



'Aranne 2', archival pigment print, 2014. ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF ELI SINGALOVSKI

ARTS & LETTERS

Eli Singalovski Shoots the Concrete Face of Israel

One photographer asks, can architecture create a better society?

BY ALEX COCOTAS

APRIL 12, 2016

A

LL BUILDINGS TELL A story. Who are the residents? Why do they live there? Who built it, why did they build it, and for whom was it built? Why that style and with those materials? The answers to these questions represent the material foundations of our personal histories.

Few artists have explored this idea as well as young Israeli photographer Eli Singalovski. His work follows in

the tradition of other great architectural photographers, like Julius Shulman, but whereas Shulman tended toward more glamorous settings, Singalovski focuses on two of the most scorned architectural styles in Israel, or anywhere really: modernist apartment blocks, and Brutalism, both of which are closely identified with Israel's early history.

When the state was established in 1948, a large wave of immigration began that the young country was ill-prepared to absorb. Many immigrants, especially those from Middle Eastern countries, were forced to live in *ma'abarot*, transit camps, sometimes for years, often in what would euphemistically become known as "development towns," new settlements on the country's

periphery. The government and the Histadrut, the quasi-governmental labor movement, built large numbers of apartment blocks. They could be built cheaply with little variance and house many families, but they also



conformed to the state's Socialist ethos. The blocks were based on the European garden-city, providing workers with cheap housing, a sense of communal existence, and easy access to city services. The gardens, unfortunately, often failed to materialize.

These apartment blocks are a familiar presence for any Israeli. Many people, of course, grew up in them, and few would accuse them of aesthetical charm. Almost all of them are painted the same shade of tan, and their gray, rigid flesh often peeks through, ringed by an intermediary dermal layer of chalky white. Many are falling apart because they were hastily built, and uncoordinated additions have wrecked whatever semblance of symmetry or balance they once held.

In Singalovski's work, however, something magical happens: They suddenly acquire the penetrating intimacy of a portrait, almost personified. He works at night and in black-and-white to strip away all superfluous detail—cars, people, clouds, color, temperature—so that these once-banal facades exert a beguiling allure. They appear abandoned and yet in this absence the inhabitants are most acutely felt; we see the physical evidence of their presence: a satellite dish, an air-conditioner, a line of laundry. Little confabulations manifest and multiply, interposing these details, composing an object of interminable contemplation, a glimmer of a collective soul.

The father of this style of building, and of much modern architecture, is Le Corbusier, who famously conceived of a house as *une machine-à-habiter*—a machine for living. He believed housing should be practical and as efficient as possible, and like his peers he scorned ornamentation as a needless expenditure of time and money (the Austrian architect Adolf Loos once wrote an essay called “Ornament and Crime”). This was idealistic architecture with a social imperative. Its aim was to create an affordable housing that accounted for all of its residents' needs, like a machine.

“They built [these buildings] as practical and as fast and as cheap as they could, and they didn't think of the needs of the residents,” said Singalovski, as we recently looked through his portfolio together. “The residents kept changing the building, they kept interfering with the architecture, which, in my opinion, makes it more of a living organism. If you came and shot this building today, it's going to be different. It is also about ownership. It's the architect's creation, so then who are they to mess with it? Or, on the other hand, if he did a bad job planning it, then why wouldn't they? They need to live there.” Through the residents' improvisations these generic buildings were each imbued with an individual character, a personal story, and Singalovski captures these stories with striking clarity.

The buildings Singalovski photographs are inhabited by the lowest socio-economic classes in Israeli society. They do not share in the prosperity of “Startup Nation.” (Israel has the highest rate of poverty among OECD nations.) The cities depicted in the photographs do not have many educational and economic opportunities, and their residents are often caught in a multi-generational cycle of poverty. Housing prices have risen more than 50 percent since 2008. And yet in Singalovski's work they are afforded a dignity and a voice that they are rarely granted in the prevailing national narrative.

“Everyone who lives in those buildings would probably prefer a one-story, white picket fence villa somewhere,” he said. The additions are “the

compromise. This is the best they could do. The reason that they change the building and the architecture is because they can't move to that place."

Singalovski, 31, is himself an immigrant, like the buildings' first residents. He was born in St. Petersburg and moved to Israel at the age of 7. He is familiar with these apartment blocks because he grew up in one. His family lived first in Sde Boker, a kibbutz best known as the burial place of David Ben-Gurion; and then in Be'er Sheva, the largest city on Israel's periphery, about two hours south of Tel Aviv, and a perpetual thrust of developmental ambitions.

Be'er Sheva has one of the world's largest collections of Brutalist architecture, which many would consider a dubious honor. Singalovski, however, took the much-derided style as the basis for his first solo exhibit and again revealed unexpected dimensions (although not all of the buildings photographed were in Be'er Sheva). Brutalism, like the modernist apartment block, is rooted in an idealistic ethic, and they share the same intellectual progenitor, Le Corbusier. The most distinctive feature of Brutalist architecture is its extensive use of exposed concrete—the name stems not from its Spartan character, but from the French *béton brut*, exposed concrete. Brutalist architects strove to create honest architecture, revealing the building materials and forsaking decoration. The resulting buildings cut stark figures and in some fundamental ways resemble a sculpture more than an assembled structure.

Brutalism arrived in Israel in the 1950s and flourished for the next two decades on the country's periphery, away from the critical inquiries of national planners or cultural elites. Its benefactor was the early state's overriding imperative of development, the need for apartment blocks, office buildings, university infrastructure, and even synagogues. Architects were commissioned for projects and given near-absolute freedom in implementation.

Despite the style's stated disdain for ornamentation, Singalovski's photographs reveal the extent to which they indulged decoration in their final designs. He shows me a series of photographs where the wooden boards used in the buildings' molds were laid out in distinct patterns. In other images, the architects' practical concerns inspired clearly aesthetic solutions. The photos' great virtue, however, is bringing the academic theory to a lay audience, making it visible to the pedestrian eye. Brutalist architecture is often criticized as being depressing or monotonous, but Singalovski's work demonstrates how deeply textured these buildings could be; indeed, how eerie, alien, and challenging they could be to the accepted notion of building.

Although this series is more stylized than his previous work, an extension of its subject matter, it still carries an undercurrent of social commentary. The architects of these buildings were young and idealistic, fervent believers of Brutalism's social ethic, and the process of commission was completely democratic—anyone could submit a design, and there was no preference of seniority. "It works differently now," Singalovski said. "Back then it was an open competition, so a lot of the architects that built these [buildings]—on top of being very ideological and really believing in this kind of architecture—were very young. They were between the ages of 28 to, let's say, 35, and that's something that couldn't happen today."

Although Singalovski denied his work is a direct critique of the current housing situation in Israel, his photographs, and the ideologies they

encompass, offer a stark contrast to Israel's housing politics today, with ownership an increasingly distant dream for many. His work depicts a time when housing in Israel had a strong social and idealistic imperative. Even when they failed, these architects believed that they could use architecture to change the world, to create a better society. Can the same be said of those building high-rise towers for high-net-worth individuals in Tel Aviv and Jaffa? Or the uniform condo buildings that the middle class aspires to? Or the suburban-style tract housing that predominates in many settlements? The concrete of these buildings is both the glint of utopia and its subversion, and Eli Singalovski is its poet.

Eli Singalovski's photographs of the 'insecurity architecture' of synagogues across Western Europe are published in Tablet magazine's current print issue No. 2, [available here](#).

Alex Cocotas is a writer based in Berlin.





'Beit Shemesh 1,' archival pigment print, 2014.



Alex Cocotas is a writer based in Berlin.

#ARCHITECTURE #BRUTALISM #ELI SINGALOVSKI #ISRAEL #PHOTOGRAPHY

Share ↗

NEWS

[See All →](#)

Can a Healthy American Society Exist on the Internet?

BY RACHEL K. ALEXANDER

New Report on Khashoggi Murder Is a Dud, Official Warns

BY ELI LAKE

The President (of the White House Correspondents' Association) Speaks!

BY ARMIN ROSEN

ARTS & LETTERS

[See All →](#)

Happy Birthday Wishes Plus a Heartfelt Apology to an American Jewish Literary Legend, Herbert Gold

BY RAY A. MARCH

Bobby Fischer's Greatest Moves

BY JACQUES FUX

Is Compulsory Race and Bias 'Training' Legal?

BY WENDY KAMINER

BELIEF

[See All →](#)

Chained Melody

BY STUART HALPERN

A Different Path to Ordination

BY ANDREA D. LOBEL

How the Zoom Minyan Brought Me Closer to Judaism

BY IVY EISENBERG

ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

[See All →](#)

Joe Biden's Ugly Betrayal of the Iranian People

BY MARIAM MEMARSADEGHI

In Memory of Ezra

BY JOSEPH DANA

The Malley Test

BY MARTIN PERETZ

FOOD

[See All →](#)

The Magic of Tahdig

HOLIDAYS

[See All →](#)

No Holiday for Soft Men