

Building a Modern Jewish City: Projects of the Architect Wilhelm Zeev Haller in Tel Aviv

by Ulrich Knufinke

Wilhelm Zeev Haller is one of the many Jewish architects of the 20th century whose biographies and oeuvres can be divided into different periods.¹ Until the National Socialists' rise to power in Germany, Haller successfully worked as an architect in Leipzig. After his immigration to Palestine, he was able to start a new career in Tel Aviv. Within a very short time he became an important exponent of the so-called international style forming the character of the first modern Jewish city. Today, some of his buildings are part of UNESCO's World Heritage site "White City of Tel Aviv". At least eight residential buildings designed by Haller are preserved. Looking at them, we may ask several questions: What were the sources of Haller's way of designing in Palestine? Did he change his style after he emigrated? What is his contribution to modern architecture in Tel Aviv in comparison with other architects?

We do not know much about Wilhelm Haller's character and personal life. Born in 1884 in Gleiwitz (today Gliwice, Poland), he took up practical education at an early age, working on construction sites and in studios of architects in Breslau (today Wrocław, Poland) and Frankfurt am Main. He finished his studies at the Technische Hochschule in Darmstadt. In 1914 he started running a studio in Leipzig. Due to a handicap Haller did not serve in World War I, but the war had a significant impact on his early career. Building activity decreased, and the political

1 On Haller's biography and oeuvre, see Reimann, Max: *Wilhelm Haller*. Berlin, Leipzig, Wien, 1930; *Jüdisches biographisches Archiv*. München, 1998, Fiche 299, pp. 61-63 (there according to Cornfeld, Peretz: *Palestine Personalia*. Tel Aviv, 1947, and *The Near and Middle East Who's Who 2: Who's Who in the State of Israel*. Tel Aviv, ca. 1950); Kowalzik, Barbara: *Wir waren eure Nachbarn. Die Juden im Leipziger Waldstraßenviertel*. Leipzig, 1996, pp. 135-137; Hocqué, Wolfgang: *Leipzig. Architektur von der Romanik bis zur Gegenwart*. Leipzig, year unknown, p. 262; Warhaftig, Myra: *Sie legten den Grundstein. Leben und Wirken deutschsprachiger jüdischer Architekten in Palästina 1918-1948*. Tübingen, 1996, pp. 202-203; Warhaftig, Myra: *Deutsche jüdische Architekten vor und nach 1933 – Das Lexikon. 500 Biographien*. Berlin, 2005, pp. 213-217; and Metzger-Szmuk, Nitza: *Des maisons sur le sable. Tel Aviv. Mouvement moderne et esprit Bauhaus. Dwelling on the Dunes. Tel Aviv. Modern Movement and Bauhaus Ideals*. Paris, Tel Aviv, 2004, p. 102. Haller's German period is analysed by Knufinke, Ulrich: *Wilhelm (Zeev) Haller (1884-1956) als Architekt jüdischer Gemeinden*. In: *Aschkenas* 16 (2006), pp. 129-176.

Wilhelm Haller was brought into focus by a joint research project on Jewish ritual buildings in Saxony, carried out by the Fachgebiet Baugeschichte at the Technische Universität Braunschweig and the Center for Jewish Art at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The project was supported by the German Israeli Foundation. I would like to thank the Minerva Foundation for grants that enabled me to conduct research on Haller in Israel.

and economic crisis after the war brought nearly all civil and commercial projects to a halt.



Fig. 1

Haller's first project that still exists is a memorial to Jewish soldiers (fig. 1). It was erected by the Jewish community of Dresden on its cemetery in Fiedlerstraße in 1916, being the very first Jewish war memorial of World War I.² It has a rather traditional shape, deriving from antique monuments, with a typical heroic iconography. Perhaps its erection was a reflection of the anti-Semitic feelings among Germans at the time:³ Until 1934, nearly every Jewish community built one or

2 See Kirsch, Ingrid: 80 Jahre Denkmal zu Ehren der im Ersten Weltkrieg gefallenen Mitglieder der Dresdner jüdischen Gemeinde auf dem Friedhof Dresden-Johannstadt. In: *Sächsische Heimatblätter* 6 (1996), pp. 363-368. On Jewish war memorials in general, see Prokasky, Judith: *Treue zu Deutschland und Treue zum Judentum – das Gedenken an die deutschen jüdischen Gefallenen des Ersten Weltkriegs*. In: *Aschkenas* 9 (1999), pp. 503-516.

3 In 1919, Jewish veterans founded the “Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten” (society of Jewish soldiers). To combat anti-Semitism, the Reichsbund fostered the erection of war memorials in numerous cities. On the Reichsbund, see Dunker, Ulrich: *Der Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten 1919-1938. Geschichte eines jüdischen Abwehrvereins*. Düsseldorf, 1977; and Welker, Barbara: „Ich hatt' einen Kameraden“. *Der Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten und das Gedenken an die Gefallenen des Ersten Weltkriegs*. In: „Bis der Krieg uns lehrt, was der Friede bedeutet“. *Das Ehrenfeld für die jüdischen Gefallenen des Weltkriegs auf dem Friedhof der Berliner Jüdischen Gemeinde*. Ed. by Hank, Sabine, and Hermann Simon. Berlin, 2004, pp. 33-50.

more war memorials in synagogues, community centres or cemeteries, and Wilhelm Haller was one of their leading designers.⁴

During the first years of the Weimar Republic, Haller worked on several projects related to the war. He designed settlements for veterans (“Kriegersiedlungen”), for example in Stendal (since 1918, fig. 2) and in Coburg (1919).⁵



Fig. 2

The settlements were to help unemployed and homeless veterans find their way back into civil society. Ideologies of the garden city movement and the “live reform movement” from the pre-war period, but also of the national conservative movement (“back to the soil”) mingled. Haller designed the settlement houses in Stendal in the so-called homeland style typical of settlement projects in those days.

4 Haller also built war memorials in Hamburg-Harburg, Eisenach, Erfurt, Leipzig, Zittau and other cities; see Knufinke: Haller (see n. 1), pp. 132-139. Other important Jewish architects and artists also designed war memorials, for example Alex Beer in Berlin-Weißensee, Fritz Landauer in Munich and Augsburg, Leopold Fleischhacker in Düsseldorf, Block & Hochfeld in Hamburg, Bloch & Guggenheimer in Stuttgart and Moritz Stern in Cologne.

5 Haller, Wilhelm: Siedlungen in Coburg und Stendal. In: *Der Profanbau* 8 (1921), pp. 89-99. During the war, Haller took part in an urban planning competition for a square in Leipzig; see Haller, Wilhelm: Leipzig im Städtebau. In: *Der Profanbau* 7 (1920), vol. 8, pp. 49-60.

Haller also worked for private clients. He designed numerous tombstones. Some of them are preserved in Jewish cemeteries, showing different styles from neo-baroque to modernism.⁶ In 1926, Haller designed a villa in Berlin, blending neoclassicism, art deco and expressionism.⁷ In the following year, a leather goods factory was built in Offenbach am Main, again with an “expressionistic” decoration.⁸ A department store in Leipzig, opened in 1929, also documents Haller’s turn to “Neues Bauen” (“new building”) or to the so-called international style.⁹ As far as we know, all of Haller’s private clients were Jewish, which was typical of the situation of Jewish architects in Germany at the time.

Since the inauguration of the war memorial in Dresden in 1916, Haller continuously worked for Jewish communities.¹⁰ His most elaborate project was a building at the cemetery in Delitzscher Straße in Leipzig, opened in 1928 after a planning period of six years. Haller placed a symmetrical three-wing building along the street.¹¹ The high cupola of the main hall dominated the edifice (fig. 3).

6 For example in the cemetery on Berliner Straße in Leipzig, see Reimann: Haller (see n. 1), p. 20; Knufinke: Haller (see n. 1), pp. 139-140.

7 Reimann: Haller (see n. 1), pp. 2-4. The villa is preserved and in good condition; Knufinke: Haller (see n. 1), p. 154.

8 Reimann: Haller (see n. 1), p. 10.

9 Reimann: Haller (see n. 1), p. 23; the building still exists, but nearly all the elements of Haller’s façades are lost.

10 In addition to the war memorials mentioned before, he designed a mortuary and a mikveh in Leipzig and a cemetery hall in Halle/Saale, see Knufinke: Haller (see n. 1), pp. 140-141.

11 On Jewish cemetery buildings in general, see Knufinke, Ulrich: *Bauwerke jüdischer Friedhöfe in Deutschland*. Petersberg, 2007 (= *Schriftenreihe der Bet Tfila – Forschungsstelle für jüdische Architektur in Europa*, vol. 3), on Haller see pp. 276-285. On the cemetery hall in Leipzig, see also Knufinke: Haller (see n. 1), pp. 141-147.

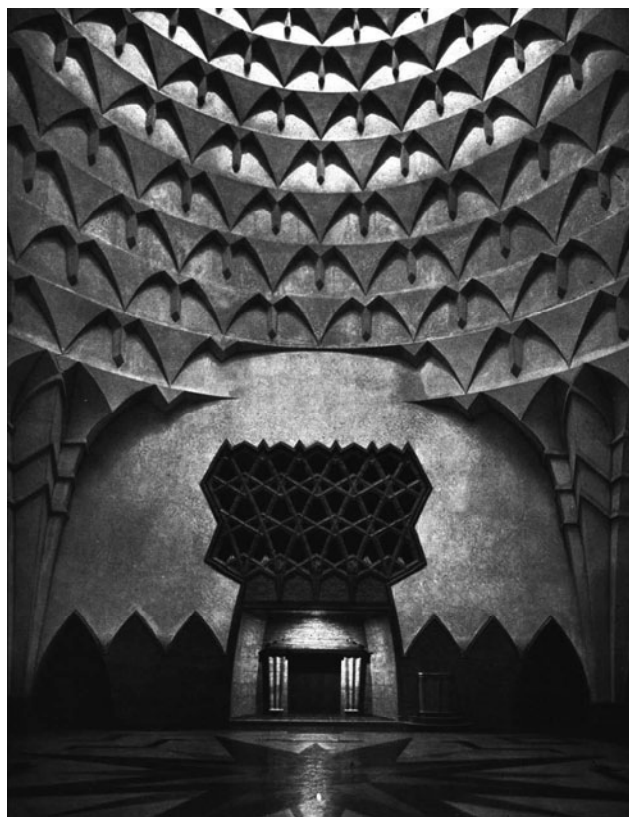


Fig. 3

Characteristic of this period of German architecture are the arcades of pointed arches and crystalline forms, combining abstract gothic elements and some kind of Moorish details. Decorative expressionism or art deco became very fashionable for some years, especially in Leipzig, and Haller's cemetery hall is an important example of this style. The main hall has perhaps the most fascinating interior Haller ever designed. The cupola's pendentives grew directly from the bottom. The semi-sphere was made of rings of plaster stalactites. Haller's cemetery hall has parallels in contemporary "expressionistic" cemetery architecture (for instance in Vienna's Central Cemetery, a crematory by Clemens Holzmeister and a Jewish cemetery hall by Ignaz Reiser). The cupola of Tel Aviv's Ohel Moed synagogue, built by Joseph Berlin in 1925-27, also resembles Haller's interior in Leipzig. The cemetery building in Delitzscher Straße was destroyed after "Kristallnacht" in 1938/39. Another cemetery hall designed by Haller, inaugurated in Halle/Saale in 1929, is preserved.¹² In 1940 it lost its entire decoration when it was turned into a home for Jewish elderly people until their deportation in 1943.

12 Reimann: Haller (see n. 1), pp. 15-16; Knufinke: Haller (see n. 1), pp. 147-148.

In the late 1920s, Haller slowly turned from decorative expressionism to functionalism, though he was not personally involved in the Bauhaus movement. Also in the late 1920s, he designed a project for a new synagogue in Leipzig (fig. 4).¹³

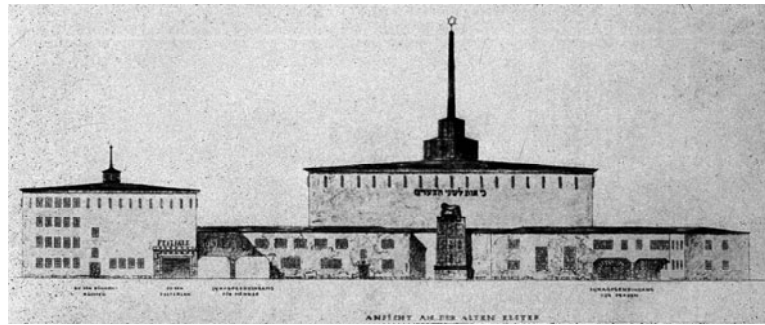


Fig. 4

The complex was to consist of a community centre and a synagogue, connected by a bridge across a street. The exterior is modestly designed: the Torah Ark is situated where the eastern façade is stressed by a pylon. A lion and a Hebrew inscription are the only decoration. The mast above is crowned by a Star of David at a height of 60 meters, making the Jewish house of worship visible in the city. The synagogue would have been one of the biggest of its time, but it was never built.

It may be asked whether Haller's projects and buildings for Jewish communities represent a distinct Jewish architecture, offering more than decoration with traditional Jewish symbols. At the turn of the century, architects started searching for a new adequate artistic expression of Judaism.¹⁴ These discussions continued in the 1920s. Haller, too, thought about style and "Jewishness" and published his ideas in 1928:

Art is the product of several factors: time (art should not be a poor copy of earlier centuries), place (it has to be rooted in the soil and should not be strange to its environment), tradition (which should not be denied, as in art nouveau, but 'work' only underground), and individuality (the artist needs to possess). [...] A purely Jewish art can only arise in Palestine. It may arise, but not exist – for that it would take a development.¹⁵

13 Reimann: Haller (see n. 1), p. 18; Knufinke: Haller (see n. 1), pp. 150-152.

14 See Brenner, Michael: *Jüdisches Leben in der Weimarer Republik*. München, 2000, on architecture see pp. 34-35.

15 Haller, Wilhelm: *Friedhöfe*. In: *Der Orden Bne Briss. Mitteilungen der Großloge für Deutschland VIII*. U.O.B.B. (1928), pp. 163-164 (translation by the author).

This may be interpreted as proof of Haller's Zionist attitude: not in the diaspora, but only in a future Israeli state would a distinctive Jewish art be possible. Haller followed the developments in Palestine. Presumably in 1925 he made a sketch for the so-called "Mädchenfarm" ("girls' farm") in Nahalal (fig. 5).

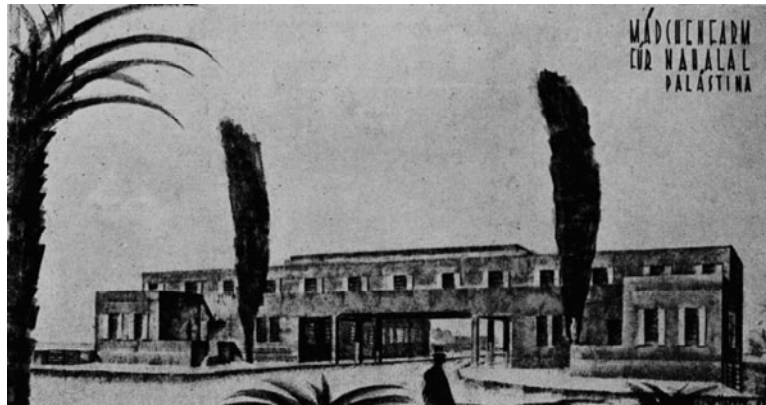


Fig. 5

In the agricultural settlement (Moshav) of Nahalal, the Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO) started to run an agricultural training camp for young women.¹⁶ Haller's project shows that he was familiar with both climatic conditions and regional architecture in Palestine: the cubic forms and flat roofs reflect traditional Ottoman architecture as well as modern ideas.

Reviewing Haller's German oeuvre, it can be said that he was neither a radical fighter for modernity nor a strict follower of conservative ideas. It is obvious that Haller closely followed architectural developments. Starting with projects in the neoclassical and homeland styles, he soon incorporated elements of expressionism and art deco. His projects of the late 1920s do without decoration and symmetry, as was common practice at the time. He worked on a wide range of projects, from town and settlement planning to tombstones and even furniture.¹⁷

In 1932, Haller immigrated to Palestine. In the following year, his Jewish colleagues were excluded from the "Bund Deutscher Architekten" (association of German architects). Deprived of their economic basis, many of them were forced

16 See Reimann: Haller (see n. 1), pp. XIII. The general plan for Nahalal, where construction began in 1921, was designed by Richard Kauffmann. Lotte Cohn probably designed the WIZO school.

17 Haller apparently designed the furniture for the cemetery halls in Leipzig and Halle/Saale.

to leave Germany.¹⁸ Those who stayed were persecuted. Only a small number of Jewish architects survived the Holocaust in the camps or underground.

In Tel Aviv Haller opened a new studio. In a surprisingly short time he was able to erect several apartment houses in the quickly growing “white city”.¹⁹ Like many immigrants he changed his German first name to his Hebrew one, from Wilhelm to Zeev.

Since the city’s founding in 1909, Tel Aviv’s architecture changed rapidly within only 25 years. The earliest quarters are characterised by buildings that reflect neo-classicism, art nouveau and oriental styles. Even contemporaries complained about the city’s unplanned development²⁰ and the eclectic mix of styles. Tel Aviv was not a social and urban experiment like some of the Jewish agricultural settlements of the time, even though ideas of the garden city movement formed the basis of town planning. Perhaps this is why the early period of “Jewish” architecture in Palestine had only little influence on the first modern Jewish city: Alex Baerwald’s attempts to develop a distinctive Jewish style in Palestine by mixing traditional Middle-Eastern architecture with neoclassical paradigms, as apparent in his Technion building in Haifa (1914), had only a few followers in Tel Aviv. Inventing and establishing a Middle-Eastern Jewish “regionalism” finally failed, much like the European “national style movements” at the beginning of the century. In the 1920s, crystalline forms of European expressionism and art deco became prevalent in Tel Aviv’s architecture for a while. Some of Joseph Berlin’s buildings are representative of this decorative “style”. In the early 1930s, ideas of functionalism replaced all attempts to define a specific Jewish style by reviewing historical or regional architecture.

Zeev Haller, together with other immigrants from Germany and Eastern European countries, took an active part in this development. His only early project in Tel Aviv that recalled expressionistic forms did not see the light of day.²¹ Soon

18 See Warhaftig: *Sie legten den Grundstein* (see n. 1), pp. 12-30.

19 The first known project is a building in Herzl Street, drawings of which (dating from 1932) are preserved at the municipal building archive in Tel Aviv, sign. 0002-079-1. In Tel Aviv Haller also tried to succeed in town planning: In 1934 he took part in a competition for the design of Tel Aviv’s beach promenade, published in *Habinjan Bamisrah Hakarov 1* (1934), p. 5. The author would like to thank Dr. Katrin Keßler, Braunschweig/Jerusalem, for providing information on this article.

20 See Sonder, Ines: *Gartenstädte für Erez Israel. Zionistische Stadtplanungsvisionen von Theodor Herzl bis Richard Kauffmann*. Hildesheim, 2005, pp. 164-166.

21 See files at the municipal building archive in Tel Aviv, sign. 0006-060-1.

Haller left behind all decorative elements, forming architecture simply by using cubes, slabs and openings. A major project, built for a pharmacist in 1936, was realised at the junction of King George Street and Dizengoff Street (fig. 6).²²



Fig. 6

Thanks to its location at the heart of the commercial centre, the building is probably Haller's best known in Tel Aviv. The four storeys originally had a "dismantled" façade of horizontal ribbon-like balconies attached in curved "waves", dynamically "floating" around the rectangular cubes behind (fig. 7).

22 See files at the municipal building archive in Tel Aviv, sign. 0187-048, vol. 1 and 2; see also Metzger-Szmuk: *Des maisons* (see n. 1), pp. 102-105.



Fig. 7

Inside, the flats have simple rectangular rooms in a rather traditional layout. Later, the balconies were closed, leaving little of the façade's original "dismantled" character. The ground floor was also altered: the balcony was replaced by shop windows. Dynamically curved façades, corners and "wave façades" were innovative elements of modern architecture in Germany: Erich Mendelsohn's department stores for the Schocken company in Chemnitz (1927-30) and his cinema "Univerrsum" in Berlin (1927-31) are important and paradigmatic examples, as is Emil Fahrenkamp's Shell building in Berlin (1930-32).



Fig. 8

An apartment house in the Strauss Street built in 1935-36 realises similar ideas of design (fig. 8).²³

The short side of the plot faces the street, which is where Haller situated the curved “head” of the building. “Waves” of balconies “float” across the long façade, going along with a private garden yard typical of Tel Aviv’s residences from that time. Unfortunately, during a reconstruction in 2004 a penthouse was added.

Curved façades became a typical component of Tel Aviv’s architecture in the 1930s, but Haller’s buildings are even more dynamic than most of his colleagues’ projects.²⁴ While he designed only single houses, the buildings of the Dizengoff Circle (general plan by Genia Averbuch, 1934) demonstrate how architecture can evoke an impression of dynamism and modernity by planning a larger urban structure in curved, floating forms.

In the south of Tel Aviv Haller found another solution for designing a house for shops and apartments at a street corner in Levinsky Street (1935-36, fig. 9).²⁵

23 See files at the municipal building archive in Tel Aviv, sign. 0416-003, vol. 1-6; see also Metzger-Szmuk: *Des maisons* (see n. 1), pp. 108-109, and Warhaftig: *Deutsche jüdische Architekten* (see n. 1), p. 217.

24 Strangely, Erich Mendelsohn, one of the creators of architectural dynamism in the 1920s, dropped this style after his immigration to Palestine in 1934.

25 See files at the municipal building archive in Tel Aviv, sign. 0035-046048, vol. 1.



Fig. 9

Once again, the corner is curved, but the façades are neither “dismantled” nor “floating”. Here, too, the ground floor is used for shops. For the upper storeys Haller introduced a new element to articulate the large cubic forms: rows of rectangular slabs for balconies protrude at regular intervals – like the balconies of the apartment wing of Walter Gropius’ Bauhaus building in Dessau (1926).

A smaller apartment house in Idelson Street, built in 1936, shows a combination of Haller’s preferred elements (fig. 10).²⁶

26 See Metzger-Szmuk: *Des maisons* (see n. 1), p. 102.



Fig. 10

The three- to four- storey building is composed of two larger cubic forms, linked by a staircase with a long vertical window (“thermometer window”) above the entrance. The lower and bigger block along the street is stressed by three rounded strip balconies overlapping the corners of the façade. The higher cube stands back some meters. Here two semicircular balconies protrude directly from the massive block. Although the house is not in the best condition, it represents Haller’s original design better than any other of his (preserved) buildings in Tel Aviv.



Fig. 11

The apartment house in Ben Yehuda Street 120 (fig. 11), built in 1935, is based on a similar idea. Again we find a cubic structure of two asymmetric wings connected by a staircase. But in this case the balconies do not look as though they were pasted onto the façades – here they are entirely part of the cubic composition. The building was renovated a few years ago, as were the house in Strauss Street and many other buildings of Tel Aviv’s “White City”. Bauhaus architecture became fashionable to live in. Prices rose, and the new residents wanted their buildings to be more luxurious. During renovations the historic substance was often changed considerably. Thus Haller’s house in Ben Yehuda Street 120 looks like a building from the 1930s, but with an extra storey and a penthouse having been added, the building lost its original proportions and character. It is doubtful that this kind of “restoration” really helps preserve Tel Aviv’s cultural heritage.

Even worse is the present state of another of Haller’s apartment houses in Ben Yehuda Street. Number 230 was built in 1935 or 36, but altered in 1992 (fig. 12).



Fig. 12

Haller's drawings show a façade of three storeys with an entrance in the middle and long, curved balconies on the upper floors.²⁷ The symmetrical design, stressed by a vertical window strip for the staircase in the middle, is rather unusual for his projects of that time. Perhaps the architect did not want to stress one part of the building in an unbalanced way. Alterations of the last decades have destroyed the original shape: three additional storeys, a protruding gallery and badly proportioned windows make Haller's deliberate design unrecognisable.

Although some of Haller's buildings in Tel Aviv were altered or are in rather poor condition, they prove that Haller was one of the leading architects of the 1930s, the city's "boom years". Flat roofs, dynamically rounded forms, horizontal ribbon windows and asymmetric ground plans are characteristic not only of his work, but of the entire Bauhaus in Tel Aviv. As in his German period, Haller did

27 See files at the municipal building archive in Tel Aviv, sign. 0025-230, vol. 1.

not invent new forms and concepts, but refined elements he studied in the architecture of his time.²⁸ Working with colleagues from numerous European countries and amalgamating the influences they brought with them from different architectural traditions and schools, Haller took part in the development of a true “international style”. In this context, Bauhaus architecture was only one source among many others. Especially the modernism in Poland, Russia, Hungary and Czechoslovakia had an impact on the development in Palestine. The idea of functionalism – form as a result of mathematical calculation – was a suitable way to transcend the existing differences.

The “White City’s” fascinating and unique character of diversity and harmony in modern forms may be the result of the amalgamation described above. Tel Aviv is not the result of rigid social and urban planning like Bruno Taut’s or Ernst May’s settlements in Magdeburg, Berlin and Frankfurt, where architects in the 1920s tried to design the life of future “new” men. Tel Aviv’s diversity of modern forms continues the principle of traditional cities, where private clients and private architects try to find individual solutions to individual demands in the wider context of an urban society. But here architects and clients obviously shared the same goal: modernity was to represent a renewed Jewish nation, freed of wrong traditions copied from other nations and centuries. However, it may be discussed whether Haller’s idea of a “purely Jewish” art and architecture, resulting from “time [...], place [...], tradition [...] and individuality”, was indeed realised in Tel Aviv’s architecture of the 1930s.

In Tel Aviv Zeev Haller worked only for a short time as a private architect. Since the 1940s, he was employed at the Public Works Department (his exact function being unknown). Little is known about the last years of Haller’s life. In 1954 he moved to Arizona/USA, probably with his son Albert.²⁹ Wilhelm Zeev Haller died there (or in Tel Aviv) in 1956.³⁰

28 Haller was also interested in refining construction methods: in 1937 he got a patent on the construction of balconies, see *Palestine Post*, 6 January 1937, p. 11.

29 Metzger-Szmuk: *Des maisons* (see n. 1), p. 102.

30 According to Warhaftig: *Sie legten den Grundstein* (see n. 1), p. 203, Haller died in Tel Aviv.

Figures

1: Memorial for Jewish soldiers killed in World War I, Jewish cemetery in Dresden (Fiedlerstraße), inaugurated in 1916 (photo: Bet Tfila – Forschungsstelle für jüdische Architektur in Europa, Technische Universität Braunschweig, 2002)

2: Veterans' settlement buildings in Stendal, around 1918 (photo by the author, 2007)

3: Building on the Jewish cemetery in Leipzig (Delitzscher Straße), interior of the great hall (source: Max Reimann, *Wilhelm Haller*, Berlin, Leipzig, Wien 1930, p. 7)

4: Project for a synagogue in Leipzig, around 1929 (source: Max Reimann, *Wilhelm Haller*, Berlin, Leipzig, Wien 1930, p. 18)

5: Project for the "Girls' Farm" ("Mädchenfarm") in Nahalal, Palestine, around 1925 (source: Max Reimann, *Wilhelm Haller*, Berlin, Leipzig, Wien 1930, p. XIII)

6: House in King George Street, Tel Aviv, 1936 (photo by the author, 2009)

7: House in King George Street, Tel Aviv, 1936, balcony detail (photo by the author, 2009)

8: House in Strauss Street, Tel Aviv, 1935-36 (penthouse added) (photo by the author, 2009)

9: House in Levinsky Street, Tel Aviv, 1936 (photo by the author, 2005)

10: House in Idelson Street, Tel Aviv, around 1936 (photo by the author, 2005)

11: House in Ben Yehuda Street, Tel Aviv (two storeys added) (photo by the author, 2009)

12: House in Ben Yehuda Street, Tel Aviv, 1935/36 (three storeys added) (photo by the author, 2009)