

Planning and architecture of modern Beersheba: between the celestial and infernal

Abstract

In *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino describes Beersheba as a city with two projections: the celestial city that its inhabitants honor, and the infernal one – the receptacle of everything they renounce. In contrast to the other cities in the book, terrestrial Beersheba is real, but like its literary counterpart, it also has two projections – celestial and infernal. This article addresses these projections as articulated in the planning of the city and its neighborhoods, and particularly in its public buildings. In a similar manner to Calvino, it is argued that precisely what its inhabitants deem infernal inheres the celestial aspect as well.

Keywords

Urban planning • architecture • brutalism • Beersheba • Italo Calvino

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Beersheba's Celestial/Infernal Planning

Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* describes two projections of the city of Beersheba, according to its inhabitants: a celestial one, "suspended in the heavens," an ideal of gold and diamonds, and a subterranean infernal one, the "receptacle of everything base and unworthy" (Calvino 1974, p. 111), which they wish to keep out. The inhabitants of the terrestrial city believe in both. Calvino goes on to write that the Beershebans are in fact mistaken, and that it is precisely the infernal city that has been "designed by the most authoritative architects" (Calvino 1974, p. 112). It is the meticulous planning that seeks to create an error-free artifice that is infernal – the planned city leaves no room for free and diverse human expression. Rather, this freedom lies in the unplanned aspect: from the garbage on the streets to unregulated human behavior. This freedom is heaven.

It is worthy of note that, in this aspect, Beersheba is no different from the other cities described in the book, all of which contain the same duality: the dream or desirable cosmic order and the chaotic reality. Perinthia, for one, was planned according to the harmony of the heavens (resulting in failure); Zobeide was designed to capture the dream, but in fact looks more like a prison; while distant Despina seems to its onlookers like their own dream. Nevertheless, it is only with regard to Beersheba that architects are mentioned explicitly by name.

Moreover, unlike other cities in the book, Beersheba is alive and kicking, and terribly terrestrial. Lying at the edge of the Negev Desert, this visible city was home to more than 200,000 people in 2024, making it the ninth largest in Israel. Like Calvino's city, the brick-and-mortar Beersheba was also designed by architects. In fact, the modern town was planned from day one. It was never a village that grew into a city, like other ancient cities, but was planned as an urban center by generations of architects, and settled by central authorities. Its initial planning, in 1900, was the work of city planners appointed by the Ottoman rulers of the land. Later, in 1937, the design fell to a British planner. Finally, Israeli architects conducted further planning in 1951.

This article will focus on the Israeli Beersheba; the dissonance suggested by Calvino will echo throughout: Is the planned Beersheba

celestial or infernal? What happens when design meets reality? Do the contents, of which its inhabitants and architects are unaware, in fact embody heaven? To answer these questions, the article begins with a description of modern Beersheba's planning, with an emphasis on its public buildings and one of its neighborhoods, which was carefully designed by architects.

Beersheba's Ideological Top-Down Planning

Modern Beersheba was born in 1900, when the country's Ottoman rulers sought to deepen their hold on the semi-nomadic Bedouin tribes (Breler et al. 1963). It is believed the planners were two Arab engineers and two foreign (Swiss and German) architects, who determined the city's grid pattern. The Bedouins built their own houses in the urban blocks (Gradus 1985) (see Figure 1). This model, so different from the chaotic dispersal of Middle Eastern settlements, expressed Beersheba's essence as an artificially preplanned center of government. It was occupied by the British in 1917, and continued to expand following the same grid pattern. By the end of British rule in the Land of Israel, there were about 5,000 inhabitants in Beersheba (Zaslavsky 1954).

Ostensibly, this is yet another artificial city; it is "celestial," with a cosmic order, the result of a grid reminiscent of the ancient Greek polis, imposed top-down and completely ignoring the nature of local construction. This is true, but not completely so. The orientation of the grid is not coincidental (Norberg-Schulz 1980). Beersheba's architects managed to orientate it toward the cool northwestern winds, allowing the southwestern winds that bear sandstorms to pass it by. In addition, the plan enabled the Arab and Bedouin inhabitants to build their own homes, according to their cultural traditions. These homes were built facing inwards, with an inner courtyard designed to protect their inhabitants against the desert. Most of them have only one story, thus lessening the conflict with the horizontal desert landscape. Only public and government institutes were built in the style of European structures – located at the center of the plot, so that they are surrounded by and facing it (Gradus 1985).

The major turning point in the town's planning followed its occupation by the Israeli military in 1948. Jewish migrants



Figure 1. Beersheba's grid planning, 1938. Source: Tuviah Archive

arriving in the nascent State were directed there, and the city was replanned by the central authorities in 1951. Although the Ottoman structural core remained in place and was settled by Jews – the Israeli planners, employed by the government and led by Arie Sharon, considered Beersheba a “new city” (Sharon 1951). Indeed, the additional construction planned was far more extensive.

The planners' guiding principle was to create self-sustained neighborhoods, separated by green belts. Beersheba's urban core was located in its geographic center, and was also disjointed from the neighborhoods. Construction was sparse and low-rise, laced with green spaces (see Figure 2). In that, Beersheba was no different from other centrally planned cities of that time. However, in this desert city, the top-down nature of the planning was much more visible: the planners sought to drown the desert in green. To return to Calvino, this made the city plan celestial, ideal, if not surreal.

Did the Israeli planners seek to realize their Zionist ideology in this planning? Perhaps. Israeli Beersheba's planning served the Jewish national ideology, Zionism, which viewed (particularly rural) settlement as a key expression of the concept of the return of the Jewish people to their historical homeland (Herzl 1965). The planning of green cities, living close to the land and to nature, articulated this utopian ideal.

This pro-rural drive was the ideological basis for the adoption of the concrete precedent that served nascent Israel's planners: the first wave of the New Towns in the UK (Glikson 1959; Merlin 1971). Their innovativeness, and the way they interpreted Ebenezer Howard's Garden City concept (Howard 1965), served as a model for planners all over the world, let alone the Israelis who had worked closely with their British counterparts under British rule (Dower & Stungo 1965). Indeed, the Israeli plan for Beersheba was highly similar to British urban plans (Shadar & Oxman 2003): both were based on disjointed, sparsely built, green neighborhoods, and both relied on the principles of modernism as formulated in the 1933 Athens Charter. These principles rely on separating uses through zoning (residential neighborhood being separate from the city center and industrial areas), and on ensuring that the residences benefit from natural lighting and

proximity to garden areas instead of to streets and traffic arteries (Le Corbusier 1973).

The celestial city, where the dream was to turn desert into garden, remained a figment of its planners' imagination. In reality, the open spaces were covered by sand and refuse. The utopia of companionship on grassy knolls also remained unrealized (see Figure 3).

Architect Artur Glikson criticized the plan, commenting: “Contemporary town planners have shown great affection for winding roads, asymmetrical spaces and broken symmetries” (Glikson 1967, p. 27). In a similar vein, planner Itzhak Yashar referred explicitly to the British precedent and its local inappropriateness: “I believe that one of the huge mistakes we have made here – in planning the first ten cities [...] – was to excessively leaf through [foreign] journal” (quoted in Glikson 1964, p. 14). Finally, engineer and architect Jacob Ben-Sira wrote that new immigrants, struggling to survive in a new country with a different culture were unable to realize the planners' dreams:

Experience shows that neighborhood residents are unable [...] to bear the burden of establishing public institutes, planting gardens, paving streets and sidewalks [...]. In poor immigrant neighborhoods, particularly within a socioeconomically weak municipality [...], public areas are usually deserted, or worse – taken over by squatters (Ben-Sira 1968, p. 31).

Embracing the Desert

Whereas the Israeli Beersheba had originally been planned to overcome the desert, one neighborhood and public buildings, planned since 1958, expressed the opposite motivation. The following analysis identifies human values in the new planning principles, the same ones celebrated by Calvino.

The first principle is *shielding the buildings* against the bright sunlight. This principle is applied in traditional rural Arab construction, where only elongated or small upper windows are installed to protect against the heat and light. For example, in the Zalman Aranne Central Library at the Ben-Gurion University, the



Figure 2. Left: Beersheba's Israeli plan. The neighborhoods (light brown) were planned as disconnected amoebas, drenched in green, around an urban center (dark brown). The squares to the southwest represent the Ottoman town, designated to become a marginal neighborhood. Right: Neighborhood A (no. 2 on the map). Both plans embody a conceptual design detached from the desert reality. Source: Sharon 1951, pp. 58–59



Figure 3. Neighborhood A in the 1950s – an isolated desert inferno rather than a green heaven. Source: Tuviahu Archive, Kol-Bi Collection

sealed structure is topped with windows that look like northern eyes and let in indirect light (Nadler et al. 1979). The same approach has been applied to the Beit Yad Lebanim memorial building, where the light penetrates from upper windows in the four facades, in addition to a central glass ceiling (Ratner & Shoshani 1961). It also features in the Municipal Conservatory, which converges inwards, with only tiny vertical slots peering through its exposed brick envelope (see Figure 4).

Reference to the emblem of traditional Bedouin architecture – the tent – may be found in the external outline and inner space of other public buildings. The largest is the university's student

dormitories. This seven-story building has been designed so that its concrete envelope looks like a stretched and diagonal sheet of cloth, pegged to the ground (Karmi et al. 2001). The arched openings on the ground and second floors simulate the stretched cloth and at the same time, are used to identify the circumferential passage leading to the housing units (see Figure 5).

Two other buildings externally reminiscent of the Bedouin tent are the Central Synagogue of the Iraqi Community, designed as a pyramidal single-space building that hardly touches the ground; colored glass windows let the light in where the “tent cloth” hovers above ground, namely, in the gap between the



Figure 4. Shielding against the desert. From left to right and clockwise: Aranne Library, planned by M. and S. Nadler, S. Bickson, and M. Gil, together with S. Amitai, 1968; Beit Yad Lebanim, planned by Y. Ratner and M. Shoshani, 1961; and the Municipal Conservatory, planned by Y. Rechter and M. Zarchi, 1970
Photos by the author



Figure 5. The student dormitories in Neighborhood C, planned by R. Karmi, A. Karmi-Melamed, H. Ketzev, and B. Peleg, 1968
Source: Tuviahu Archive; Collection: Public Relations, Ben-Gurion University

concrete and the floor (Amir 2011). Another tent-like building is the Medical Library at the Soroka municipal hospital (Sharon & Sharon 1983).

The two other buildings presented here embody the tent in large inner spaces that stretch several stories high. The Faculty of the Humanities at Ben-Gurion University converges into a tall, linear space, whose beams are sculpted to appear like crocheted textiles rather than a concrete-rich building (Niv et al. 1980).

Finally, the Negev Center, which was actually the earliest of the “tent buildings,” was planned as the urban center of two adjacent neighborhoods. As previously mentioned, Beersheba’s neighborhoods were planned as disjointed amoebas with their own centers. However, architect Ram Karmi sought to connect them through a joint center, located in the empty space between them. Only partly completed, the center contains commercial, office, and residential uses under one roof (Karmi et al. 1966) (see



Figure 6. Four “tent” interpretations. From left to right and clockwise: *The Iraqi Community Synagogue*, planned by N. Zolotov in the 1970s; *the Faculty of the Humanities*, planned by R. Reifer. A Niv and N. Magen, 1968; *the Medical Library*, planned by A. Sharon and E. Sharon in the 1980s; and *the Negev Center*, planned by R. Karmi et al. in 1958

Source: photos by the author

Figure 6). In that, it was ahead of its time: mixed uses became popular in European cities only from the 1970s (Jacobs & Appleyard 1987).

Another aspect of the planning tradition with permanent structures that embraced the desert may be found in public buildings structured around an *inner courtyard*. Developed in Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, and East Asian regions, the structures remain shaded by the walls of the surrounding buildings for long hours during the day, which has a cooling effect (Schoenauer & Seeman 1962). The Faculty of Natural Sciences embraces two inner courtyards, which the lecture rooms on the top floors face in varying degrees of openness depending on their orientation (Yaski & Gil 1979). Another example is the municipality building, which directs a sealed façade outwards, while its openings are directed toward three inner courtyards. Next to the building is a tower, which contributes to its visibility in space and serves as an urban milestone (Engineering & Architecture 1962). The horizontal sealed block, adjacent to a tall building, reminiscent of a mosque with a minaret, which may have inspired the planners seeking to embrace the desert (see Figure 7).

The most highly developed exemplar of an inner courtyard fabric is Neighborhood E. Despite being a neighborhood rather than a public building, its architecture is so different from that of its predecessors that it deserves mention. In this case, the architects referred to Middle Eastern and Mediterranean city fabric – specifically, to the *casbah*. Casbahs are characterized by a network of narrow, winding alleys facing sealed walls with

only gates serving as openings, and with inner courtyards for the use of the residents. They are built by their inhabitants with no advance planning, and house multigenerational families.

Neighborhood E was planned in advance, of course. Moreover, its alleys are grid-shaped and its modernist housing design separates public from private areas, and serves nuclear families (Engineering & Architecture 1959). Nevertheless, it represents a fascinating interpretation of the casbah and a profound understanding of its fabric: congested and low-rise construction, with alleys and inner courtyards. It is not for nothing that this construction is called “mat housing,” since fabric covers the ground like a carpet, akin to bottom-up construction with no architects (Oxman et al. 2002) (see Figure 8).

To conclude, the architecture of the public buildings and the mat housing in Neighborhood E in Beersheba provided an interpretation of indigenous desert architecture by adopting several local elements. The architects learned the lessons of evolutionary construction, which embodies the yearslong interaction between the local inhabitants and the place, its materials, and climate. It may be said that they translated the Indigene vernacular into contemporary architecture (Stangl 2008). This contrasted with Garden City–inspired planning that referred to a utopian reality, and more concretely, to the modernist ideology of architecture and city construction, particularly as embodied in the first wave of the British New Towns. Isn't there a concrete precedent behind this architecture? The following analysis is designed to answer this question.



Figure 7. Public buildings with an inner courtyard. From left to right and clockwise: one of the inner courtyards of the Faculty of Natural Sciences, planned by A. Yaski and Y. Gil, 1968; the sealed building (top right) and one of the inner courtyards (bottom right) of city hall, planned by M. and S. Nadler, S. Bixon, and M. Gil, 1961
Source: photos by Omri Oz Amar



Figure 8: Mat housing in Neighborhood E, reminiscent of the casbah. Headed by A. Yaski, the planners included A. Alexandroni, R. Karmi, T. Kissilov, U. Bareli, M. Chechik, B. Comforti, N. Zolotov, and D. Havkin. The latter two developed the mat housing. D. Zaslavsky and Z. Miller were in charge of road and landscape development
Source: Ministry of Housing 1967

An Architecture of Truth

Analysis of the architecture of the public buildings and the mat housing in Neighborhood E in Beersheba indicates that here, as in the urban planning previously mentioned, the planners were inspired by a concrete precedent, also developed in post-WWII Europe: the Brutalist ethics. The name immediately implies that this is no attempt at sublime architecture – quite the opposite: the Brutalists seek an architecture of truth, one that is far from celestial, far from ornamental. Coined by Le Corbusier, the word “Brutalism” derives from the search for the authentic: in French, *béton brut* means raw concrete (Boesiger 2015).

Having witnessed the horrors of WWII, young European architects rebelled against the celestial modernist view, to paraphrase Calvino, that humans can redesign creation by virtue of their intelligence and technology (Frampton 1992). The war proved that technology could also be used to induce mass death. Indeed, in the ninth Congrès international d'architecture moderne (CIAM 1953), they challenged the modernist utopias and sought more human, communal, and cultural values. These Brutalist architects anticipated Calvino's (1974) conclusion about his fictional Beersheba: authoritative planning, and seeking a rational, orderly life, is the inferno. The good lies in the authentic, the unplanned, the human, and grounded.

Since the young architects sought to develop structures embodying values other than the physical comfort offered by modernism – such as locality, identity, neighborliness, and democracy (Webster 1997), they turned their gaze toward indigenous, pre-industrial cultures. They studied, and came to admire, vernacular architectures that evolve naturally over centuries, without the intervention of architects (Scott 2000).

The social aspect, also highly typical of the postwar period, was also included, given the need to provide housing for the refugees and internally displaced persons following WWII. There was an urgent need to build quickly and cheaply on a massive scale. The exposed building materials and visible infrastructures expressed the ideological stance that the building was designed primarily to serve its users, simply and directly (Banham 1955; Banham 1966).

These Brutalist concepts were expressed in postwar Europe in new neighborhoods and public buildings. The architects who designed them were employed by the government. Thus, also in Beersheba, the Israeli planning authorities commissioned the designs directly from the architects, many of whom were young graduates. These architects were familiar with recent European developments, and brought the Brutalist message to Israel (interviews with Druckman 2002, and Yaar 2001). And, as in Europe, the fact that planning was invited by the planning authorities meant that the architects were given creative freedom, as they did not need to sell their buildings in the private market and cater to popular tastes. The government authorities, so dominant in the 1950s and 1960s, given the need to pool resources to overcome the WWII disaster, promoted Brutalism unknowingly, to the point that it became identified with state architecture – in Europe and Israel, and Beersheba, in particular.

Conclusion: Invisible Brutalism

Many of those who do not look too closely at the location, interpretation, and architectural details, as discussed above, tend to identify the Israeli brand of Brutalism as an extension of the European and international ones: as in Europe, most of the buildings expose their materials and structure; their shapes are sculptural and free, even artistic, and allude to the activity occurring within. Most people, who see only that which is plainly visible, despise Brutalist architecture. This is even more pronounced when it comes to Beersheba. Apparently, the combination of the city construction and the inadequate landscape development in

the desert climate have created a sense of ongoing abuse. The inhabitants, mostly voiceless new immigrants, consider the heavy concrete buildings evidence of the meanness of the government, which forced them to settle in the desert, conducting architectural experiments at their expense.

To this day, the fact that the buildings in question are public, mostly well maintained, and the fact that the mat housing in Neighborhood E is in high demand, make little difference when it comes to popular opinion. From the townspeople's point of view, the architecture they see is yet another aspect of their inferno. In reader comments in response to a newspaper article on this subject (Zandberg 2022), the inhabitants' authentic feelings were expressed as follows: “The ugly concrete structures cast in our city require demolition and evacuation. It is an atrocious crime committed against Beersheba;” “The ugly Brutalism in Beersheba is an offense against helpless people. I have often considered suing the state for the damage done to me as a child, having been surrounded by this ugliness;” “Brutalism is disgusting. Period.”

What about the architects? Apparently, many were not aware of the trailblazing statement embodied in their own Brutalism. They hardly discussed the fact that the principles of desert architecture had seeped into the planning of Beersheba's public buildings and the mat housing in Neighborhood E (interviews with Yaski 1999, and Zolotov 2001). Perhaps, like other creators, they were not aware of their sources of inspiration. Only one of the major architects active in Beersheba addressed local Arab architecture as inspiring two of his works; he wrote about it later in his autobiography (Karmi 2001).

Be that as it may, the young Israeli architects considered Beersheba as a wonderful platform for an experimental, passionate architecture. Indeed, their buildings in that desert city were more sculptural than they dared plan in central Israel. There, far from the desert, their Brutalism was indeed a copy of its European counterpart, without locally unique contents.

In Calvino's book, the celestial city embodies an ideal, interpreted by its inhabitants in terms of gold and diamonds. Later, he writes that its planners sought perfect order. Both were threatened by the wild, unplanned city that expressed the human, but was seen by everyone as infernal. In reality, the planners did seek to “celestialize” Beersheba by covering it with foreign greenery, whereas its inhabitants, who had no image of the ideal city, were nearly unanimous in calling it a failure. To them, the encounter with the planners' work resulted in a desert hell – whether it sought to make it bloom or to embrace it.

Calvino argues for the *human* city: “a planet a-flutter with potato peels, broken umbrellas, old socks, candy wrappings [...] eggshells” (Calvino 1974, pp. 112–113). What is that city in reality? Is the human city embodied in all that is not planned, in all that has never sought to express ideals that cannot be realized? Is it embodied, as Calvino suggests, in disorder and neglect?

In this article, I have proposed taking another step past the plainly visible, and fleshing out the values inherent in invisible contents – in this case, in the Brutalist desert architecture in Beersheba. This architecture is profoundly human, as it contains and interprets structural principles developed by the local human inhabitants: the sedentary Arabs, and the semi-nomadic Bedouins. As argued in the canonic book, *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (Alexander et al. 1977), good architecture is one that studies, respects, and provides a design interpretation for patterns of living, evolved and established naturally by humans, wherever they are. According to this paper, such is the good architecture of Beersheba.

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