

Sharon Rotbard, *White City, Black City: Architecture and War in Tel Aviv and Jaffa* (London: Pluto Press, 2015), pp. 256.

by *Barbara Mann*

Cities are notoriously hard to pin down; they are a work in progress, always already both dynamic stage and evolving container of the diverse lives that move in and out of them. Stories about cities are even more slippery. However, just as history is told by the victors, stories about cities, as Sharon Rotbard points out in *White City, Black City: Architecture and War in Tel Aviv and Jaffa*, are also primarily dictated by those powerful economic, political and social forces that have built them. The received history of Tel Aviv in relation to Jaffa – the town from which it emerged, and to which it remains joined at the hyphenated-hip – is the putative subject of Rotbard’s study; however, the book is also a broader investigation of cultural and political identity, and especially how Israeli Jews have negotiated the burdens and responsibilities of national autonomy and regional power.

In the years since Rotbard’s bracing and passionate book first appeared in Hebrew in 2005, scholarship about Tel Aviv-Jaffa has burgeoned.<sup>1</sup> Scholars now have a fuller appreciation of the development of Israeli urban space, and Tel Aviv’s and Jaffa’s particular roles therein. Yet *White City, Black City* still reads like a fresh and necessary corrective – in parts like a slap in the face – mostly due to the fluent urgency of Rotbard’s prose, and the continual visual scrim that accompanies the text. This text-image dance is even more impressive in the original Hebrew version, which was one of the first volumes published by Rotbard’s own independent press, Babel. The book’s narrative folds on the fuzzy, threadbare seam that is the historical boundary between Jaffa and Tel Aviv, a border that – like all borders – is more about political exigencies than physical topography.

The term “white city” stems from the moniker that has shaped discourse about Tel Aviv since the 1980s, and references the city’s abundance of “international style” or Bauhaus constructions from the interwar period. “Black City” is all Rotbard’s invention – though, as he notes, examples may be found all over the world (p. 176). He means the term in the Morrisonian sense: in her classic study

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<sup>1</sup> See “Tel Aviv at 100: Notes Towards a New Cultural History,” in *Jewish Social Studies*, 16/2 (2010): 93-110.

of American literature, *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison argues that it is only against [African-American] black, that [American] whiteness becomes visible; Herman Melville – especially, *Moby Dick*, with the elusive “whale’s whiteness” – is her grand case study.<sup>2</sup> Rotbard’s argument rests on a similar dynamic: beginning in 1909 or so, and moving through the interwar period, Tel Aviv is “born” (or grounds its origins story) as a ring of neighborhoods, essentially gated communities posing as new suburbs – a land grab on the part of a mixed group of Jewish immigrant investors, whose strategy effectively stymied Jaffa’s own urban growth (p. 72 and following, 79-80). Tel Aviv is “born again,” in the 1980s, with the stories with which Israeli architects began to explain the significance of the city’s predominant early architectural style, variously tagged as “International” or Bauhaus. In both instances – “birth” and “rebirth” – Tel Aviv depended on a selective rendering of the facts (e.g. how many Jewish architects working in Palestine in the 1930s really studied at the Bauhaus school in Berlin), and – more profoundly – a particular version of Jaffa for its self-definition, even as it turned a blind eye to, and eventually destroyed, traces of the latter’s physical existence, as well as its presence in historical memory:

“Much more than a physical location boxed in by calcified geographical frontiers, the Black City as a condition. And it is a condition which exists only in relation to the White City. Without it, the Black city is invisible; it is everything hidden by the long, dark shadow of the White City, everything Tel Aviv does not see and everything it does not want to see.”<sup>3</sup>

With this historical blindspot, and with Jaffa’s continuing gentrification, Tel Aviv has not only staged itself as Jaffa’s opposite; it has also attempted to erase any evidence of this process. In Rotbard’s view, the “white” version of the city’s origins, which began to emerge in its professional (architectural/municipal/creative/business) classes in the mid-1980s, was eventually embraced by a citizenry longing for a “clean” version of its own beginnings. This version of Tel Aviv’s progressive, liberal origins – its modernity – appealed to a Jewish-Israeli audience grown weary of the nightly television news’ steady diet of *Intifada*. It gave them something good to believe in, and strengthened the notion of Tel Aviv as a “bubble,” aloof towards the ongoing violence and political conflict (“the situation”) that so powerfully shapes Israeli

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<sup>2</sup> On page 52, Rotbard references an interview with Morrison. See Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> *White City, Black City*, 66.

life. This narrative reached an apex of sorts in 2003 when Tel Aviv was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, for its architectural distinctiveness and abundance of interwar structures, specifically – its “synthesis of... the various trends of the Modern Movement in architecture and town planning in the early part of the 20th century”.<sup>4</sup> There is, as Rotbard suggests, a direct line from the economic windfall of this award to the city’s more recent emergence as a gay-friendly global destination. But before we jump to the present, it is worth lingering on that moment when Tel Aviv happened, and the meaning of its establishment precisely in relation to Europe.

Indeed, the abundance of interwar structures that connect Tel Aviv to its European past, also implicitly recalls the war’s enormous physical destruction and diminishment of Eastern European Jewish life. While, as Rotbard claims “much more than a Zionist project or a Jewish project, Tel Aviv was a white, European project” (p. 142), these same Jewish entrepreneurs also viewed Europe as a *negative* space, whose broken promises of acculturation and political equity laid the foundation for national aspirations, including – but not only – Zionism. The utopianism of architecture as a tool of social engineering may also shape the enlightenment’s darker side, but Jews have arguably stood on both sides of its dialectic, on both ends of power.

Rotbard himself implicitly raises the *Shoah* when he introduces the figure of Albert Speer, Hitler’s architect, and the symbolic importance of ruins for a national tradition. Rotbard concludes: “there is no doubt that any building, of any form, is also, by default, a pattern of the destruction which may await it” (p. 131). One could extend this profound statement to the enterprise of Israeliness that seems to be at the center of this book (pp. 35-36). Is there something inherently, “organically” combustible about Jewish national autonomy?

In the years since Rotbard’s book first appeared, groups such as *Zochrot* – in Tel Aviv-Jaffa and throughout Israel/Palestine – have addressed some of the historical and material *lacunae* he describes.<sup>5</sup> Raising public awareness through publications, public forums and artistic installations that draw attention to physical traces of pre-state Palestinian life in Jaffa and elsewhere, their actions also contextualize the contemporaneous efforts of community organizers in Tel Aviv-Jaffa to create solidarity among historically neglected neighborhoods and

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<sup>4</sup> See Rotbard 2 and <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/decree03.htm#dec8-c-23>.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the recent *They say there is a land: Guidebook* (Sedek/Pardes-Zochrot: Tel Aviv-Jaffa, 2012) [Hebrew-Arabic].

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their disenfranchised populations. One can only read Tel Aviv-Jaffa's streets with more open eyes, with a more sober a tread, with Rotbard's book in hand.

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