

# Block Gardens in the Geddes Plan for Tel Aviv

## Researchers

Arch. Ruth Liberty-Shalev

Ruth Liberty-Shalev Architecture & Conservation

Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning

Technion Israel Institute of Technology

Arch. Adi Har-Noy

Ruth Liberty-Shalev Architecture & Conservation

Arch. Rakefet Sinai

ARA Landscape & Urban Design

## Project manager

Arch. Hadas Nevo-Goldberst

Conservation Architect

Conservation Department

Tel Aviv Municipality

## Research Summary

Much has been written in recent years about the urban planner Patrick Geddes and his 1925 plan for the city of Tel Aviv. While during the latter half of the 20th century he was viewed as an original but marginal figure in modern urban planning, in recent years, his unique vision for the relationship between society, nature, and the city are revisited. This research focuses on the “block gardens” in Geddes’s plan for Tel Aviv, which are nowadays scattered across the city, hidden within the blocks. These small inverted plots of open space embody the ‘Garden City’ vision as conceived by Geddes, perhaps better than any of the plan’s other components.

The research examines a series of aerial photos, maps, plans, regulations, and statutory documents which describe the city’s evolution from 1923 onwards. Survey maps and aerials chart the city’s actual evolution, while regulations and statutory maps chart the municipality’s attempts to control future development. The research examines the chronological overlay of vision vs. execution against data regarding land purchase and development throughout the 1920’s, 1930’s and 1940’s. Ultimately, it suggests real-estate pressures as the main cause for the divide between the two.

## Research Description

The research includes a comprehensive comparative survey of all remaining 29 gardens and connecting network of alleys and lanes, charting the history of their development, assessing their current state, evaluating their significance and attributes via the design principles originally set out by Geddes, and understanding their potential futures within the evolving city of Tel Aviv. The research aims at three main outcomes.

First, the research will identify the core characteristics of a true “Geddes block garden.” As elaborated by Geddes himself in his 1925 report, these gardens would play a central role in Tel Aviv’s proposed grid of “Main Ways,” which frame some sixty city blocks of approximately 200 x 300 meters. The city blocks would be penetrated by smaller streets called “Home Ways.” Each block garden would be ideally located at the center of the block,

“recreating value to the interior of each block; and with the further advantage of homely seclusion of about half of the houses within the main block itself.”<sup>1</sup> Through these gardens, Geddes aspired to create a dense urban settlement that retains the quality of life of a European Garden Suburb<sup>2</sup>, offering all building plots fresh air flow, proximity to nature, and accessibility to open areas.

The written report that Geddes submitted included a sound textual rationale for his approach to the design of northern Tel Aviv, but its graphic documents (now lost) were schematic conceptual layouts rather than fully developed urban plans. Considering that Geddes spent only two months in Tel Aviv preparing this plan, the task of applying the conceptual plan to the actual limitations of the terrain and the ever-growing demands of landowners was left to his assistants at Tel Aviv Municipality. The plan was thus continually developed and adjusted to gain the approval of the governmental planning authority until 1929 and was ultimately approved as a statutory plan only in 1940. While Geddes’s theoretical concept dictated an ideal size, location and proportion for these gardens within their respective city blocks, many departed from the ideal as the city of Tel Aviv expanded north to inhabit Geddes’s plan.

Secondly, the research will examine the significant unplanned changes to most gardens, and the ultimate failure of changes originally planned to be implemented. The research will challenge the perceived chasm between the allegedly “pure” vision offered by Geddes, and the “technical” application of the plan by “uninspired” local clerks who submitted to mundane pressures. Did Geddes really endow Tel Aviv with a visionary plan which transcended “real politique,” and were the clerks who worked on the detailed development of the plan just technicians? Perhaps they were the visionaries? The research compares the 1925-1926 versions of the Geddes plan with data regarding land purchase and ownership in those years, trying to understand the blend of conceptual and real-life considerations that shaped the illustrious Geddes Plan.

Lastly, the research will study the contemporary significance of the gardens that were executed. The majority of these were significantly diminished in size and location within the block, yet they retained the qualities of an introverted retreat to nature in “homely seclusion” as intended by Geddes. Ultimately, the research will offer recommendations on desirable maintenance and future development to these gardens. It will further identify the alleys, lanes, and plots that were part of the original network of Geddes gardens and could be returned to the city as a network of viable public green lungs.

#### Research Status

The research began in January 2018, and is currently in the data analysis phase. Its anticipated completion date is December 2019.

1. Geddes Report 1924, p.16
2. Ibid