

The city hall of Bat Yam, a municipality just south of Tel Aviv. Abstract sculptural forms on roof, “cuboctahedrons,” mask and control light and air.

Tinker Toy City Hall in Israel Is ‘Space Packed’

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BAT YAM, Israel—Israel's best publicized export beyond Jaffa oranges is probably Habitat, the dramatic complex of box-like housing units by the architect Moshe Safdie that was the centerpiece of Montreal's Expo 67.

In Israel, the school of design theory that led to Habitat has produced a small, strange collection of buildings of intriguing appearance and—like Habitat—of debatable experimental value. They are undoubtedly some of the most striking and provocative buildings to be seen today.

For example, there is an inverted ziggurat of a city hall for Bat Yam, a small industrial municipality just south of Tel Aviv, that looks like a Tinker Toy of brightly colored triangles. It might be called a bold failure—too sophisticated for its simple municipal purposes, but still one of the most interesting buildings to be found anywhere.

Like a Beehive on a Hill

An apartment house in Ramat Gan, a suburb of Tel Aviv, is piled high on a hill like a beehive. It is very likely one of the handsomest pieces of architectural sculpture around.

The Faculty of Engineering at the Technion in Haifa, Israel's M.I.T., presents a sawtooth facade of insistent geometry sharpened by the brilliance of the local light.

All these buildings are based on a theory of three-dimensional geometric forms that attempt to find a building shape to be established as a basic unit of construction that will give the most economical and efficient use of space. It is called a “space packing” system by its inventors.

The beehive house is made of elongated hexagons; put together, these hexagonal “space packing” units form rooms and terraces around an open court in the center, for a compact and unconventional arrangement.

The Bat Yam city hall is worked out with a three-dimensional spatial unit the architects call a “cuboctahedron.” All of the parts of the structure are assembled from this repeated module, as if with building blocks.

The father of the space packing theory was Alfred Neumann, an archetypal European intellectual and architectural polemicist, who emigrated from Germany to teach at the Technion, where many students became his disciples.

No Standardization Yet

One was Mr. Safdie, who went on to design Habitat. Two others, Zvi Hecker and Eldar Sharon, joined with him to produce these buildings, which cover a 10-year span. Mr. Sharon left the firm about five years ago and Mr. Neumann, who went to Montreal to teach, died last fall. Mr. Hecker is carrying on alone.

The question now is whether the experiment will continue or whether the breakup of the partners and the problems of translating theory into practice are running the experiment into a kind of natural dead end.

Ultimately and practically, this kind of theoretical building standardization should lead to prefabrication for cheapness and mass production, if it is not to result in a series of sports, or individual exercises. A building “systems” of any kind is meant to deal with large-scale production.

There is, as yet, no standardization of any of these building units. The beehive house is built up of conventional concrete block because its 60-degree angles could not be prefabricated. However, according to the architects, it cost no more than an ordinary building and is a better

The engineering building at Haifa has walls of folded concrete slab construction that work very well in terms of sunbreaks and interior spaces.

The Bat Yam city hall is a remarkable flight of creative fancy grounded in poor execution and detail. It is a grand concept—including a combination ceremonial-emer-

gency stair to a miniature amphitheater—that appears to have baffled a small town bureaucracy, which maintains the whole thing on the level of a kind of giant locker room.

The sophisticated stair is now barricaded by garbage cans. But the abstract sculptural forms on the roof,

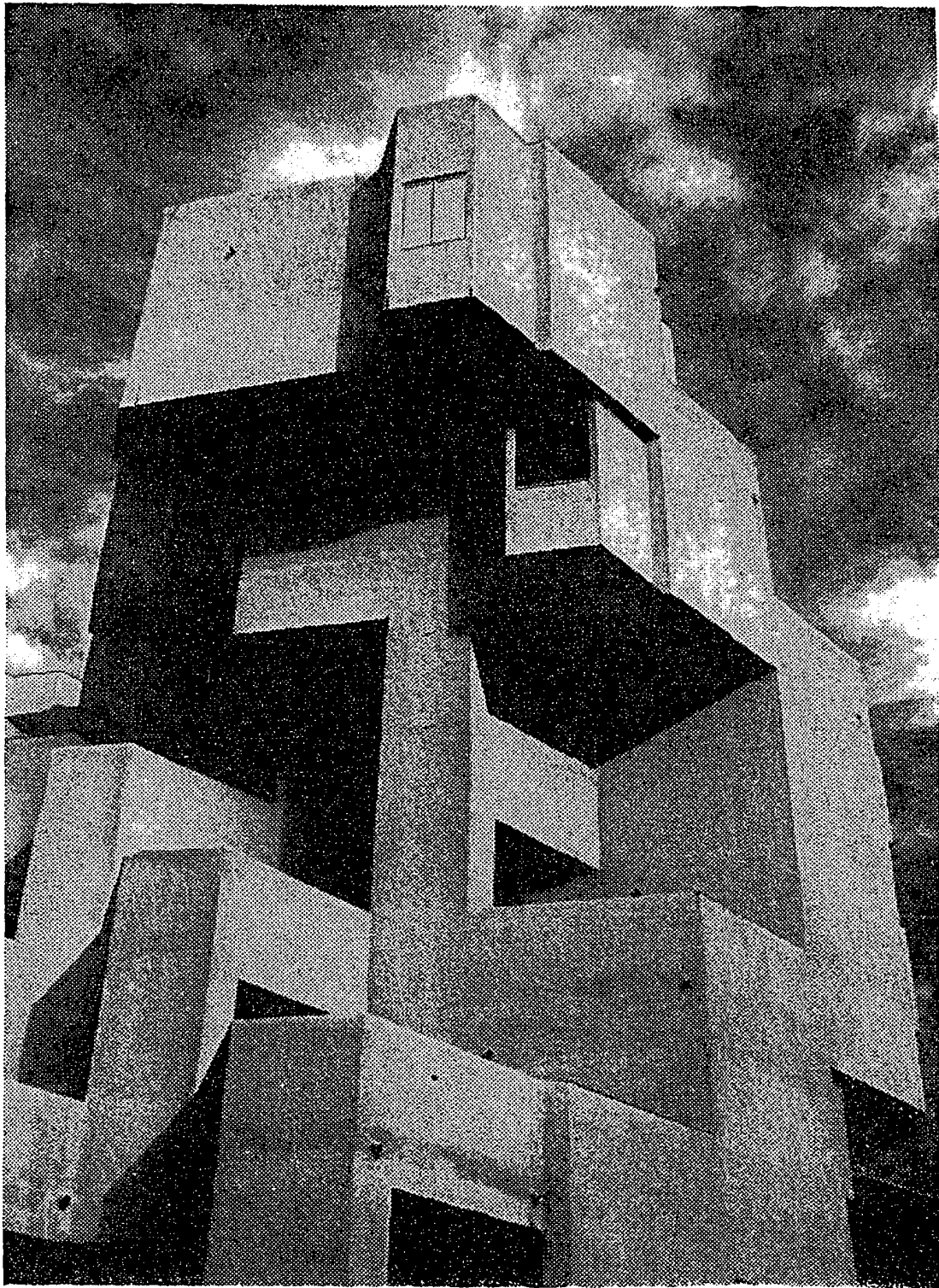
which mask and control light and air, are worth the trip to see. This building is one of the most curious combinations of triumph and disaster that architecture has ever produced.

The theory is obviously not without faults, which appear as soon as the buildings face the realities of construction.

But experiments such as these are rarely ends in themselves. What they indicate is a progressive fertility of ideas that can open eventual avenues to solutions of problems from housing to environment. In the meantime, they have produced some of the most stunning, unsung half-successes anywhere in the world.



Faculty of Engineering building at Technion in Haifa. All buildings here are based on the theories of Alfred Neumann, an architect who emigrated from Germany to teach at the Technion, and were designed by him and his disciples.



Apartment house at Ramat Gan, a suburb of Tel Aviv. Structure is made of elongated, hexagonal units that are “space-packed” to form rooms and terraces around open court.