

**FORM FOLLOWS METAPHORS:  
A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Construction of the Israeli  
Supreme Court Building in Jerusalem**

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**Abstract**

This article examines critically the role of architecture in the construction of national identity, using the case of the Israeli Supreme Court Building. Through critical discourse analysis of texts that accompanied the design and construction of this building, I will propose to study the interrelations between the production of the architectural object and the practice of construction of Israeli national identity. The existing body of knowledge that supports this article claims that the creation of national identity is a socially constructed process, which involves a variety of practices including education, music, army service, as well as designing the built environment. It is important to note that the realization of such practices does not occur as a natural process, but rather as a result of power relations, embodied within the national sphere. Following this line of argument, this article proposes a critical approach, which aims to move towards the politicization of the term "sense of place". In this context, focussing on the Israeli Supreme Court Building is not an arbitrary decision, since this institution is in the focus of the Israeli civil arena, and its building became a 'land-mark' and symbol of architectural quality. Following the texts written by the architects and critics, I would argue that this building reflects - and thus strengthens - the hegemonic interpretations of the Israeli social and cultural reality. This interpretation is characterized by using selective historical and biblical references, in order to create through architecture an 'iconographic bridge' into an imagined collective past. However, this bridge reproduces the antinomies that frame Israeli space and transform it into "our place", that is West versus East and Local versus Diaspora.

## A. Introduction

*"...[M]onumental buildings mask the will to power and the arbitrariness of power beneath signs and surfaces which claim to express collective will and collective thought" (Lefebvre, 1991:143).*

In 1992, in the National Compound<sup>1</sup> of Jerusalem, the Supreme Court building was inaugurated. To many, this building epitomizes a landmark in the development of Israeli architecture; therefore, it was proudly presented in public. The architects who designed the building, Ada Karmi-Melamed and Ram Karmi, accompanied their working process with verbosity both during competition and while constructing it, and repeatedly interpreted the architectural tributes and their significance. Thus, the architectural practice was accorded an additional dimension that was reflected by the high expectations from this building, the abode of an authority which presumably promotes justice and civil equality in a state seeking to establish its Jewish and democratic identity, not merely through its judicial contents<sup>2</sup> but also by means of its symbolism. Architect Yaron Turel eloquently describes it:

"...It was clear from the very beginning that the Supreme Court building must make a speech. I cannot recall even one similar incident in which the expectation from an architectural work of art was almost entirely focused on its message... There was some hovering hope that the architects, Ada Karmi-Melamed and Ram Karmi, might start a revolution by sending some sort of an architectural 'transmission' that would convince the nation, its elected representatives and judges, that it is impossible to carry on this way. That there is a sublime, superior merit ignored by all of us, and this building will remind us of its existence" (Turel, 1993:54).

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<sup>1</sup> The National Compound (Kiryat Ha Leom in Hebrew) is the area which was designated before the 1967 war to include national official functions such as the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament), the Israel Museum and governmental institutions.

The status of the new building and the importance of its collective symbolic meaning may be appreciated having read architect Moshe Atzmon's poignant response to Brittain-Catlin, published on May 1993 in the Israeli Architects Association bulletin, and titled: "Anti-Semitic Criticism of Architecture – A Critical Essay about the Supreme Court". Atzmon sets out to defend the building and its architects, in response to an article published in the renowned British magazine *Architectural Review* (Brittain-Catlin, 1993). The article criticized several aspects of the topographical setting of the building, as well as its location vis-a-vis the Knesset building and the decision to build it outside the town centre. Towards the end of the article the critic emphasized the centrality of the Supreme Court to Israeli public discourse, and noted that a few days after the inauguration the High Court of Justice ruled Hamas activists to be expelled. The critic concluded saying that this is a classical Zionist policy issued out of a classical Zionist building (Brittain-Catlin, 1993). Atzmon perceived this criticism as an anti-Israeli statement, set not only against the architects of the building but also against the collective, or in his own words:

"The prestigious magazine AR, run until recently by the former Maxwell empire... has published in its latest issue a critical essay... The insipid article is deriding and includes anti-Israeli political remarks... The 'sympathetic' attitude towards architects Karmi and Karmi in particular, and Israeli architecture as a whole, is evident from the very first sentence which determines that 'the Karmis shamelessly' represent 'the arrogant plastic style' dominating Israeli architecture for the last 30 years. It concludes noting that the inauguration of the building was pushed into the background by the Civil Rights Movement's appeal to retrieve the Hamas deportees... Does the Architects Association have anything to say about this revolting story?" (Atzmon, 1993).

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<sup>2</sup> For details see: Gavison, 1995.

This dispute which stirred the Israeli architects community reflects the intensity of symbolism associated with the national significance of public and governmental buildings. However, as I will argue here, attaching significance to an architectural object is not the product of a 'natural' process in which collective symbols are being deciphered. Rather, it is structured upon meanings attributed to the building by agents of power – whether architects, politicians or public figures, who produce and reproduce what Geertz (1983) termed as 'local knowledge'. Therefore, this essay intends to examine the discourse that accompanied the design and construction of the Supreme Court building in Jerusalem. My main argument is that architectural practice and the discourse upon which it is based are first and foremost an expression of an ideological agenda, and an effective instrument for 'taming' time and space. Indeed, this article does not intend to discuss the esthetical or technological aspects of the Supreme Court building, nor its importance to the 'development' of Israeli architecture. Rather, I am interested in presenting a critical discussion, according to which a building is a social product and thus its significance lies within the array of social power relations that create it.

My argument coincides, among others, with Edward Said's claim (Said, 1978) that no single person, nor any society, are beyond or outside the struggle over geography which is fought, he maintains, using not merely weapons but also ideas, images and imagination. This struggle escalates when the issue is discussed within a context of national space and place, which represents a geopolitical and social order aimed at sustaining congruity between the population's homogeneity and the outlining of geographical borders, and formulating the connection between the national identity of that population and the collective significance it associates with that space. However, due to the complexity of reality, the landscape - whether natural or built - is shared by different groups; therefore, each entity claims exclusive symbolic possession of the landscape. The outcome of this process is the establishment of physical spatial dominion, which in turn is symbolically exploited to draw the boundaries between 'self' and 'other' (Yacobi, 2003).

This argument, it is important to highlight, is accentuated while discussing contested territories such as in Israel.<sup>3</sup>

Viewing the construction of sense of place - both tangibly and symbolically - in this theoretical perspective is intensified in light of present reality, in which the national state has come to represent the dominant geopolitical order. Despite controversies between different schools that analyze the origins and development of nationalism, they seem to agree that the nation has the potential of provoking deeper loyalty on part of its members than any other community. This sense of belonging develops over time, as a result of changes and by encouragement of the state, and forms relationships of 'us-versus-them' reflecting not merely differences but also superiority.

Loyalty is also associated with territory; in the course of socialization processes, individuals' interrelations with territory may alter, leading not only to their identification with territorial space, but to the latter becoming a hub of awareness, being defined as a homeland, the 'land of our forefathers' or 'motherland' (Fox, 1990; Agnew and Corbridge, 1995). But the very fact that a nation is not a homogeneous entity dictates that sets of national symbols, which embody the freedom of political, cultural and symbolic choice, are in the hands of those in power. This conceptual process requires the engagement of imaginary historical, religious and cultural interpretations, which become 'facts', supported by what Foucault (in Danahar et al., 2000) termed 'games of truth' that provide a set of rules and practices serving as scaffolds for the construction of a desired narrative, based on a variety of allegedly 'objective' disciplines.

These issues have been critically discussed in Israeli context over the past two decades. However, one field that remained in the shade of this critical discussion is architecture, which much like other cultural practices isolates the significance of interrelations in space, physical and discursive alike. More specifically, I intend to analyze the statements of the architects who designed the Supreme Court building, Ada Karmi-Melamed and Ram Karmi, as well as those of the Rothschilds, who initiated and financed the

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<sup>3</sup> For a wider discussion on the contested nature of the Israeli landscape see for example:

construction of the building, the criticism raised against it and the explanatory declamations recited daily by conducted tour guides at the site. Indeed, the texts I am about to examine are not addressing exclusively the 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991), which is thoroughly proficient in professional knowledge. I would like to stress that most of the following texts were published in books and albums available for the general public; hence their powerful impact as instruments for the construction of symbolic perception of space.

In this essay I aim to show that critical analysis<sup>4</sup> of these materials reveals the topics of discourse which accompanied the design and construction of the Supreme Court building in Jerusalem, simultaneously reflecting and structuring the hegemonic perception of 'the Israeli place'. This place, I argue, uncovers the duality and tension inherent in representations which reject the past, yet at the same time embrace their religious foundations (Yacobi, 2004). The duplicity of this process is evident in representations of Israeli national culture, which craves to be defined as 'secular' and 'civil', yet at the same time relies on religious, ethnic and messianic images that percolate into everyday life and serve as an interpretation that solidifies its hegemonic definition.

Another issue I address here is the fact that the Supreme Court building, its representations and symbolism, all reflect the conflict between this authority's aspiration to represent so-called 'neutral' and 'autonomous' civil values (Shamgar, 1992; Barak, 1998), and the fact that the conceptual scaffoldings of the planners' terminology rely on hegemonic interpretation which constructs the national-Jewish identity, though not the civil one. Hence, the discussion of the architectural discourse that accompanied the design of the Supreme Court building cannot be separated from the enhancement of its daily significance to Israeli social arena (Lahav, 1998), nor from the judicial

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Yiftachel, 1995; Yiftachel and Yacobi, 2003; Weizman, 2002

<sup>4</sup> From a methodological perspective, the interpretation and analysis of the texts in this article are based on vast literature that deals with discourse analysis in general and in relation to the built environment and planning in particular. See: Markus and Cameron, 2002; Fairclough, 1992; 1995; Scollon, 1998; Hastings, A., 1999.

activism that attempts, using its 'pastor force' (Shamir, 1994),<sup>5</sup> to mark and outline the boundaries of secularism and the extent of civility in Israel. As I further elaborate, this stance, aimed at criticism of law, is of great importance to this essay (see: Feldman, 1995; Shamir, 1995).

Following my line of argument, I propose that the architectural discourse which accompanied the design and construction of the Supreme Court building, follows and reflects the transition from the concept of court as a dispute resolving body to the idea that its judges are no less than 'a council of erudite scholars... whose wisdom grants them authority to determine the standards of the normal, the appropriate, the desired and the acceptable' (Shamir, 1994:12). In consequence, I will also claim that this building has already ceased to be 'a house'<sup>6</sup> and became 'a shrine' which constructs a spatial cognition that blurs and erases every barrier or conflict regarding the integrity of the hegemonic idea which is reluctant to overturn 'the cultural balance of power relations' (Geertz, 1973).

## **B. Who is the legitimate Son?**

Until 1992 the Supreme Court resided in a building that had formerly functioned as an inn for Russian Church pilgrims, and was located in the Russian Compound at the centre of Jerusalem. The decision to locate the Supreme Court in Jerusalem was apparently not owing to symbolic considerations, but 'more of a pressing necessity' (Lahav, 1997). Nevertheless, when the Supreme Court building was inaugurated in 1992, the significance of its location and appearance was emphasized, as lord Rothschild, who had financed the construction of the building, indicated saying that architects Ram Karmi and Ada Karmi-Melamed succeeded in creating 'a rare combination of traditional and innovative ingredients, **in a building which sanctifies the bond between law and the land of Israel**' (in Sharon, 1993:7, emphasis added).

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<sup>5</sup> According to Shamir (1994:11) who refers to Foucault, due to the strengthening of the radical formalism of the Supreme Court in Israel, the authority of the judges evolved much like pastor authority.

Lord Rothschild's message was neither incidental nor singular. The desire to form an affiliation that sanctifies the bond between 'law' and 'the land of Israel' was evident as early as the stage of examination of planning proposals, submitted by architects who competed for the design of the Supreme Court building.<sup>7</sup> Most of the proposals attempted to grant the building a symbolic, even mystical significance, inspired by biblical verses; various plans made a lot of effort to design a 'super-temporal' and monumental building (Sharon, 1993; Levin, 1987). Eventually, architects Karmi-Melamed and Karmi were selected, as the chairperson of the jury indicated, for measuring up to the requirements of the jury, who sought an architect capable of producing 'a building that would exceed the limits of time' (Levin, 1987).

The insistence of the competition jury to choose a monumental building is also evident in their explanations for rejecting other proposals, such as architect Ricardo Legoreta's work. In this case the jury strangely argued that 'the unique elements of this proposal – its gracefulness, its relaxed and informal approach – are the ones that eventually convinced the jury to reject it', since 'the plan has failed to provide the Supreme Court building with a semblance befitting its status' and neglected to 'express a sense of awe and meet the ritual needs' (Levin, 1984:5).

Then how did the proposal of Ada Karmi-Melamed and Ram Karmi, which was adapted and later realized and built, succeed in satisfying the required symbolic dimension? To begin with, one may describe the physical traits of the building and its conspicuous topographical setting. The soaring building is situated on top of the north hill of the National Compound, overlooking the centre of town to the west, and visible from different locations of the city (figure 1). The 'pilgrims' arrive at the courthouse climbing the stone stairs (figure 2) which ritually ascend into a paved yard, from which one may enter the building through a gate embedded in walls. Those who enter through the gate are compelled, by a visual axis – a panoptic eye - to watch the Knesset building.

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<sup>6</sup> In Hebrew the Supreme Court building is named Beit Ha Mishpat, i.e. the House of Law.

<sup>7</sup> The design of the building is a result of a two-stage international competition in which Israeli and internationally known architects participated. For details see: Levin, 1987.



But can a visitor to the building actually interpret its symbolic traits relying merely on the physical experience of a body manoeuvring within the architectural space? This issue was addressed by Lefebvre (1991), who claims that one should observe the complexity of space and recognize not only its physical elements but also the symbolic ones, as well as the ideology, which stands behind its production. Lefebvre asks: 'What is an ideology without a space to which it describes, whose vocabulary and links it makes use of, and whose code it embodies?' (Lefebvre, 1991:44). Indeed, in order to decipher the symbolic meanings associated with the Supreme Court building, one should trace the 'vocabulary' used by architects Ada Karmi-Melamed and Ram Karmi. In numerous texts, words and architectural tributes that accompanied the competition stages, and later also the construction of the building, they have joined together the concrete architectural practice, and an imaginary and selective super-temporal space; a Jewish, Zionist space, shaking off the Diaspora - yet not lacking identity and roots:

"The map of the city, as well as **the map of the Supreme Court building**, reflect a clear hierarchy of those cores that have made their mark in our personal and collective memories, and by orchestrating them together the city tells us who we are, where we came from and what we are descendents of. The conceptual aim was to create a realization of the urban memory and the experience of being acquainted with the city, and incorporate it into the architecture of the building, that would reflect the private city map each and every one of us carries along. The feeling that the building is 'mine', we may even say 'ours' – **a building that bestows cultural orientation and pride**" (in Sharon, 1993:35, emphasis added).

This statement clarifies the way the architects outlined their sphere of action. First, they chose to use the notion 'map' instead of 'plan', which is the professional term for the two-dimensional description of buildings, thereby emphasizing their wish to create a place of greater spatial significance. The

texts I am about to present here also indicate that they had no intention of confining themselves to the planning of a new building for the Supreme Court. Rather, they saw in this an opportunity to fulfil an additional, even more important mission: to design, epitomize and represent the national memory that will be structured and built upon a hegemonic construction, which excludes any deviation from the desired utopian mold reflected in a so-called 'civil' architecture, which embodies the spirit of the city and the glory of the nation, and may help 'us' remember what was chosen, as well as suppress what is intimidating.

The discussion of architecture and town planning as a socially constructed symbolic manifestation is central to this essay. Just like other cultural representations, governmental buildings are also characterized by being a symbol of the political power of the state, which struggles to establish a particular collective identity and no other (Swartz, 1997; Vale, 1992). As noted by Foucault (1982), a significant change in the role of architecture which coincides with the rise of nationalism is evident in Europe from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward. From that period on, architecture and town planning became disciplines of a new political aspect, which accentuates the state as an organization that enforces territorial, social, political and cognitive order, which molds norms and rules by means of domination, exclusion and inclusion mechanisms.

Two historical examples will illustrate my claim. The first occurred at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Germany with the rise of romanticism, which represented an essentialist approach considering nationality as an emotion that resides in the human psyche (volksgeist). This idea was supported by contemporary architectural discourse,<sup>8</sup> which viewed architecture as a plastic manifestation of the human spirit, concluding that a particular architectural style – and in Germany it was the Gothic style – is an authentic representation of the nation.<sup>9</sup> Another example is the Gothic Revival in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which the Gothic style came to represent nationality in Great

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<sup>8</sup> In 1772 Goethe's article which deals with the German architecture was published. For a detailed discussion see: Forty, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to mention that the Romantic movement in Europe in general and in Germany in particular profoundly influenced the Zionist thinking.

Britain. This issue was often debated within elite circles, and reached its peak with the construction of the Palace of Westminster in Neo-Gothic style, as a symbol of British nationalism (Forty, 1996). Marrying the Gothic style and British nationalism relied on justifications and pseudo 'scientific-historical' facts, that were described by Collins (1967) as 'an obsession for archaeology' which calls upon history as a scientific discipline to prove the link to the past.

The obsession for archaeology and history, as well as for treating them as unquestionable truths, is clearly evident in the texts that accompanied the design and construction of the Supreme Court building. To reach their goal, the planners used architectural and conceptual terms that are readily associated with the Bible as a favourable reference book, which permits historical, emotional and mystical bondage between 'the people' and 'its land'. This choice became the groundwork for numerous statements and ample use of images, from urban scale down to concrete architectural space, while the purpose was defined as the wish to express **'a sensual, natural and authentic love for the country, its land and landscape; the fact that the [Jewish] people are not an illegitimate children of their land'** (in Sharon, 1993:93, emphasis added).

Turning the people into a legitimate offspring of its land is worth noting, since this issue is central to the discussion of the Jewish people's return to Israel within the Zionist narrative; the return to the origins of authentic being, both ideational and earthly. Furthermore, the presentation of this issue necessarily raises the possibility that the wish to express an essentialist 'genetic-biological' bond with the land is the first step towards the construction of the symbolic order of space in Israel, which is based upon the exclusion of the 'other', namely the 'illegitimate son'.

### **C. Form follows metaphor**

As I have already mentioned, the construction of the Supreme Court building in Jerusalem produced vast repercussions in Israel and abroad. The architectural design, the way the building harmonizes with the urban landscape and the historical tributes were highly praised. The architectural

criticism focused mainly on the symbolic interpretation of the interrelations between the Knesset, as a legislative authority, and the Supreme Court, as a judicial authority (Brittain-Catlin, 1993; Turel, 1993). The visual axis projected from the Supreme Court to supervise the Knesset was perceived as a symbolic manifestation of the way the High Court of Justice considers itself responsible to fill up the governmental void, shifting the judicial authority weight from the legislator to the judge in the process (Shamir, 1994). However, I would like to argue that even this criticism failed to undermine the fortified hegemonic interest demanding the participation of every project in the construction of a subjective identity, founded upon a complete fabric of divisions and separations defined by Chinski (1993:189) as an antonymous system of 'local and universal, Israeli and Jewish, ancient and new, nature and culture, Jewish and Arab, here and there'.

The representations of this antonymous system were already present when the idea of providing a new building for the Supreme Court was raised in the early 1980s, during the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Jewish settlements and Baron Edmond de Rothschild's support of them. Financing the construction of the Supreme Court building, Ms. Dorothy de Rothschild noted her husband's wish to donate the money to construct 'a building of national significance' (in Sharon, 1993:8). Thus was set, from the very beginning, the commitment to tie together the history of Zionist settlement supported by the Rothschild family and the construction of the Supreme Court building. My claim is further validated by the following text, taken from a publication of Yad HaNadiv (the 'Generous Memorial'), established by the Rothschild Foundation:

"Both buildings – the Knesset<sup>10</sup> and the Supreme Court – seemingly issue forth concentric ripples which spread outwards, reaching the city limits and beyond. They were conceived when Baron Edmond de Rothschild had made some personal decisions... initiatives that accompanied the national revival narrative and played a central role in it. What has started at the end of the last

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<sup>10</sup> The Rothschild family also donated the money for the construction of the Knesset building.

century with a unique zeal of one man, who bought lands and invited Jews to settle on them, became a tradition over the years" (in Sharon, 1993:8).

Placing the Supreme Court building in Jerusalem on a chronological time-line as part of a historical narrative enhances the formation of the desired game of truth, which aims at conjoining old and new, and narrates the continuity of Jewish settlement and the contribution of the Rothschild family to this project, perceived as a heroic chapter in Zionist history.

However, unlike the professed bond between the Gothic style and German or English nationalism, using a quondam architectural style within Israeli context is problematic. The architectural facet of modernism, which characterized the architectural practice of the Jewish community of settlers as early as the 1930s, was predicated upon the rejection of the past and the Diaspora, as well as the alienation of the orient, as both were manifested in the native scenery (Yacobi, 2003; Nitzan-Shiftan, 2000). But starting with the 1960s, there was a growing yearning for the formulation of 'deep-rootedness' and 'Israeli indigenoussness' that embraced the native scenery as a source of inspiration, dimming and ignoring its political implications. Taking that into consideration, one may therefore wonder which 'style' could the architects of the Supreme Court building refer to, in order to attest the continuity necessary for proving the relatedness to territory. Sharon (1993:25) discusses this dilemma and the alternatives architects may use:

"Architects have nothing to rely on but the archaeology of the land of Israel and the complex character, both old and new, of Jerusalem. On the one hand, that is a great deal, yet on the other, it is insufficient. There is such a firm and complex connection in Jerusalem between various construction styles and versatile religious and national traditions, that it is impossible to isolate the purely 'Jewish' and 'national' from numerous other styles."

The strategy chosen by the architects in order to assign a symbolic significance to the building may be described by Sharon's phrase as 'form follows metaphor' (1993:89). This approach facilitated the creation of a super-temporal metaphoric space in which nature and culture are nothing but a 'sensual' and 'authentic' foundation. The architects successfully produced a neat 'historical collection' associated with the history of Jerusalem. This collection serves as a controlled instrument for organization of the collective knowledge and memory, creating an atmosphere of certainty and order that lead to the observation of present reality as a linear continuance of the past. The practical representation of this world seems as if it was meant to demonstrate Mitchell's description of the way the Orient was perceived by the orientalist discourse of international exhibitions, in which artificial exhibits were presented under the pretence of authentic certainty and 'scientific' chronology (Mitchell, 1998). But much like a museum, which offers the viewer a certain spatial definition of knowledge rather than a 'neutral' organization, so does the perception of architectural space, which serves as a container for the organization of knowledge.

It was implemented by alluding to temporal and spatial landmarks on the city map, and positioning them in relation to the new building. The historical stations cited, though not altogether 'Jewish', are not intrinsically Muslim either. They all represent events of heroic significance and sovereignty, so that the building would be 'one link in a chain of buildings and sites, starting with the Rockefeller Museum, heading for Nablus Gate, the Russian Compound, Zion Square, Ben-Yehuda Street – and onward to the Ben-Gurion Compound [the National Compound]' (in Sharon, 1993:35).

Figure 3 (source: Sharon, 1993:35), a graphic representation produced by the architects, concisely depicts it, marking the Old City wall in the east, and the outlines of the Supreme Court building, 'the keystone of the entire National Compound' (in Sharon, 1993:35), in the west. The connection between these two 'walled cities' is an imaginary axis that generates the symbolic relationship within the urban space. The architects' illustration graphically neutralizes the existing urban texture in order to enhance two focal points: the Supreme Court building in the west and the Old City in the

east. The topographical location of these two cities is highlighted by means of dramatic contour lines gradually disappearing towards other parts of the city.

This graphic image uses a modernist analytical approach to urban analysis (Forty, 2000: Chapter 1), which reduces the complexity of reality into a generalization. This document also graphically exemplifies how the organization of space relies on a representation of knowledge, in accord with Said's criticism of orientalism which perceives west-versus-east through a set of polar contradictory images, ideas and experiences (Said, 1978). Indeed, it seems that the architects actually do separate (graphically, textually and cognitively) between the eastern part and the western part of the city, the latter being the modern capital in which the Supreme Court resides. Hence they indicate the link between the eastern part of Jerusalem, which symbolizes the 'spiritual aspect', and the western part, which symbolizes the rational 'capital aspect'.

I would like to refer at this point to Kim Dovey (1999), who coined the term 'framing of place'. According to him, our mundane actions are subjected to the planned space: rooms, buildings, streets, cities and neighbourhoods dictate a hierarchical spatial order and physical boundaries. However, claims Dovey, these spaces also have a discursive dimension in which the built environment generates a meaning that becomes 'obvious'. These two dimensions frame space (both physical and symbolic); thus the built environment becomes a mediating agent, constructing and reconstructing power relations. This formulation relies on Bourdieu (1977), who defines the dynamic interrelations between ideology and everyday life using the concept of habitus: those everyday life evaluations, classifications and hierarchical rankings which define time-space relations that produce knowledge, beliefs and truisms. Framing of place therefore portrays a reality which maintains its hegemonic force by percolating into everyday life and becoming an obvious and undoubted truth. It thus effectively assigns ideological power to the built environment and architectural object, in order for them to epitomize and frame the significance of place for the group in power.

The text that accompanies Sharon's book is also indicative of the intensity of the architects' expressions, and the way they became a common

jargon, any dissimilar interpretation of which was perceived as a threat to the hegemonic narrative. A perfect example is the concern that architectural elements cited by the Supreme Court building might be interpreted as 'non-Jewish' symbols and images:

"The southern niche – in fact, the entire yard plan, including the northern atrium, the aisles on the sides and the big southern apse-resembling niche – troubled the chief contractor of the building, Gabriel Peretz. His concern was appeased once he learned that this classical structure is typical of Byzantine synagogues... A formal letter written by Engineer Dan Wind, mailed to the architects in 1988, during the planning stage, reveals some unease regarding no other than Muslim connotations. However, neither Muslim connotations, nor the resemblance to a cathedral apse... can change the fact that the niche of the arched peristyle is first and foremost an arch, and the arch refers to Roman architecture, and to the Roman Triumphal Arch" (in Sharon, 1993:13).

But regardless of the concerns, this comment is bewildering considering the fact that the Roman Triumphal Arch is a symbol of exile and destruction, hence referring to it as an architectural inspiration source for the Supreme Court building is paradoxical. However, according to my interpretation of this building as a display of a historical collection which builds a super-temporal bridge, the symbolic and imaginary retrieval of the Roman Triumphal Arch into Jerusalem further reinforces the Zionist game of truth, which claims that the return of the Jewish people to the territory defined as 'the land of its forefathers' is merely a reestablishment of ancient sovereignty.

#### **D. Between the sacred and the secular**



A visitor entering the Supreme Court building from the 'outer yard' walks within a carefully planned architectural form. This is a controlled and hierarchical space which deprives one of the choices of movement under the pretence of democratic space. This is a disciplinary building, accompanied by a didactic message that attempts to assimilate the body moving in space into a single narrative. I would suggest here to interpret its spatial and symbolic hierarchy in relation to the description of the architecture of the second Jewish temple:

"Everyone was allowed to enter the outer yard even foreigners, only menstruating women were forbidden to step in. Into the second yard came all Jews men and women who were purged of all bodily impurity. And into the third yard came only Jewish males who were purified and sanctified, and into the fourth yard came the priests wearing sacerdotal garments, and into the sanctum sanctorum came only the prominent priests wearing sacramental apparel for them alone" (Yosefus Plavious, in Rosenblit, 1988)

Indeed, following this historical description, as one approaches the building, the ritual ascent continues: the 'rise towards Jerusalem' (Sharon, 1993:83) leading to the audience story, which is 'the second yard'. A tall wall built of natural stone escorts those who climb the stairs (figures 4, 5). This is a 'museum piece' to which the architects refer as 'the wall', and with which they hope to depict the building literally as an urban fragment. Therefore, the wall, that cannot be considered a parapet despite its dimensions, is nevertheless defined as such. But defining this wall as an anonymous rampart fortifying the city-building is not enough. The authority of interpretation of this wall's significance is clearly manifested in the daily tour guides' declamations, according to which the stone wall at the entrance 'is built like the Wailing Wall'.

Furthermore, the boundaries of national responsibility the architects have taken on gradually expanded, as proven by the religious attitude

towards the act of building the wall. Architect Ram Karmi called the builders 'Nimrods': 'It takes a lot of Nimrods to build something like that' (in Sharon, 1993:94), he stated. We therefore witness the use of a biblical image – Nimrod – associated with Canaanite ideology, which attempts to differentiate between Jewish identity and Hebraic identity. Thus the Diaspora past is being set aside, and the bond with the 'authentic place' is being magnified, as if it is the very origin of 'the Hebraic nation'.

The use of natural stone to build the wall is also an important symbolization object to the architects, and expresses the same love they refer to as sensual and authentic. This essentialist love not only justifies the Jewish people's bond with its land, but is also unquestionable. It is described in Sharon's interpretation of the architects' statements, in a way that clarifies the importance of the religious and ethnical aspect of the building:

"The natural stone, unharmed by 20<sup>th</sup> century technology, makes you feel that you are but a particle within a huge super-temporal life cycle that ceaselessly endures regardless of the building. **At the entrance, beside those stones, you simply have to surrender a part of yourself.** You are reminded of what author Y. M. Berdichevsky wrote at the turn of the last century about the wish to become instantly, in a trice, 'Hebraic humans' nurtured by the same place. **The return to the ancient territory has always been stressed in order to highlight the Zionist and national option**" (in Sharon, 1993:94, emphasis added).

As the visitor proceeds towards the court halls, the experience within the architectural space of the Supreme Court building gradually assumes a religious nature. The next exhibit the visitors are exposed to is called 'the inner gate'; it is roofed over by a pyramidal structure, leading to the lobby of the court halls and separating between 'the sacred and the secular' (figure 6):

"... This space makes reference to Yad Avshalom [Avshalom memorial], in the sense of endurance of law over time. The pure

geometrical shape of this hall runs down the higher it ascends towards the dome... This is a solemn static space which separates between **the sacred and the secular**. This is the real 'gate-house' of the Supreme Court" (in Levin, 1987:3, emphasis added).

The rhetoric employed by the architects in order to justify the use of this architectural structure raises a fundamental question: what does a Supreme Court building have to do with a gate-house that separates between the sacred and the secular? Shamir criticizes the aggrandizement of judicial activism, as well as the professional expertise that became 'the new civil religion' which replaces the priest with the judge, making him 'a source of spiritual authority... exercising a paternal, protective force; not merely ordering and enforcing, but also willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of others' (Shamir, 1994:11,17).

Taking this criticism into consideration, it is evident that the building and the discourse that accompanied its design manifest an ideological platform, which strives to establish a new temple within a society that struggles to be defined as Jewish and democratic. Thus the architectural representation clearly reveals a paradoxical contrast between the local-Jewish and the universal representation. This building, which is supposed to represent a civil, not a religious authority, uses form and content borrowed from inherently religious buildings, and therefore the separation between the sacred and the secular, and the hierarchy that characterizes religious buildings with a cosmological scheme, perfectly match the way this authority establishes its status within the Israeli public. Behind choosing the monument of the Kidron valley for a source of inspiration lies another reason:

"Yad Avshalom, one of the Hasmonean tombs of the Kidron valley, was a source of inspiration... The decision to deliberately follow an element of the Second Temple era was probably owing to the wish **to leap over a considerable length of time** in order to stress **the continuity of the connection to the place, as well as to**

**a bygone grandeur...** What has started with emphasizing the connection to Jerusalem by means of a Jewish monument influenced by Hellenistic culture, became an abstract element, super-temporal rather than 'national'" (in Sharon, 1993:85, emphasis added).

However, the architects' statement that Yad Avshalom became an abstract rather than a national element is trivial in comparison to the symbolic significance they attach to the form in relation to the Jewish history of the city. The purpose of the pyramid, they claim, is to establish that same imaginary geographical continuity from east (the Kidron valley) to west (the National Compound), and from an epoch conceived as national and heroic (Hasmonean) to this day. Obviously other justifications for the choice of pyramidal structure may have sufficed. However, it seems that the obligation to intensify the super-temporal significance of the building revalidates the paradox inherent in the relation between the local and the universal, the Israeli and the Jewish, the ancient and the modern, and even the earthly and the mystical, as one may learn from the description of entering the pyramid as an experience of removing the external world from the cognition, finding a place 'lit from heavens... and infusing you with the sense of your ephemeral transience in this world' (Sharon, 1993:85).

The space of the 'third yard', roofed over by a pyramid, is enveloped within the circular library of the Supreme Court which is visible through a glass wall, revealing the 'fourth yard' that 'priests' alone may enter. This is the place which stores the textual knowledge used for the rituals of judicial citations, in which 'the ancestral spirits of the judicial tribe are summoned to advise their offspring in times of affliction and distress' (Feldman, 1991:158). The architects attributed the reason for using this form to the verse 'He leadeth me in the cycles of righteousness', and according to Sharon (1993:89) and the Supreme Court daily tour guides' explanations, this is how the architects chose to convey the architectural connection between biblical-utopian justice and the law, and between heaven and earth:

"'Justice' is symbolically depicted in the Bible as a cycle associated with heavens – an unattainable and absolute virtue. In contrast, 'law' or 'truth' are illustrated as a line and treated as human ideas, relative values, depending upon man's changing perceptions and associated with earth" (Sharon, 1993:31).

These explanations heighten the religious significance of the judicial system, perceived as a 'neutral', 'authentic' and perpetual super-temporal entity.

My claim is supported by judge Shamgar's congratulatory speech made at the inauguration of the Supreme Court building (Shamgar, 1992:370). He chose to cite a poem written by Nathan Alterman in 1937, when 'the first Hall of Justice in Tel-Aviv' was built:

"Let us leave cabins of clay  
Ancient prophecy to uphold –  
On a soft carpet, in palm umbrae,  
Our magistrates we'll reseal as of old"

Beneath these verses, abundant with 'authentic' descriptions saturated with an orientalist tone (cabins of clay, carpet and palm), one may recognize the religious undercurrent and claim that this is yet another attempt to tie together the biblical past, namely the 'ancient Hebraic myth' (Shapira, 1994), and the present. This is the imagined connection between the distant national-collective experience and its national-territorial realization.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, at the height of the exhibition that reorganizes time and space, are the court halls, in which ritual hierarchy is epitomized. The convicts are brought up in an elevator from the lower story; the judges arrive at the hall from their chambers, situated on a separate story, the 'sanctum sanctorum'; and the audience enters the hall through the wall gates. The power relations

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that this interpretation relies on the difference between biblical register and Alterman's idiom. While the original Hebrew verse conveys a moral act of restoration of justice using the verb "reset" (Isaiah 1: 26), Alterman emphasizes the physical active using the verb "reseal".

embodied by this choreography may be appreciated having read Feldman's essay (1991). However, I shall focus here on the interpretation of the architectural representation of these halls, at which the audience arrives through gates breached in the 'wall', which 'as if rises from the depths of earth, **far deeper than the actual foundations of the building itself**' (Sharon, 1993:92, emphasis added).

Much like the bedrock stone that rises and thrusts on Mount Temple, the stone-coated wall is presented by architect Ada Karmi-Melamed (1990) as organically growing and rising from within the rocks at the depths of earth. Yet the archetypal justification the architects provide is but another manifestation of the medley of domains, according to which the identity of the 'Israeli place' is infused with religious, ethnical and messianic images, assimilated into everyday reality and used as an interpretation that fortifies the hegemonic definition of Israeli national identity.

I would also argue that the tension between the principle of universal-civil justice and the architectural national representation is fully revealed here in all its acuteness. According to the architects (Levin, 1987; Sharon, 1993), the law as a social and cultural phenomenon is meant to address the human urge for order - it balances the relationship between the individual and the collective. On the other hand, the architects emphasize that the court halls have to visually reflect the concrete involvement of 'the people with its land', and furthermore, the approach asserting that 'tradition and landscape are interrelated'. The fundamental assumption of the architects is that the people in question is the Jewish people, and the realization of its existence can be achieved only on its land and within its landscape, which are 'devoid' of anyone that does not belong to 'us'. Reference to non-Jewish citizens of Israel, to their past and their cultural representations, is conceived as problematic for the Jewish majority, since recognizing the past of the other may reveal an identity which rivals the Zionist one (Rabinovitz, 1998). Therefore, the stone wall must rise from a core far deeper than the foundations of the building, because in between the foundations of the building and the bedrock stratum lies the memory of the foundations of 'others' houses.

The surfacing dilemma is whether a building that essentially represents Jewish-Zionist nationalism can accommodate an institution which epitomizes civil equality. It seems that the donors, the competition jury and the architects were also aware of this tension, and their statements reveal an attempt to manoeuvre between their symbolic affinity to Jewish justice and tradition, and their commitment to values of civil justice, as noted by the jury of the architectural competition:

"The whole building is awe inspiring and respectful – respect for **the special character of the site, and respect for Jewish justice and tradition**. It attests to the acknowledgement of the need for symbolism, but at the same time does not ignore practical requirements of such a building, which is meant to serve a multifarious public" (in Levin, 1987, emphasis added).

However, I suggest that in this particular point the architects have missed an opportunity to imbue their project with a wider 'local' significance, by acknowledging the fact that the site of 'special character' which accommodates the Supreme Court building was once the location of the Palestinian village of Sheikh-Bader. But disavowing the Palestinian past and excluding this entity from Israeli identity originate in that same historical conception that denies the Jewish past of the Diaspora:

"This conception, that views the present as a realization of Jewish history, namely the restoration of the past, produces a definition of the relation to the land in terms of ownership and of 'a historical prerogative' that surpasses any other right... It should be recognized that there exists a strict denial, owing to the formulation of cultural identity in terms of disavowal, and more importantly, the fact that repudiating the Diaspora means repudiating the memory – the Jewish memory on the one hand, and the Palestinian on the other" (Raz-Karkotzkin, 1993:113).

## **E. Discussion**

*"'We' are indeed 'us', we are the inexhaustible who keep generating endless interpretations in order to exert Sisyphean toil in proving our territoriality, the bond between the population and the land, and in order to draw the portrait at which we gaze to learn about our identity" (Chinski, 1993:190).*

This essay examines the texts that accompanied the design and the construction of the Supreme Court building, supporting the claim that national identity – as a political and cultural construct – is related to the formulation of new time and space created by communal imagination processes that intertwine past, present and future. This course is a manifestation of hegemonic culture, which frames the place while intervening and generating spatial transformation, using architecture as an instrument for their realization. Thus is formed the rhetorical landscape, the spatial fabric which 'teaches' us about our past and our identity, and within which buildings assume their structured symbolic significance, being justified as representatives of the collective wish and thought. Through these lenses the dispute between Atzmon and Britain-Catlin, accumulates importance as a key to understand the role of architecture and its discourse in the construction of sense of place.

Indeed, one may conclude saying that the architectural object should be viewed as a social product. I have analyzed here the way in which the Supreme Court building in Jerusalem embodies, through the antonymous rhetoric of the texts that accompanied its design and construction, the transition that took place in the Supreme Court's status within Israeli public discourse. The architects, as well as the judges, claim the position of social change pioneers and authoritative designators of the 'enlightened sector', simultaneously distinguishing the 'other'. Thus are reproduced the power relations that configure the Israeli 'democratic fundamentalism' (Shamir,



1995:702), not only judicially but architecturally and spatially as well. If Feldman (1991:146) has compared the judges' chambers at the Tel-Aviv courthouse with 'the Forbidden City', the Supreme Court building, as this essay demonstrates, embodies a Forbidden City within a Forbidden City, attempting to create a hierarchical framework of sanctity. The outer, the second, the third and fourth yards, and at the very heart of those – the sanctum sanctorum, which the prominent priests enter wearing sacramental apparel for them alone. Hence the hall of 'civil religion' is built in the western part of the city, reflecting the one in the eastern part while blurring and subverting the link between architectural function and form on the one hand, and enhancing the metaphor on the other. Thus is also revealed the dichotomous distinction between Israeli nationalism, which strives to depict itself as 'secular' and 'rational', and the religion characterized by it as 'irrational', 'mystical' and 'messianic'.

However, the architectural medium's ability to convey messages is limited, since laymen visiting the Supreme Court building would not necessarily succeed in deciphering the 'architectural text'. Therefore, the architects' statements, the jury's communications and the daily tour guides' declamations are important. They are the ones who by verbal means repeatedly enliven the significance of the site. Thus, efforts and resources are dedicated to the reproduction of this habitus-jargon, in an attempt to tell the 'story' of the building and translate its symbols for the benefit of the visitors. These activities include daily guided tours around the Supreme Court building conducted in Hebrew and English, pamphlets distributed by the department of public relations, and the presentation of the courthouse as 'Israel's Supreme Tourist Attraction' in the 'Jewishtravel' website ([www.jewishtravel.com/israel/supreme.html](http://www.jewishtravel.com/israel/supreme.html)).

A critical examination of the texts I have presented in this essay reveals that their epistemological role resembles the formulation of colonial thought, which conjoined the Bible with science as historical justification for its rule. More specifically, these texts build an iconographical bridge towards a 'communal' past that was pushed aside by modernistic architectural practice, and at the same time attempt to define a deep-rooted and local identity,

Israeli Nimrod-like, which emanates 'directly' from the bedrock, erasing intermediary memory strata in the process. Referring to the Bible as a source of inspiration and justification in order to uphold the super-temporal bond is essential to the construction of Jewish-national identity and space. And the 'advantage' of this bond is the fact that it does not imply a religious obligation, which may be perceived as characteristic of the Diaspora. This approach is evident in various media which constitute the Zionist-national culture, such as the poetry of Uri Tzvi Greenberg that employs images and symbols outside the domain of the Halacha, drawing from the ancient Hebraic myth. Much like the statements of the architects of the Supreme Court building presented in this essay, he too selectively chose historical stations in order to 'mythicize the present through national religious symbolism':

"The renewed reign of David; the temple, the sanctum sanctorum, the priests, the Ruffians and the Zealous. Images from the days of Roman rule adjoin images from the days of British mandate. The contrasts between the Jewish people and the gentiles, both in Europe and in the Land of Israel, between the cross and its victims, joined together to form a perspective according to which past and present, myth and reality are united into one whole web" (Shapira, 1994:310).

Shapira claims that this duality, which simultaneously represents cognitive hostility towards religion on the one hand, and religious inclination on the other, dichotomously epitomizes the distinction between the 'self' as opposed to the 'other', the deep-rooted who belongs as opposed to the Diaspora displaced.

This perception, which frames the social order, is therefore reflected not merely by the daily public discourse, but also through the symbolism of buildings – such as the Supreme Court building – which deprive of political and cultural content the civil status of those who fail to be the object of hegemonic narrative. The symbolization, structured upon collective citations, hinders others from entering, and they become present-absentees within the

Supreme Court building; their spirits hover and fade against the 'wall' and the 'city gates'.

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A view from the city centre toward the High Court Building

*Figure 2:*

The stone stairs ascending to the building entrance

*Figure 3:*

A graphic representation produced by the architects marking the Old City wall in the east, and the outlines of the Supreme Court building in the west (source: Sharon, 1993:35).

*Figure 4:*

The tall wall built of natural stone escorts those who climb the stairs

*Figure 5:*

The wall: a detail of the facade

*Figure 6:*

Light entering to the building through the pyramidal structure, separating "between the sacred and the secular".