



Modern Architecture and Gender in Pre-State Israel

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Photograph of architect Elsa Gidoni Mandelstamm and a worker on a construction site, 1936. Photographer Walter Kristeller. Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

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*This book is dedicated with deep gratitude to my Eretz Yisrael pioneers:
my grandmother, Yaffa Messinger (Charlotte Weinbach), who
immigrated from Vienna in 1933, and my mother, Naomi, who was
born in Eretz Yisrael.*

PREFACE

The woman who suffers the most from the servitude of household management is also the one who totally opposes the experts' attempts to update the building in keeping with the spirit of the times. After all, the house is nothing but a shelter from the storm, from thieves, a refuge for family life, a kind of machine to provide a comfortable and hygienic arrangement for sleeping, eating, and caring for domestic life. This is the fundamental condition of the civic home of our time.

In an article entitled “The Woman Builder,” published in 1928 in the magazine *Ha'isha* (The Woman), architect Lotte Cohn (1893–1983) expressed her views on the role of the contemporary home and women's place in it. The short paragraph cited above introduces some of the central issues associated with planning the apartment and the private home in the first half of the twentieth century. The questions of how modernizing the household affected the Jewish community in pre-state Israel and the roles of women in society and the home are the themes of this book. From 1920 until 1948, Palestine was under the British Mandate granted by the League of Nations. Mandatory Palestine is referred to here as Palestine or Eretz Yisrael (Land of Israel), one of its biblical names. The Jewish community in Palestine is also referred to as the Yishuv.

Cohn was one of the leading architects in the Yishuv. Her work is central to this research, along with several other women architects, notably Elsa Gidoni Mandelstamm (1899–1978) and Genia Averbuch (1909–1977). Who were the other female architects practicing in pre-state Israel? Where

did they come from? Where were they trained? How did their professional colleagues receive them, and what was their architectural contribution to building the land? Who hired them, and what did they plan? These questions, and others, will be examined alongside the new ideas that permeated the emerging Jewish society in Palestine and shaped its architecture. These questions raise further inquiries regarding the meaning of Cohn's "civil home of our time" and the "suffering" woman to whom she referred.

This cultural-historical study is situated between architectural history and gender studies. It focuses on the architectural production of female architects as Jewish settlement took shape in Mandatory Palestine, highlighting their design of educational and welfare institutions for the Zionist women's organizations that operated during this period. These institutions were created for women and were inspired by new, modern ideas. I analyze their unique contribution to the development of social institutions in Palestine. I also explore their contribution to the development of modern architecture and examine how they expressed their commitment to social goals, especially for women, through architectural design. My intention is not to provide a comparative study of the work of women architects in relation to their male colleagues but rather to shed new light on visionary work that has been forgotten or overlooked. The pioneering design of the social institutions established to support women profoundly shaped the image of the new Eretz Yisrael woman.

Lotte Cohn's arrival in 1921 marked the beginning of women's professional architectural activity in Palestine. By the end of the 1930s, 20 female architects were thought to be practicing architecture. Although most were graduates of technical universities in Germany and Austria, four graduated from the Technion, the Hebrew Technical Institute in Haifa, constituting the first generation of Israeli women architects. In both their personal and professional lives, they epitomized the European model of the modern woman: They were educated, professional, financially independent, and engaged in an occupation that was, until then, exclusively controlled by men. Architecture was not a common profession for women at that time, neither in Palestine nor in the rest of the world.

Four Zionist women's organizations—Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO), The General Council of Women Workers in Eretz Yisrael (*Moetzet Hapoalot*), Women's League for Palestine (WLI), and Mizrachi Women's Organization of America (MWOA)—founded new social institutions for Jewish women in Eretz Yisrael, adopting modern forms to house new programs and activities. These organizations had a clear agenda:

the advancement of women based on principles of modernization, hygiene, and efficiency in household work. To this end, they established educational, social, and healthcare institutions to support Eretz Yisrael women—whether new immigrants or long-time residents, workers or bourgeois homemakers—in the kibbutzim, villages, and cities. These organizations sought to ease the assimilation process by creating a supportive women’s community. They provided professional training, guidance for mothers, and affordable housing for single women. After World War II, the organizations broadened their goals of instilling modernist ideas of progress into the field of education for children and youth. All of the buildings of the leading institutions, including training kitchens, women pioneer houses (urban residences for single women), domestic science and agriculture schools, women’s clubs, mothercraft and child welfare centers, and later youth villages, were designed by the architects Lotte Cohn, Elsa Gidoni Mandelstamm, and Genia Averbuch. The book will elaborate on these organizations’ activities and their collaborations with these female architects.

The concept of the “new domesticity” that emerged in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century significantly influenced the German home economics movement, as well as the Zionist women’s organizations. These ideas provided the foundation for a reform movement that advocated using professional methods to perform housework and modernizing domestic space. Not surprisingly, German bourgeois women’s organizations were captivated by these ideas. Housework was redefined; it was now portrayed as more efficient, quicker, and less monotonous work. The “new household” was designed to free the housewife from routine tasks and reframe household management as challenging work that could be performed effortlessly and even with pleasure. Women’s traditional roles were redefined as “professional” roles worthy of new respect.

The ideas of the new household were also enthusiastically received by Zionist women’s organizations and significantly shaped their goals for Eretz Yisrael women. In their view, the woman responsible for the home also played a substantial and vital role in maintaining the health of the nation. They worked in various ways to spread these ideas. Their most significant activity, I argue, was the establishment of institutions that provided women with practical “scientific home management” skills.

These institutions were housed in modern buildings that represented Western ideals and provided a space to implement new daily routines. Their designs were based on similar institutions in Europe and the United

States. Concepts of the “new,” the “scientific,” and the “efficient” were embodied in their architectural form through rational planning and technological innovation. They reflected existing planning approaches, particularly concerning the home’s central space: the modern kitchen. The women’s institutions, therefore, expressed the social transformations that were taking place at the time, including the idea of the “new woman.” Modern architecture similarly promoted and even initiated societal changes.

Yet, the concept of the “new woman” was elusive. The book discusses this idea extensively, presenting its diverse definitions and interpretations. Originating in Europe in the 1920s, the idea was based on a model in which women were freed from the shackles of tradition. Women expressed their freedom through their external appearance and social behavior. Though technological advances and the modernization of domestic space freed them to leave the confines of the home and family, they were “convinced” to stay at home to fulfill their domestic duties. I chose to use the term “new woman” in the Eretz Yisrael context to describe the women who received vocational-domestic training in the institutions of the women’s organizations that had adopted the ideas of the “new household.” Although the term itself was not used in Eretz Yisrael, I believe that it reflects the goal of the Zionist women’s organizations to shape the image of the new Eretz Yisrael woman. This concept corresponds with similar trends that prevailed in Europe at the time, particularly in Germany. The architects described in the book also embodied a version of the “new woman” in their lives and work: educated, liberated, and independent.

My research is based on the analysis of primary sources, both textual and visual. These sources include documents, letters, articles in the popular press, architectural plans, and historical photographs. I also utilized statistical surveys and historical testimonies of women published in the press to understand the cultural, social, gender, and national contexts. The archival work was complex, involving a process of cross-referencing textual and visual information. Letters and reports from members and directors of the women’s organizations were studied against the architectural plans and photographs.

My research involved collecting biographical details of 14 female architects who practiced during different periods before the establishment of the State. I was able to compile an almost complete list of their built projects. Unsurprisingly, the quantity and quality of available information

were uneven. The architects' personal archives vary in terms of their comprehensiveness and the quality of their materials. They primarily contain personal photographs and information about their lives and work. Given that the book focuses on events that occurred approximately 90 years ago, the use of oral histories was necessarily limited. I was, however, able to interview relatives, close friends, employees in their offices, clients, and even one of the leaders of the women's organizations.

The search for projects designed by female architects during the Mandatory period was a difficult challenge. Apart from Cohn's archive, which is divided between Jerusalem and Berlin, there are only two personal archives of female architects within the public archives. Projects are not cataloged according to their architects. For this reason, I began my search in the popular press, first to locate the names of female architects practicing during the Mandatory period and then to generate a list of their projects. I searched mainly in the archives of the organizations that commissioned planning works from female architects and in the municipal archives of the cities where the buildings were built. In some cases, I only found a photograph or a short news item about a building that mentioned the architect's name. More and more buildings designed by female architects came to light, forming an impressive body of work by architects who headed their own private practices. The detective work involved in unearthing the details of the planning of institutions built for women opened up a rich, unexamined field of research regarding the role of female architects in developing modern architecture in Israel. This body of work has been overlooked by the historiographies of modern architecture as well as the historiographic record of the Yishuv and remains outside the Israeli historical discourse.

The research presented here raises questions that touch on other areas, such as gender, social issues, and settlement patterns during the Mandatory period. It is, therefore, a transdisciplinary study that relies on various theoretical frameworks, some of which deal with the subject of female architects and their influence on the development of social modernism in Israel directly, and others that relate to broader historical issues of gender and architecture. In addition to studies dealing with women in Mandatory Palestine, I also relied on studies addressing the European ideas that fueled the transformation of the status of women and the contribution of modern architecture to the development of these ideas. Alongside the social historiography and cultural research on the development of the Yishuv, I based this work on feminist theory in architecture.

I have expanded upon concepts related to architecture, gender, and Yishuv history in the notes.

The interrelationship of architecture, gender, culture, and society is a central theme of the book, as it is framed by ideas of public and private, local and global. Functionalist planning ideas imported from European modernism distinguished the design work of female architects for women's organizations. These ideas laid the foundation for the book and generated its main research questions: How were the new ideas and concepts that shaped European modernism adapted in Eretz Yisrael? How were they realized as a system of new social institutions for women, and how did female architects contribute to local social modernism?

The first part presents the ideological underpinnings of the women's organizations and their building program, as well as the social and gender foundations of modern architecture. The second part details the building program of the Zionist women's organizations in Eretz Yisrael. Women's institutions designed by female architects are then analyzed according to their typologies and characteristics.

Chapter 1 presents the development of modern architectural ideas in Germany during the first decades of the twentieth century. It examines the influence of the German discourse on the "new household" on Eretz Yisrael discourse and the social processes that shaped the policy of the "new domesticity" and the "new woman." The chapter then expands upon the social, cultural, hygienic, and technological ideas expressed in the development of the formal and spatial language of European modern architecture, especially regarding the influence of these ideas on the design of the domestic space and the rational kitchen. This part also discusses the role of German women's movements in this process.

Chapter 2 paints a portrait of the female architects based on their life stories and the characteristics they shared in their professional and personal lives. These shared characteristics allow us to define them as a distinct group. The chapter also provides context on how German, British, and American women advanced within the architecture profession at this time, allowing us to understand their family situations and professional advancements in light of their countries' social, economic, political, and cultural circumstances. This comparison highlights the unique position of Eretz Yisrael women architects of this era.

Chapter 3 discusses the innovative concept advanced by the institutions built for women, along with the architecture they promoted. How did female architects integrate the ideas of efficiency, rationality, technology,

hygiene, and health into the architectural design of the institutions' buildings? What were the physical and symbolic expressions of their designs in urban, social, gender, and cultural contexts? The Yishuv leaders' attitude toward establishing women's institutions is also examined. A separate discussion is devoted to the tendentious use of images to promote the agenda and goals of the women's organizations. Photographs of buildings were published in their magazines to represent the Eretz Yisrael woman as a figure who contributed to nation-building through her work in the home.

The second part of the book focuses on the building project itself. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 describe the response of women's organizations to the existential challenges women faced in Eretz Yisrael. Here, I describe the establishment of new institutions focused on practical training and detail the development of their functional programs. I describe the process of selecting the designers—through architectural competitions or specific commissions—and analyze the architectural work. Women's institutions are organized according to their functions and patronage. Chapter 4 focuses on WIZO's programs designed to impart professional domestic skills to women: domestic science and agriculture schools, an electrified public kitchen, a women's club, and a training kitchen, as well as mothercraft and child welfare centers. Chapter 5 addresses the women's pioneer houses, the initiative of the Women Workers Council and WLI, while Chapter 6 addresses the agricultural youth villages established by WIZO and MWOA. All chapters contain photographs and plans of the various buildings and the women's activities they housed.

In the Afterword, I review the nature of the collaboration between the female architects and the women's organizations and examine its contribution to women and their representation in Eretz Yisrael. I also address why this body of work has been marginalized and remains outside the historical discourse. The historical photographs of the women's institutions and the descriptions of the women's activities that took place in them reflect the spirit of the times and strengthen my argument that modern architecture supported and even promoted social and gender processes in the nascent Jewish society. Finally, the Appendix provides short biographies of fourteen female architects and one home reformer who were active in Eretz Yisrael.

Acknowledgments I first became aware of the work of female architects in Eretz Yisrael in the early 2000s while researching the Levant Fair, an international trade exhibition held in Tel Aviv in 1934. The finest local modern architects designed superb permanent buildings for the exhibition. Two of them were female architects: Genia Averbuch and Elsa Gidoni Mandelstamm. Averbuch was well known for her design of a central square in Tel Aviv—the Zina Dizengoff Square—and for many other projects. However, I found almost nothing about Gidoni Mandelstamm. The lack of information drove me to embark on a fascinating decade-long journey filled with surprising discoveries. My search for materials ultimately uncovered many additional female architects who were among the first to practice in Eretz Yisrael. I collected historical documents from 40 archives in Israel and around the world and located the buildings these female architects designed throughout the country. I also gathered information by interviewing family members, friends, and employees in their offices. The journey culminated in a doctoral dissertation on the work of female architects in Eretz Yisrael, from which this book was born.

I was assisted by many women, people, and institutions along the way. I want to thank all those who supported me and helped publish this book. First and foremost, I want to acknowledge my professors, Hannah Naveh and Robert Oxman, who inspired me to combine the fields of architecture and gender and mentored me with infinite dedication. Hannah Naveh guided me through the intricacies of gender research and enriched me with her knowledge. Her faith in my research, wise advice, and deep encouragement greatly helped advance the project. Robert Oxman, my teacher and mentor since my undergraduate studies in architecture, instilled in me a love for research and gave me the tools to conduct critical research. I was privileged to benefit from his wisdom and support over many years.

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Building a New Land: Women Architects and Women's Organizations in Mandatory Palestine

Bonot erets hadashah: adrikhaliyot ye-irgune nashim bi-tequmat ha-mandat
Translated by Elissa Rosenberg

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ABBREVIATIONS

CZA	Central Zionist Archives
LI	The Pinhas Lavon Institute for Labor Movement Research (Lavon Institute)
CAHJP	The Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People
HWO	Hebrew Women's Organization
JVA	Jezreel Valley Regional Council Archive
MWOA	Mizrachi Women's Organization of America
PICA	Palestine Jewish Colonization Association
PLDC	Palestine Land Development Company
TAMA	Tel Aviv Municipal Archive
TACA	Tel Aviv Construction Archive
WIZO	Women's International Zionist Organization
WLI	Women's League for Palestine (Israel)

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PART I

Ideological Foundations



CHAPTER 1

Toward a New Society

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, Europe witnessed the emergence of a new concept: “modernism,” which soon became an ideological movement known as the “modern movement.” As with many ideological movements, modernism arose in reaction to tradition and its norms and values. The modern movement is rooted in a concept of modernity that emerged in the early seventeenth century and accelerated with the Industrial Revolution in the middle of the nineteenth century, based on the changes that took place in Europe in all areas of life: economics, science and technology, religion, politics, and culture. The modern movement brought together a wide variety of movements, styles, ideas, and attitudes in the fields of culture and art, encompassing architecture, design, painting, sculpture, music, literature, poetry, and more. These ideas flourished in major cities in Germany and the Netherlands, as well as Moscow, Paris, Prague, and later New York, in search of the “new” as much as the rejection of the old.¹

This chapter will trace the new ideas that were taking hold during this period and were to make a critical contribution to the rise of European modern architecture. The discussion will then focus on the theoretical and visual aspects of architectural modernism. I will examine how technological, social, health, and cultural ideas were implemented in the planning and representation of the “new dwellings” (*Neue Wohnung*) and modern domestic space, first in Germany and later in Europe and Eretz Yisrael.