harod sought solace not in religion but in art. A place where productivity appeared to be the only metric, Ein Harod ultimately celebrated and came to be remembered for all that was subjective, emotional, aesthetic. In 1937, the kibbutz’s leaders established a museum in the heart of their community, first housed in a three-room wooden shed and later in a structure that quietly became a source of inspiration for some of the 20th century’s most prominent architects. From the tranquil exhibition spaces of Louis I. Kahn’s Yale Center for British Art and the careful curving roof of his Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, completed in 1972, to the intimacy of Renzo Piano’s Menil Collection in Houston, traces of Mishkan Le’Omanut can be seen in the type of architecture that, as the self-taught Tadao Ando has put it, uses light to create “consciousness, an awareness of a larger universal rhythm and balance.”



Samuel Bickels, the museum’s architect. Credit Courtesy of Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod

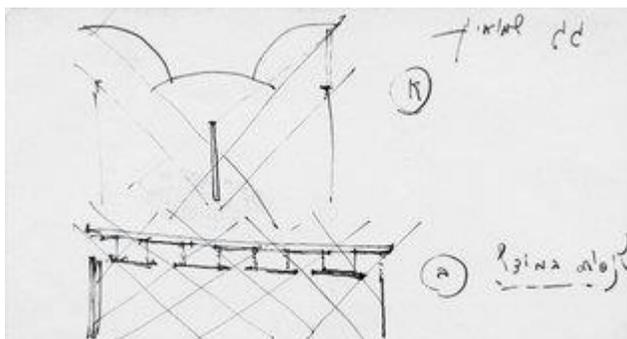
Today, the use of natural light is a common feature of museum architecture; as the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto wrote, “what acoustics are for a concert hall, light is for a museum.” And yet Mishkan Le’Omanut, which was officially inaugurated in 1948, is one of the earliest examples of a museum that used indirect sunlight with sublime results. Decades later, in the early 1980s, Piano drove north from Jerusalem to the museum at the recommendation of Pontus Hultén, then-director of the Centre Pompidou in Paris, with Dominique de Menil, the Houston philanthropist who had hired him to create a museum to house her collection. As Piano recently told me, he was so moved by the museum’s manipulation of

natural light, especially by the use of the cool and constant northern light so often favored by artists for their studios, that the impression of Mishkan Le’Omanut never left him. After completing the Menil Collection in 1987, Piano again focused his attentions on the glass roofing of the Fondation Beyeler near Basel, which he finished in 1997, and in the latticed

glass colonnade of his 2013 extension of Kahn’s Kimbell Art Museum. Most recently, in his design for the new Whitney Museum, he created a multistory glass facade that looks north onto the Hudson.

But as Piano knows, the appeal of the little kibbutz museum was never only its sunlit rooms. “Somebody believed that art, culture, knowledge, understanding — this was not secondary, but essential,” he said. Indeed, since its founding, the museum has become a kind of parable, a testament to art for art’s sake, and art against all odds. There are few historical precedents, after all, for a community with an oppressive political ideology embracing art for nonpolitical reasons. The unlikeliness of the existence of a homegrown museum on a hardscrabble Eastern European kibbutz makes it all the more poignant a reminder, according to the Israeli historian Anita Shapira, that “people even in dire straits have this feeling of need to have beauty around them.”

MISHKAN LE’OMANUT was the brainchild of an artist, Chaim Atar, who was also the kibbutz’s baker. Having been allowed to visit Paris twice by the kibbutz leaders in the 1930s, Atar became increasingly influenced by Chaim Soutine, whose expressionistic agitation is clearly discernible in Atar’s own portraiture. For Atar, portraits were essential to Ein Harod’s future museum as a way of restoring to community members their individuality. Unlike the modern New Horizons school of painting that portrayed the Zionist project with bright colors and depictions of the land, Atar’s portraits of the members of Ein Harod disregarded the self-styled heroism of the state of Israel (established in the same year as Mishkan Le’Omanut). When Atar painted the members of his kibbutz, he rendered faces not with Israeli futures but Jewish pasts, marked by trauma and loss — faces notably suspended in darkness, as if to foreground the self above all else.



Bickels’s sketches for the museum’s ceiling filters designed to soften the glare of the Mediterranean sun. Credit Courtesy of Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod

It was Atar’s idea to create in Mishkan Le’Omanut “an archival storehouse for treasures of the Jewish spirit,” from the menorahs he bought in local markets to the cherished family objects members had brought with them from Europe. When Israel’s leaders were urging a collective forgetting of the diaspora experience, the museum became the first venue in the newly established state to present a public exhibition devoted to the Holocaust, with a study of Polish Jewry’s liquidation. Atar’s vision clearly responded to a deep need: In the museum’s

early years, Israeli citizens traveled from near and far to see vestiges of their histories shown without elision. A fledgling museum had become a site of memory for a fledgling nation.

Driving through the sleepy region of Ein Harod today, it would be easy to miss the museum altogether. From the exterior, the building could be the kibbutz's cafeteria or a storeroom. Inside, there is a bookshop that sells hardcover volumes from the 1970s, a dusty library with empty desks and a tiny cafe that resembles the kitchen of a studio apartment. And yet, entering the vestibule, you come upon the secular synagogue of Atar's imagination, a vast sanctuary with steps leading not to the traditional Torah ark but to a set of vitrines showcasing the work of human hands. Today, Mishkan Le'Omanut is a respected exhibition space for local artists, but its true appeal is the ethereal communion of a deceptively simple structure with the white intensity of Israel's Mediterranean sun.

Its architect, Samuel Bickels, was a member of a neighboring kibbutz who had studied architecture in his native Poland, and whose vision — not unlike that of the Bauhaus architects then developing Tel Aviv — was of a “total work of art,” in which form would follow function. Bickels imagined the museum as a place where visitors could put aside the roles they were required to perform in the rigid social structure of the kibbutz — in much the same way that Atar's portraits were intended to help fellow kibbutzniks remember who, rather than what, they were.

But Bickels's lasting legacy was more technical. Built with humble materials over a decade, the museum is a somewhat awkward string of 14 rooms. To conserve resources, the galleries were left unadorned and painted only in white, the ideal canvas to display both artworks and the sunlight in all its nuanced fluctuations. For those who care about spaces — like Hultén, Piano and countless other international visitors over the decades — the combination of intimate, varied rooms and light sources make for a kind of ur-museum, not grand but perfectly executed. In the central sanctuary, light enters laterally, through tall, opaque windows, but elsewhere it seeps in indirectly, almost invisibly, through intricate ridges in the ceiling that filter solar glare into steady streams that gently roll over the walls. There is no view outside, no organic connection with the immediate surroundings. What Mishkan Le'Omanut offers instead is a departure from context, a temporal escape.

The writer Ari Shavit has written that Ein Harod is “imprinted on every Israeli's psyche,” a microcosm of the Zionist project itself. “In a sense it is our Source,” he writes, “our point of departure.” And yet the often-overlooked museum at its heart is a different kind of symbol, at once more personal and more universal. God may have been banished from Ein Harod, but there, in a humble building on a kibbutz that has seen better days, you experience the Psalmic ideal of being “enveloped in light,” and with it, a reminder of history's emotional inner life