

MIDDLE CLASS BY DESIGN

Mass-Housing Estates and the Consolidation of the Israeli Urban Middle Class

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ABSTRACT: Middle-class housing in the context of post-independence growth in Israel, where urban growth was guided by the massive construction of new neighborhoods and buildings, produced various types of shared dwellings, which became the prevailing types of urban housing. While mass housing is discussed in the context of Israel as a key device of a modernization project on the national scale, with profound consequences for marginalized immigrants and the lower classes, it has rarely been studied as a housing typology for the middle classes. Nonetheless, urban growth and national consolidation starting in the 1960s led to an emerging urban middle class whose housing was the product of diverse actors, including urban and national policy, private contractors, neighborhood associations, financial systems, architects, and planners. Yet, as the social category 'middle class' is muddled, how can we distinguish mass housing for the middle classes or middle-class housing? This paper examines the architectural features of three middle-class mass housing estates built in Israel in the 1960s. Asking what constitutes the middle class, we point to the capacity of an architectural analysis to identify the designed elements that construct a middle-class identity within the context of shared urban dwellings. The three cases briefly examined include the Be'eri estate in Tel Aviv, the Kiron estate in Kiryat Ono, and Shchuna Bet in Beer Sheba. The three estates, developed in the 1960s by commercial and semi-commercial companies explicitly for the emerging urban middle class, employ New Brutalist architectural and urban design principles in mitigating community and individuals, public and private, identity and property.

KEYWORDS: Architecture history, housing, middle class, mass housing, Israel

MIDDLE-CLASS MASS HOUSING: AN ARCHITECTURAL ANALYSIS

While social housing complexes have been associated with an explicitly reformist, socio-democratic choice towards lower-income residents, the middle class—and middle-class housing—generally lacks a clear definition. This is especially true when it is constructed and inhabited in the context of urban real estate development. While access to public housing was typically monitored by the state via various administrative conditions such as income restrictions, private ownership shaped a community in middle-class mass housing, which is less explicitly defined and remains under-researched (Caramellino, 2015).

What is middle-class housing? Although it is one of the main aspects of the urban fabric in Europe, the Middle East, East Asia, and Latin America, middle-class mass

housing has been generally under-represented in urban and architectural studies. This is despite the importance of the phenomenon, of the weight that this real estate stock still holds in cities, and of the role that the buildings of the period played in contributing to the definition of cultures and housing practices over a generation (Caramellino and De Pieri, 2015; Allweil and Zemer, 2019).

As the middle class bears different social-economic and political meanings in various historical and geographic contexts—the study of the messy socio-demographic category of middle-class mass housing can benefit from a close examination of the architectural and urban actualities of this dwelling type. “When observing the architectural quality of some of the collective houses built for the middle classes,” writes Eleb, “we are led to the conclusion that the characteristics of the individual house are central, because

even the dwellings in high-rises are designed in an attempt to preserve home qualities: outdoor spaces that extend the residential space, attention to storage room, or even bricolage areas, gardens and sports grounds and meeting areas surrounding the residences” (Eleb in Caramellino and Zanfi, 2015, p. 11).

In Israel, whose nation-building and immigrant housing apparatus was state-dominated since statehood in 1948 (Allweil, 2017), the introduction of mass housing for the middle classes, which previously chose detached or apartment housing, was a distinct transformation with a distinct building type and urban-architectural premise (Karmon and Chemanski, 1990, Allweil and Zemer, 2021). In this paper, we examine three middle-class mass-housing estates of the 1960s and show how their architecture and urban design created the built platform for consolidating the Israeli urban middle class. As the key asset and mode of investment for middle-class families, mass housing designed for the middle classes was capable of answering and interpreting the residential aspirations and consumption desires of the urban middle class, namely in solidifying the middle class in a young immigrant society like Israel. In this paper, we propose that the Israeli urban middle class was articulated by design, namely via the design, construction, finance, operation, and habitation of urban mass housing estates. These urban mass housing frameworks served as spaces for examining, articulating, and shaping the middle class as a way of life and social strata, thus as a communal identity. Interestingly, and in surprising contrast to much of post-WWII central Europe, in Israel, the urban layout and architecture of mass housing estates constructed and marketed for middle-class consumers employed the urban and architectural vocabulary of New Brutalism, which, in the literature and public image, is associated with social housing for the working class. In Israel, New Brutalist design principles, ethics, vocabulary, and materiality served architects and developers in designing a middle-class way of living invoking ‘modern architecture for a traditional community,’ employing designed features explicitly relevant for the middle class, such as privacy and identity for individuals within a community. This paper examines three settings exploring New Brutalist mass housing as middle-class habitats in Israel in the 1960s: an alternative urban block within Tel Aviv’s home-block urban system, an urban neighborhood unit within a rural, suburban setting, and a middle-class estate in a desert immigrant town context. We show how each setting employed New Brutalist design principles to produce a specific middle-class community.

BE’ERI ESTATE: NEW BRUTALISM AND THE MIDDLE CLASS

Be’eri estate in East Tel Aviv was built for the purpose of housing more middle-class urban dwellers upon agricultural land annexed to the city with statehood (Allweil and Zemer, 2021). In 1958, the Solel-Boneh semi-public construction company acquired a full urban block of 13 km² as part of the privatization of Tel Aviv’s medical-center lands and invited a team of noted Israeli architects to devise the plan. Designed by a renowned design team composed of architects Arie Sharon, Dov Karmi, Ram Karmi, Benjamin Idelson, Isaac Melzer, and landscape architects Lippa Yahalom and Dan Zur, Be’eri estate was explicitly designed to target a new and growing section of the Israeli housing sector: open-market urban housing for the middle class. Be’eri marks the transition from small-scale developers of market-produced urban apartment houses for the middle class to the design and production of mass-housing estates by state-owned construction companies (semi-private) and on large tracts of land formerly characterizing social housing. Marking the beginning of the end of the Israeli welfare state, this market-built housing estate explores into the very nature of middle-class housing.

The unique team of architects, the Israeli Team 10, viewed Be’eri estate as an opportunity to realize its planners’ urban critique of the anonymous housing blocks constructed for working class and immigrants, as well as of overcrowded apartment houses at the expense of dwelling qualities such as greenery, communal spaces, and in-between spaces (Sharon, 1970; Karmi, 1946). The design team employed explicit New Brutalist design principles, for which it won the prestigious Rokach Award for design in 1970. Designing Be’eri’s urban block as a big house—maintaining one self-managed community—aimed to constitute a framework for community. Rather than subdivide the large urban block into typical Tel Avivian apartment building plots, as proposed in the Quarter masterplan of 1954, the design team proposed one estate sharing the entire block. Echoing New Brutalist estates of the time, Be’eri planners designed the estate as a big house that functions like a small city, involving various city-like common facilities shared by all residents (Allweil and Zemer, 2021).

Mitigating the public and the private, the individual and the collective, the estate comprised 192 private apartments upon the 13 km² shared urban plot, including an inner road, three parks, a central park, two parking areas, pedestrian lanes, and shared roofs. This crucial balance between the individual and the collective, highly discussed in New Brutalist discourse, takes shape in Be’eri in an urban-block-sized shared estate whose spatial

fragmentation is composed of four smaller frameworks of human associations graduating between city, neighborhood, and house; explicit values of the middle class. As stated by one resident, the estate's class status is closely related to its shared spaces and the community that has formed to manage them collectively: "I would like to point out that when a community of good neighbors is created the [real estate] value of apartments increases" (survey, May 10, 2020).

Complementing the estate's "architectural separation," the four parks vary in levels—each park is attached to a different building (Sharon, 1970, p. 1). Granulite-covered walkways frame the different parks, leaving them open for resident appropriation. While the big house constituted an

urban-block-sized framework for human contact, its spatial fragmentation encircled four smaller frameworks of human associations within its boundaries, with several scales of social interaction among residents.

Contemporary commercial ads in the press marketed the estate as an opportunity for quality of life, offering spacious 3.5 and 4.5 room apartments, 100 and 120 sqm, respectively, with a list of amenities that included three-way breeze, private parking, a private telephone line, subfloor heating, aluminum screen shutters, etc. [FIGURE 01]. The apartments were marketed to a segment of society not eligible for subsidized housing, clearly marking the financial framework for buyers to be commercial banking loans for apartment purchases [FIGURE 02]. This clearly attests that



01 Be'er estate, 1969. Note the estate's upper park at the center of the photo, overlooking the central garden and the street, with broad stairways leading to it. At the center-right of the photo, the central park extends to Be'er Street. © U. Sharon, 1967.

בנין, בנותן תל אביב
בנינים בנייני בארי

להכירה דירות בגדלים הבאים:

- 3 חדרים: שלון + שני חדרי שינה ופינת אוכל.
- 4 חדרים: שלון 2 חדרי שינה, פינת אוכל, ארון בגדים במרפסת.
- 5 חדרים: שלון, 3 חדרי שינה, פינת אוכל, פינת עבודה, ארון בגדים במרפסת.

בין הבתים מרחב לא תקדים מודולו בתל אביב. רק 3 דוברים מתוך 13 הדוברים של השטח מתושים ימי הבנייה, הנבנים על עמודים-השטח כולו מוקדש לגנים, המבטיחים נוף ובריאות.

- משקפות, בתאים נוחים.
- מיונים פרזוזים לרכב.
- עלויות כיווני ארוני לכל דירה-החדים מפורשים לרוח.
- מעליות חדשות.
- הטוב רצה דירת ימי מתקן השפלי ללא תלות במתקן מרכזי.
- החום ניתן לוויסות ימי טרמיסטטים בכל הדר.
- תערוכים מיוחדים ללא הסכם עם הבית השפלי.
- מים חמים עם שפון דירת ימי - ללא השבון משותף עם דוברים אחרים.
- השפעת 0 סוכרית בכל בניין.
- בידוד מחום ומרעל: קירות חיצוניים כפולים, עובי הקירות בין הדירות 22 ס"מ.
- סלרן מניסי.
- גזסורים, הומפללים אוטומטית עם הפסקת זום החשמל, למעילות ולבטחה.
- מרפסת מיוחדת לחדרי האמבטיה עם מתקנים למבנה כביסה.
- הריסים נגדריים עשויים שלבים מלסיים נעים כפסגרות אלומיניום.

היחום: דיר ב. פ. בע"מ
הבצוע: החברה לבניין ולעבודות צבוריות
מיסודו של שולל בונה.

המקום: איזור מגורים נאה ושקט
 במרכז עשן העיר - רחוב בארי
 (ימי הרחובות ארלוזורוב-ויזנברג)

הקרקע: מרפסית.

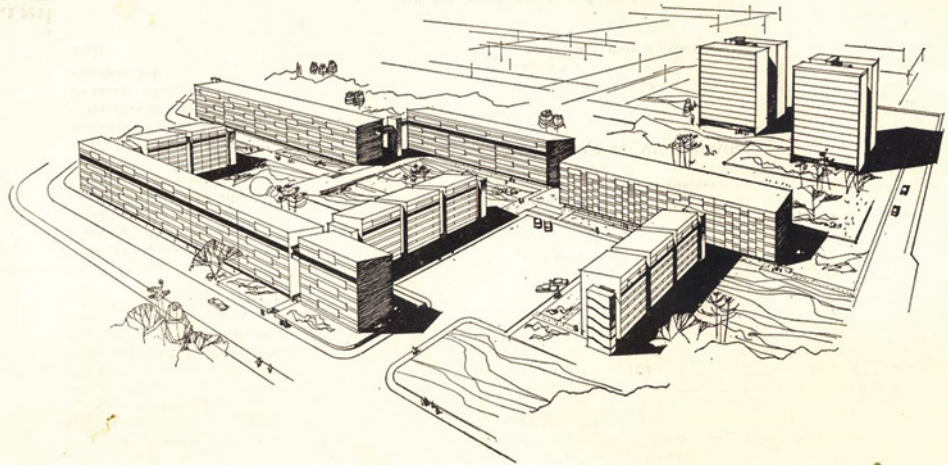
בנייני בארי

הרשמה: במשרדי דיר ב. פ. בע"מ
 4 תייל- 43360, 43362
 עות 5-12 למני-תערוכים בימים א

02 Binyanei Be'er [Be'er housing], Advertisement. © Davar newspaper collection, Israel National Library Newspaper Collection, 1963, 6, 28.

קיראון קרית מגורים בלב גנים

ליד תל אביב, בין רמת חן ושביון



מרכז מגורים מפותח כליל, על מלוא השטחים והמתקנים — בקרבת תל-אביב (כמרחק שבין רמת-אביב למרכז העיר) — על רמה בגובה 70 מטר מעל פני הים — נוף נהדר, אוויר יבש, שטחי ירק נרחבים — בתו מגורים ובנינים רב-יחידות ממוארים, עם מיטב החידושים והנוחיות. — במקום מצויים: מרכז מסחרי, סופרמרקט, חניית למיניהן, קולנוע, בית-קפה, מוסדות חינוך החל מגני-ילדים ועד לאוניברסיטת (בראילון) — מתקני ספורט מנוונים: בריכת שחייה, מגרשי טניס, — מגרשי חניה ליד כל בנין.



03 Kiron sales brochure, 1964.
© Israel Lotan archive at Israel National Library.

the estate was marketed for the middle class, indicating precisely what built elements distinguished middle-class dwellings from those of the upper and lower classes. The planning of Be’eri estate as a cooperative housing estate of 192 units, legally registered as a single shared house under the Israeli shared-houses law, was an explicit design decision intended to foster a self-managing community in the estate.

The estate has been self-managed over the past sixty years by a three-tier elected body of elected residents who represent the interests of each entry within the blocks, each block/tower, and the home-block at large vis-à-vis neighboring urban blocks and the adjacent hospital. The Be’eri home-block structure provides the built framework for a community in constant negotiations over the uses of the four parks, “homeways” (as named by Patrick Geddes), and other shared spaces. As members of the “big house,” each member of the community of 192 households has a hold on an area as large as an urban block. Residents, therefore, have stakes in the use, design, and future planning of the estate itself, as well as the built environment surrounding the block. Within the block, continuous negotiations over everyday use, alterations, and management, run by elected representatives, shape the estate. Further, collective ownership of the urban block allows the residents to organize as a political community and voice their concerns and objections to changes to the urban landscape of the city.

KIRON ESTATE: COMMERCIAL MASS HOUSING AS MIDDLE-CLASS EXPERIMENT

Starting in 1963, Kiryat Ono transformed from a rural-suburban community to an urban middle-class town through the construction of thousands of middle-class units in the exploratory New Brutalist estate of Kiron. Designed by

Israel Lotan, Eric Bauman, and Werner Joseph Wittkower, with landscape architects Lippa Yahalom and Dan Zur, this urban transformation reflects a profound transformation in Israel’s housing culture in the 1960s. Developed by a commercial developing firm founded for this project, Kiron Company, it marks one of the landmarks of the transformation of Israel’s housing production from a state-produced to a market-produced housing apparatus (Shabtai-Cyzer, 2011).

Kiron was a turning point in national housing programs in Israel, as a key experiment expanding from a semi-private to a fully-private framework, introducing, for the first time, commercial construction firms founded for the purpose of constructing mass housing geared toward the middle classes. For the first time, urban mass housing (rather than suburban detached houses) was introduced to the growing middle class, and it required an adaptation of the amenities and architectural, urban, and landscape components of mass housing in order to address the needs and aims of commercial dwellings for middle-class buyers [FIGURE 03]. Executing this experiment in a state-led framework based on a contract between the Ministry of Housing and the Kiron firm paved the way for the privatization of the Israeli housing market. It required the commercial firm to commit to construction, planning, and social standards for its clients (Shabtai-Cyzer, 2011).

As such, Kiron required a new urban, architectural, and landscape framework, later termed ‘the housing group’ (Yavin, 1970). Like Be’eri, Kiron incorporated Team 10 critique of the *Shikun* immigrant housing block, as well as the aspiration for modern urban housing in previously rural settings such as Kiryat Ono to propose a new way of middle-class living, enabling modern measures of quality such as greenery, ventilation, and traditional community. Designed as a self-supporting ‘neighborhood unit’

for 10,000 dwellers, Kiron included housing blocks and towers surrounding a central park, accessed by pedestrian routes and surrounding parking lots, and serviced by public-communal services including schools, a clinic, and a commercial center (Israel Lotan archive at Israel National Library; Glikson, 1965).

04 Newspaper ad, 12 May 1963, marketing Kiron and detailing the apartments' amenities.
© Ha'aretz newspaper collection, Israel National Library Newspaper Collection.

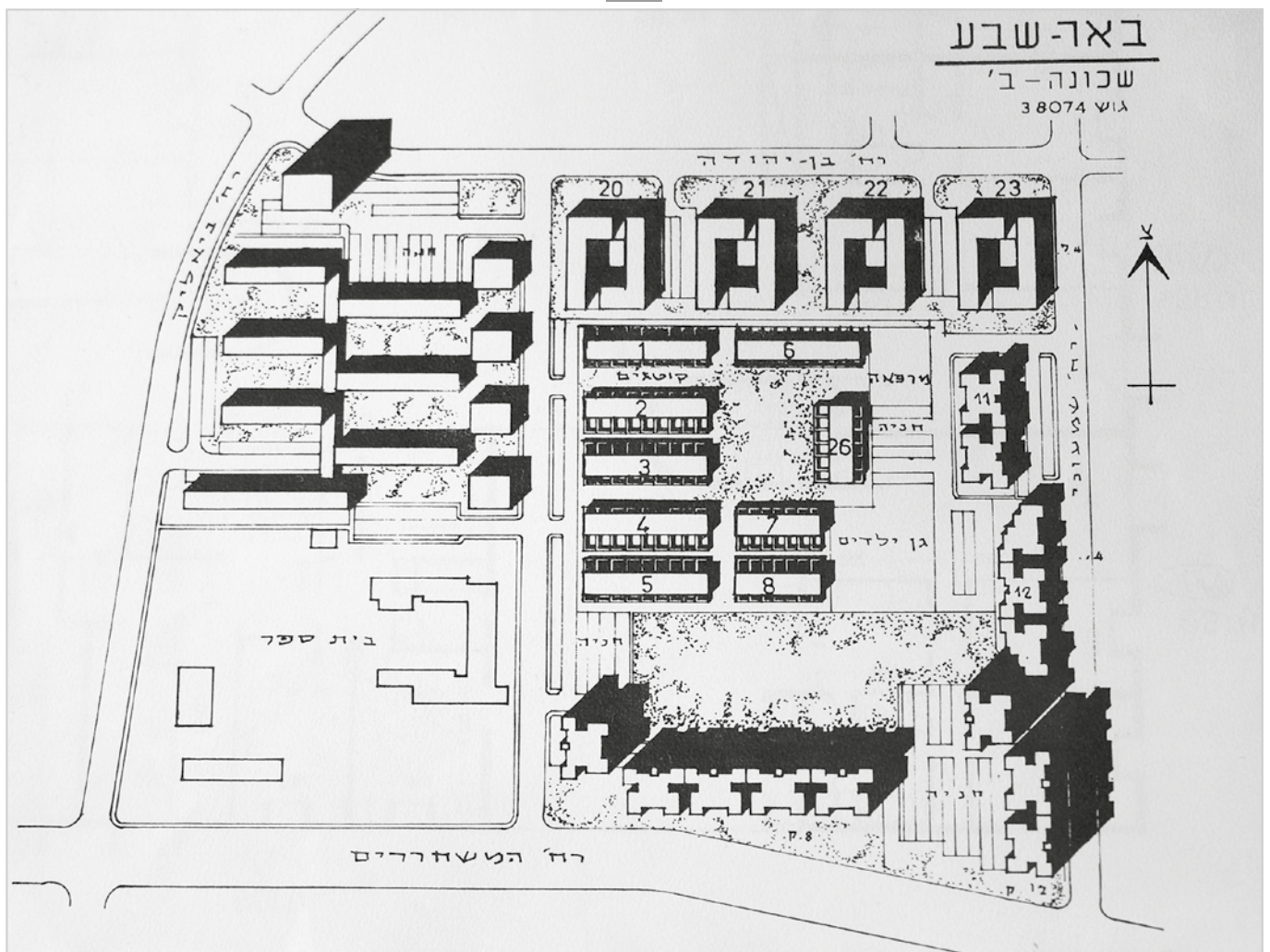
05 One of the housing blocks in Kiron (Iris section), note varied apartment types on the right-hand building and villas on the roof on the left one.
© Kiryat Ono Municipality, via PikiWiki Creative Commons.



Interestingly, the first elements constructed in the Kiron neighborhood were the commercial ones: its commercial center, which included the first supermarket outside Tel Aviv, opened in 1965. The supermarket, as well as parking lots, cinemas, and cafes, were a clear demarcation of the middle-class and commercial nature of the new neighborhood (Kiron sales brochure, 1964). Commercial advertising of the flats indicated large apartments of 100 m², with flexible division in 3 or 4.5 rooms, with amenities such as central heating and cooling systems, aluminum frame windows, mosaic floors, and private parking. Middle-class neighborhood services, including a commercial center, clinic, schools, pools, and sports facilities, and easy accessibility to the employment centers of Tel Aviv and Bar Ilan University, are highlighted in the ads. Moreover, the estate included unique apartment layouts with elements enabling internal flexibility for resident usage and individual design and the 'villa on the roof' apartment type, marketed as an urban middle-class alternative to detached housing (KironNews, 1966). The cost of the apartments, including a hefty downpayment based on buyers' savings and commercial banking loans for a third of the apartment costs, are highlighted in the ad, indicating that the estate was marketed to a segment of society not eligible for subsidized housing, particularly to home improving high-income middle-class families [FIGURE 04, FIGURE 05].

BE'ER SHEVA NEIGHBORHOOD B: MIDDLE-CLASS MASS HOUSING IN THE DESERT

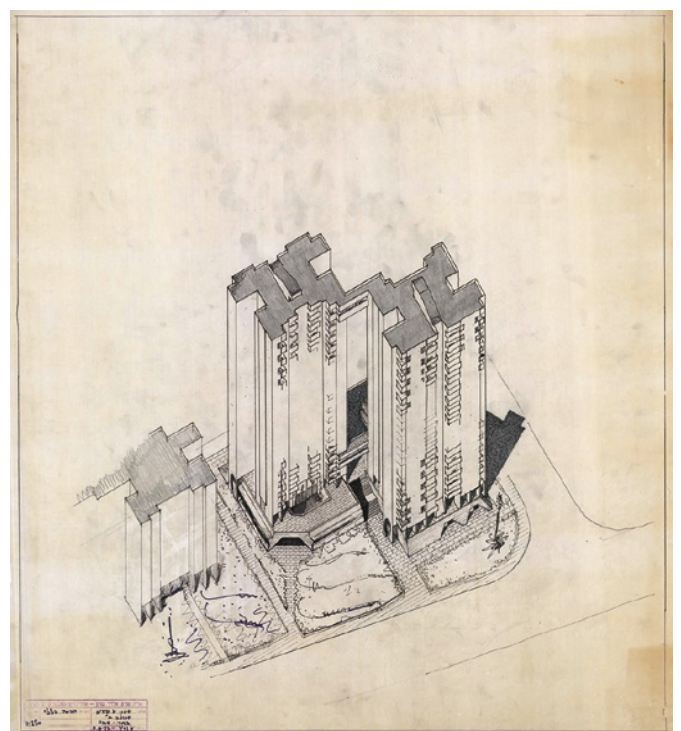
Be'er Sheva Shchuna Bet ("Neighborhood B") was a state-sponsored enterprise that reflected the Ministry of Housing's new policy of encouraging the construction of middle-class mass housing by promoting larger apartments (*Sikumei Pe'ulot Misrad HaShikun, Mechoz HaNegev 1963-1968, 1969*). Designed by architects Arie and Eldar Sharon, and constructed between 1968-1978, Shchuna Bet marked a turning point in the Ministry's approach to Be'er Sheva and the Negev region, previously planned as a peripheral urban center for the housing of new immigrants, naturally of little means and a lower social class, hence producing small and cheap mass housing units, constructed in what can be considered acute emergency conditions (Tovia and Boneh, 1999; Sleiffer, 1999). Nonetheless, the design and construction of Shchuna Bet in the 1970s, almost two decades after the mass immigration crisis of the 1950s, designated it as a middle-class neighborhood for young families, veteran Israelis, and middle-class immigrants (*Sikumei Pe'ulot Misrad HaShikun, Mechoz HaNegev 1963-1968, 1969*). Shchuna Bet can indeed be identified as intended for the middle class in both its marketing and design [FIGURE 06].



06 Schuna B, Be'er Sheva, General Scheme from Schuna B Sales Brochure, 1968-1978. © Azrieli Archive, Arieh and Eldar Sharon Collection.

The Sharons designed Shchuna Bet in roughly the same period as their participation in the design of Be'eri Estate. Sharons' scheme for Shchuna Bet proposed a mass-housing neighborhood of 925 dwellings in several building blocks planned on a grid. Of the six apartment blocks originally planned, only four were materialized [FIGURE 07]. They included apartment buildings and two-story townhouses offering a small private patio, an entrance court, and in some cases, a backyard. The design featured significant diversity of apartments, which amounted to nearly ten different types and varied in building forms, heights, and densities, including 16-story towers that were not realized. The size of the spacious townhouses ranged from 100 m² to 115 m². Four and five-room townhouses were planned; most had, as noted, an entrance court and either a patio, a backyard, or both. A novel addition to these townhouses was a small private bomb shelter, indicating improved war readiness but also an acknowledgment of the demand for privacy even in emergency situations. In the apartment buildings, flats included no less than five types, ranging from 90 m² to 116 m², some with a pantry or walk-in closet. This wide selection indicates that the neighborhood's design catered to middle-class diversity in individual requirements of dwelling and varied economic capabilities.

Similar to Be'eri Estate, Shchuna Bet can be identified as implementing New Brutalism (Ben-Asher Gitler and Geva, 2018). First, both neighborhood plans and architecture were conceived as one entity "woven into a modulated



07 Schuna B, Be'er Sheva, unrealized 16-story apartment buildings. © Azrieli Archive, Arieh and Eldar Sharon Collection.



08 Shchuna B, Be'er Sheva, apartment buildings planned around a shared inner courtyard.
© Inbal Ben-Asher Gitler, 2023.

continuum,” reflecting the Smithsons’ engagement with the hierarchies of human life in the city and the flow they sought to create from house to street to neighborhood, etc. (Steiner, 2011). An early master plan of Shchuna Bet shows these hierarchies: the Sharons prescribed the relationship between four existing main streets, internal streets, and pedestrian pathways, as well as the neighborhood’s two public gardens and the green spaces between the apartment buildings located on its northern boundary. The neighborhood included a kindergarten, a school, and a clinic. Thus, as in the Be’eri Estate, the Sharons’ design adapted New Brutalist ideas, creating a “small city” with its varied passageways and common facilities. Human association on a smaller scale was additionally created within the four apartment buildings planned around a shared inner courtyard. Privacy, which scholars identify as important in the construction of middle-class identity, was created by designing measured and narrow entrances into the inner courtyards, in the semi-circular volumes that characterized staircases and the junctions of pedestrian paths, as well as in the entrance courts of the townhouses, which provided a scaled transition from public to private [FIGURE 08].

In the case of Shchuna Bet, marketing was carried out by the two construction companies involved in its making: the first one, Shikun Ovdim (“Workers’ Housing”), belonged to the workers’ union, the Histadrut, and operated in conjunction with Solel Boneh. The second was the Ministry of Housing company, Shikun u-Pituach le Israel (“Housing and Development for Israel”), with which Shikun Ovdim collaborated on numerous governmental projects. Shikun Ovdim sold the apartments in Shchuna Bet by offering open market mortgages of varying rates to “established” middle-class families and newlyweds. A key goal in offering comfortable mortgages was to encourage middle-class Israeli veterans to invest in buying apartments in Be’er Sheva, rather than the extant tendency of having real estate in central Israel and renting, rather than investing, in

the country’s periphery (*Al Hamishmar*, 19 January 1973, 8). In the case of new immigrants, the Ministry of Housing subsidized the cost of the apartments (*Al Hamishmar*, 19 January 1973, 8). Shikun Ovdim’s marketing gradually became geared toward the middle classes rather than the working class. This can be seen, for example, in its ad dated 1971 that emphasized real estate as an asset, as well as neighborhood community services (*Ma’ariv: Yamim VeLeylot*, 4 June 1971, 20-21). Additionally, the ad included detailed explanations of mortgage options and referred potential buyers to the company office located in Shchuna Bet, among other offices across the country. Moreover, both construction companies jointly marketed the neighborhood by producing glossy brochures that emphasized the generous dimensions of the apartments, displayed the neighborhood plan, and contained detailed technical specifications associated with middle-class living standards. These mark the expansion of urban middle-class living beyond the key cities, an attempt to dismantle the class distinction between Israel’s economic center and immigrant, working-class periphery.

CONCLUSIONS

During the first two decades of vast immigration and subsequent housing crisis, the Israeli middle class constituted a small section of Israeli society, associated primarily with detached cottages in semi-rural urban neighborhoods. With the consolidation and stabilization of Israel’s economy and society in the 1960s-1970s, state interest in diminishing its role as the key provider of citizen housing, together with extended aspirations for middle-class living standards, teamed to produce a new housing type: middle-class mass-housing estates. Why mass housing?

Developed, planned, and constructed starting in the mid-1960s, these mass-housing estates explored and experimented with the design of a new way of living: one that successfully meshed the individual and the collective, the private and the public, the rural and the urban. Interestingly, the architectural articulation of the urban middle class in Israel in this period employed the architectural vocabulary of New Brutalism, originally framed for social housing (van den Heuvel, 2015). The targeting of the middle class can be observed throughout the 1960s and 1970s in marketing strategies that highlighted amenities, financial programs, and real estate values. As the three cases of Be’eri Estate, Kiron Estate, and Shchuna Bet demonstrate, the construction of a middle-class identity was deeply associated with—and in a sense required—an architecture and urban layout that underscored the middle class as a mass phenomenon and as a community; whose living conditions and lifestyle stretch constantly between the private and the collective, the individual and society.

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