

Tel Aviv – The White City:
Geddes' Ideal for the Renewal of the Hebraic Culture

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Introduction

“[...] it is clear that the city-state is a natural growth, and that man is by nature a political animal, and a man that is by nature and not merely by fortune city-less is either low in the scale of humanity or above it.”

--Aristotle

Appearing as a “White Mirage”, the city of Tel Aviv emerged from the northern dunes of Jaffa claiming to be the last of the garden cities. Created *ex nihilo* following a utopian plan, it reflected the changes occurring in the Mandatory Palestine during the early twentieth century. Its core, The White City, bloomed as a desert oasis:

Appearing as a “White Mirage”, the city of Tel Aviv emerged from the northern dunes of Jaffa claiming to be the last of the garden cities. Created *ex nihilo* following a utopian plan, it reflected the changes occurring in the Mandatory Palestine during the early twentieth century. Its core, The White City, bloomed as a desert oasis; orchestrated by philanthropist and urban planner, Sir Patrick Geddes, and shaped by the waves of European émigrés seeking new freedom. Today, it is the bustling metropolis of Israel, mythicized within the tales of its foundation. Classified on the UNESCO World Heritage list, its “innovative town-planning ideas”, and its “International Style” have been closely associated to the rebirth of the Jewish identity. Amidst the reshaping of the Hebraic culture within modernity, the city’s inception and its master-planner were henceforth tainted in a propagandist gesture; only then can the etiological myth be established. The architectonics of the city of Tel Aviv reflect the underlying political motivations which pushed the councillors to choose Geddes’ master plan for it. The myth surrounding its inception shadows many different social, political, and regional factors that shaped the city which vanished under this “white mirage”.

Tel Aviv is a major pillar of the modern Israeli identity hence the purpose of this paper; to study the inception of the city of Tel Aviv thoroughly in order to grasp how the Hebraic culture re-rooted within the ancient homeland. This can be done with an examination of its spatial, social, and architectural development over the thirty years following its establishment. For now, the majority of the scholarly work usually presents the city as the concretization of a new modern state where its construction and its architecture are emphasized but little is shown about the underlying political aspect. In addition to that, most present Tel Aviv with a polished and uniform discourse denying henceforth the discord that laid underneath the appearance of such a mirage. Concealed were the tensions between the Zionist ideals and the reality of the situation, between Geddes’ master plan and the architects, or between the different factions of architects. The analysis of the different contexts and the work of Geddes are an essential key in the understanding of the process of fabrication of this vast enterprise of forging a national identity. Overall, a correlation needs to be established between state, planner, and architects in order to demystify what has been called the first “Jewish” city.

The “New Jew” and the Kibbutz

In the context of emerging nationalism in the late nineteenth century, the Jews residing Old Europe were faced with a problematic crisis. There seemed to be an identity gap between the “land” and the Ashkenazim, (European Jews) a relationship proved to be porous and or flexible. For instance, Moravian Jews would identify themselves as Jews who spoke German and not Germans who practiced Judaism in response of being accused of sympathizing with the German national movement in Czechoslovakia. This seemed to be widespread amongst this Jewish population whose fluidity of national identities and the primacy of the Jewish identity provided the impulse in the building of Eretz-Israel; of the building of the land.

This need of identification to the land urged the establishment of Jewish settlers within the Yishuv (Palestine). Zionist groups throughout Europe were distributing pamphlets, adverts, and utopian propagandas promoting the Aliyahs or immigration waves to the Land in the early 1930s. The vanguard or Halutz have already established themselves there and constitute the intelligentsia behind the national revival. There was a systematic triage of the immigrants to the land as it was already regulated by the British authorities. This political Zionism had plans for the national revival in Eretz-Israel, the productivization of the Jew, and the class war. There was a single goal of bringing the Hebraic nationalism and identity to the same level as western counterparts through a strong and rich state. However despite its attempt of becoming a pioneering and beaconing society, a third of its population lived in rural settlements or villages concentrated around Jaffa. Also with the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe, the massive influx of immigrants could simply not be controlled and triaged efficiently. Thus, the head of the Zionist groups were faced with Jews from all social, economic, and linguistic background cramped within the outskirts of Jaffa. This imposed the creation of a new common identity, or the facing of a “new Jew”; an individual whose identity is shaped from the land it shapes. Much like Kemalist Turkey, Fascist Italy or Maoist China a strong sense of nationalism and pride came from an identity developed around the myth of the work of the land. Hence were established the kibbutzim across the Mandate.

The kibbutzim were farming communes in Palestine first implemented in 1910 by Ashkenazic Jews. It presented itself as a centralized social structure whose focal point is the agricultural, and later, industrial development of the community. Its layout was centered upon communal facilities (communal dining room, administration, schools, etc.) These self-sufficient communities represented the epitome of social Zionism as it forged the “new Jew” and concretized the ideals of a communal life where all needs were provided for and where everything is shared. In fact, by 1947, 7.5% of the Israeli Jews lived within one of these micro-societies attaining such high living standards and political influence that they were qualified as the “rural aristocracy”.

These agricultural settlements re-appropriated the land and fructified it thus fulfilling the political agenda of a faction of the Zionists. Nonetheless, the link between urban and rural development proved to be a challenge for this mostly urban diaspora therefore the reshaping of the identity within the “new home” necessitated to be anchored within something symbolic and something concrete. Hence, the new Jewish state must encompass a city embodying “a transition place and a link between the over-crowded cities of Europe and the renewal of Agricultural Palestine.”

Geddes and Zionism

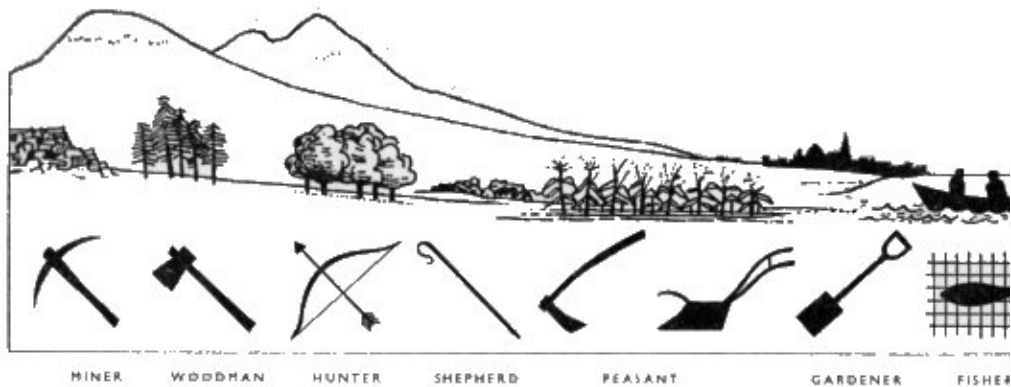
Humanist must be the most appropriate word to describe this man of broad interests driven by his will to improve the living conditions of the masses. Sociologist, biologist, ecologist, and educationist, Sir Patrick Geddes illustrated himself mostly in the domain of urbanism which represented the epitome and the concretization of his

Humanist must be the most appropriate word to describe this man of broad interests driven by his will to improve the living conditions of the masses. Sociologist, biologist, ecologist, and educationist, Sir Patrick Geddes illustrated himself mostly in the domain of urbanism which represented the epitome and the concretization of his understanding of the world. First with his renewal of Edinburgh's Old Town, and later with his 'Cities Exhibitions' across the United Kingdom exposing his urban theories, his name was cited across the burgeoning field of urban planning by 1915.

Geddes' name came to the attention of the Zionist mostly due to his affinities with writer and Zionist Israel Zangwill and his cousin Dr. David Eder who was part of the Relief & Reconstruction Department of the Zionist Commission. Manifesting to the latter his desire of reviving ancient cities, his first opportunity came in 1919 when the Zionist Commission required experts for a vast report of Palestine encompassing not only sanitation and engineering but also architecture and planning. The Scot's candidature was pushed by Eder who saw in him a well-rounded man with his "interdisciplinary character of planning" and his ability to link past and future. This initiated the relationship between Patrick Geddes and the Zionist movement resulting in two dozen reports and related activities for the next decades.

Fig. I: The Valley Section

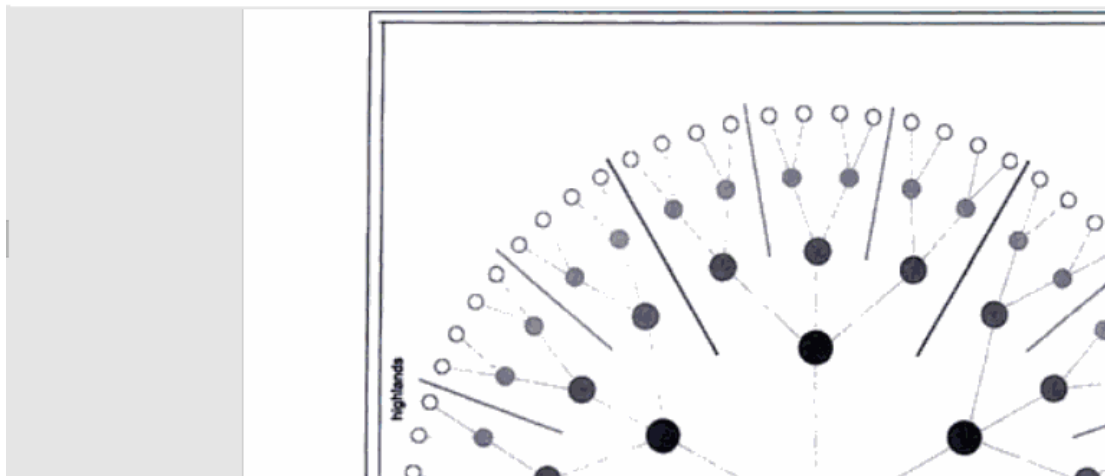
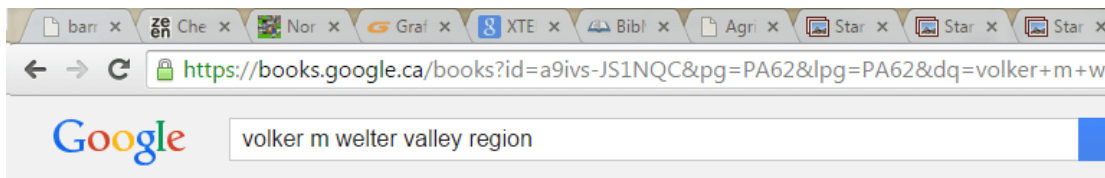
Geddes' Valley Section depicts the integration of different kind of human settlements within the land



The Zionists saw in Geddes ideology a way to channel the renewal of the Hebraic spirit within the holy-land. In fact, presented in his 1915 book, *Cities in Evolution*, the famous valley section provided an archetypal development of the Yishuv. (Fig. I) Transposed to the Jordan Valley, various types of settlement would fit accordingly to the social organization needed for the work of the land. (Fig. II) Palestine's destiny was directed towards this vast land transformed into a vast conurbation where agricultural work and industry coexisted, where the people would work and strive. Labour is portrayed as mediator between nature and man hence the identity of the

Fig. II: The Valley Region Diagram

The diagram depicts the hierarchy between the types of settlements that would constitute the city-region.



man is rooted within the earth. This is exactly the embodiment of Zionist thinking in which there is a need to re

man is rooted within the earth. This is exactly the embodiment of Zionist thinking in which there is a need to re-root, a need of re-establishment.

Geddes envisioned these ideals in a city in an era where the city was considered the worst place to live albeit for the Baudelairian *flâneurs*. His vision of a city was not the metropolis or the capitals of Europe but rather the return to the original form of the city; the Greek Polis. Cities are places of human development and savoir-faire fostered by mutual cooperation and support. Following the platonic principle in which the Polis exists only because of its inhabitants and vice versa, the city is imbedded within the region and its socio-cultural context.

This idea of interweaving town, cities, and country are not to recall those of Ebenezer Howard in *Garden Cities of To-morrow*. In his own adaptive way, Geddes sees in the land the key to the development of a culture. His theory of regionalism, based upon his projects in India and Edinburgh, suggest that the individual is defined by its region, its culture, its work, and its habits. In a letter to Geddes, Lewis Mumford states that the nationalistic movements are useful for a state to implement social and political life within a region but this would then kill the spiritual integrity of the quest of national identity. The regionalist-humanist outlook in the development of the cities proof to be the best path to be bestowed upon the Mandatory Palestine. All in all, the survival or the rebirth of a city did not depend on political or military force but rather depended upon its regional development and by its cities and city-life.

In the same way that Athens and the Greek Polis shined upon the Mediterranean, the Zionist wanted to create a state in parallel to its western counterparts, with a strong economy and national ambition. Contrary to this, Patrick Geddes saw Palestine not only as a national revival but more of a regional revival. In this land filled with history he envisioned the revival of the local Mediterranean basin, the renewal of its ancient glory as center of trade, ultimately leading to the flourishing of the Hebraic culture. In order to do so there needs to be a further development of the land with the establishment of the various settlements preconized in his valley section. Nonetheless, on the current situation in the Yishuv, he comments "... the agricultural colony villages are still too much mere squatting, and not the germinal centres they should be: it is difficult to get hold of there the Zionist & older groups being too middle-class in their ideas." These kibbutzim and moshavs being implemented as rural settlements are autarkic from the conurbation, they reflect social Zionism but do not implement the renewal of the land, or contribute to the general project of revitalizing the whole region of Palestine which includes its local population. An anchor was needed for the project, something that would bring together the old and the new, the Arabs and the Jews, and the country and the town. The Yishuv needed its city; the missing link.

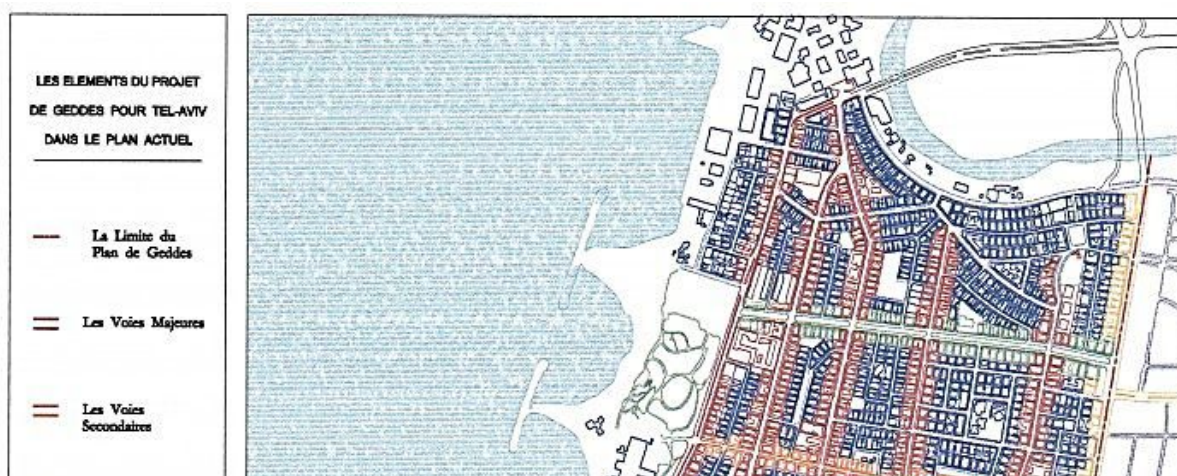
The 1925 Tel Aviv Plan

Palestine was for Geddes the revival of the Mediterranean basin, and Tel Aviv its beacon. Having already done numerous reports and surveys of Palestine and its cities, he was commissioned in 1925 by the mayor of Tel Aviv, Meir Dizengoff, to realize a comprehensive master-plan for this suburb in rapid expansion. The same year, the "Town Planning Report – Jaffa and Tel-Aviv" was presented at the city council and the works started the following year. This plan called for an extension of Jaffa and making it into the Yafo-Tel Aviv conurbation we know today. The area concerned is limited by the Yarkon River to the north, Bograshov Street to the south, Ibn Gvirol Street to the east and the beach to the west.

The plan of the city was developed following the scheme in which large north-south axis cut by secondary east-west axis allowed automobile fluidity and connection to Jaffa. (Fig. III) This would cut the city in big blocks that were then subdivided in a network of minor streets, "home-ways", granting access to the houses in the inner rows hidden within gardens. These "garden blocks" lined with rows of low density housing in retreat from the bustling street formed a harmonic flow between the latter and the inner private gardens. The established hierarchy of the street grid defined distinct spaces in the city which goes with the aesthetic and tradition of the garden city movement.

Fig. III: Geddes 1925 Plan for Tel Aviv

The plan depicts the hierarchy of the different roadways that constitute this unique urban fabric.





In addition to private gardens, he envisioned for Tel Aviv large central points or nodes and municipal gardens connected to the system with planted boulevards, much like Olmsted's Parkways, reflecting his will to integrate gardening and education within the city. The analogy between this planted city and the concept of "garden city of the fruit" is powerful; Tel Aviv would be the fruit of the people of the Yishuv. In *Cities in Evolution*, Geddes stated that every city should have their cultural acropolis, center point of civic life, where "burgher people govern themselves from their own town hall and yet express also the spiritual ideals which govern their lives..." Transposing this idea to the scale of the city, these central points would be where Hebraic (read Jewish) culture would blossom. Similarly, the civic center or Central City was built on the highest spot of Tel Aviv encompassing the institutions which would reflect the status of the city as the lighthouse of the Mediterranean. With the construction of music and drama colleges, the city wanted to forge a new Jewish art and create a new local identity; an identity that wanted to be authentic, based both from Arabic and Jewish traditions.

Overall, Geddes admired greatly the Zionist quest of re-establishment in Palestine and he concluded in his report stating that there is no other city like Tel Aviv which owes its origins to the ideals and aspiration of its inhabitants. However, even though the adoption of classical Hebrew as the spoken language of the Jews in Palestine represented a first step towards re-establishment, there were to be others in order to resettle in the Orient. He sought for the origins and the authenticity in the making of the "new Jew" either through the revival of its arts and crafts, its lifestyle or its architecture.

Amidst Modernism and Planning

Geddes believed that the genius loci or the spirit of the city should be embodied within its buildings. He advocated for a representative architecture; a hybridized eastern-western craft. As seen in his proposal for the University of Jerusalem, an overall oriental language is adopted with its white walls and umayyadian forms. However, after his death, rapid changes in the context of Tel Aviv in the late '30s condemned this scheme. With a large influx of immigrants to the Yishuv, the offer could not meet with the demand of land which caused the prices to rise exponentially. Hence many of the lots provided in Geddes plan were often subdivided and cut.

On the other hand, the garden city grid constrained the newly implemented modern architecture to tight lots suited only for individual dwellings. This constrained them in their grand schemes of corbusian complexes forcing them to adapt themselves. Many proposed to redesign the vacant lots and of the grey areas that lay between Allenby Ave. and the Yarkon River. Hence, many urban schemes proposed in the master-plan were discarded and therefore completely travestied the spirit behind Geddes' vision for Tel Aviv.

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Becoming somewhat of a conventional western city with a state-of-the-art architecture, Tel Aviv became in the following years the grand souk of the area. Instead of radiating its savoir-faire and conveying the ideals of a cultural renewal, it was qualified as little Warsaw by some historical accounts where you could buy everything from a melon to a carpet. It has therefore failed the idealized vision of a new city, and somewhat became the ghettoization of its origin. Sole witness of the grand ideals and schemes of the Scottish planner, remained his street layout. In 1938, the plan was amended with changes in plot and building sizes openly violating the spirit of the city. Thus, Geddes' name and legacy slowly faded and disappeared within the turmoil of the following decade.

On the other hand, the mirage of the white city was forged. A white, new, metropolis emerged within the dunes and conquered the desert. It attracted the masses for its novelty, its soirées, and was even presented as the Paris of the Orient. Began then the fortifying of the myth, the Tel Aviv of the subsequent years bathed in dreams of white, of lines, and of shapes. Modernism swept across the land and so with it a second chapter in the building of a national identity.

Regionalism within Zionism

The introduction of modern architecture in the Yishuv in the 1930s was not a uniform process. Wanting a distancing from the old nations of Europe, modern architecture was adopted in all socialist movements from Weimar

Fig. V: The Weizmann House (1936)

Designed for Chaim Weizmann and his wife, it became Mendelsohn's emblematic work in Israel.

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Before the 1930s, an orientalist vision of new Hebrew architecture was praised with a strong attachment to biblical orientalism and regionalism. Qualified nowadays as "the eclectic style", (Fig. IV) this vision of architecture was quickly portrayed as the reflection of the Gentiles of Europe and their perception of the mystical Orient. Thus, progressively, modern architecture devoided from all references to history, was institutionalized by the Zionist movement. At its head, the Tel Aviv Chug, composed of Yoseph Neufeld, Zeev Rechter, and Arie Sharon led the rational nationalist discourse in architecture. The orient needed to be stripped of all its cultural contingencies, make tabula rasa of the region, and distancing itself from its past, its

Fig. IV: Eclectic Style in Tel Aviv

A view of the Old City Hall whose style contrast with the building in the foreground.



present in

order for an idealized future. There was a need to uproot in order to rebuild.

From this discourse emerged most of Tel Aviv's architecture; rows on rows of white "international style" dwellings; aseptic, extemporal, and new. The vision for a regionalist architecture was baffled by this international wave. Some viewed this as the effacement of culture and geographic specificities. Erich Mendelsohn writes that internationalism in architecture is as bad as nationalism in politics. Contrary to Edward Said's definition of orientalism, the mystical orient could counter balance the materiality of the occident and therefore Palestine should be seen as a hyphen between the two; its architecture should be a modern architecture rooted in culture and growing in progress and technology. Following Geddes' ideals of a renewal of the Mediterranean culture, he also saw the Semitic within the Mediterranean order. For him, the national renaissance of the Mediterranean within the Yishuv imperatively meant the co-ownership of the land by both Arabs and Jews. This ideology translated into an architecture of mass and void, of modern fluidity and historical stability, of east and west. The Weizmann house (Fig. V) can be seen as the epitome of his work in that era. Enclosed within its clean rectilinear walls were not only

imperatively meant the co-ownership of the land by both Arabs and Jews. This ideology translated into an architecture of mass and void, of modern fluidity and historical stability, of east and west. The Weizmann house (Fig. V) can be seen as the epitome of his work in that era. Enclosed within its clean rectilinear walls were not only a grand circular stairwell but also the soul of the building. But in a narrowing architecture discourse in the Yishuv, his “Arabic” interpretation of architecture and his opposition to Zionist nationalism made him incompatible with the mainstream Israeli architecture. With him died Geddes’ vision for a pan-Mediterranean revival through the input of



the western “techné” and eastern “métis”.

Conclusion

Tel Aviv crystallized the dream of a cultural rival, either through its “international style” architecture, or its symbolism in the construction of the Jewish identity. Nonetheless, behind the myth are different grey areas. In the time lapse between 1915 and 1935 the city underwent tremendous changes in its development. From an anarchical growth to a planned city, its quest for identity was assumed by the shaping of the “new Jew”, the new land, and the new architecture.

As to question Patrick Geddes’ role and legacy within Tel Aviv’s inception, the contemporary eye may identify many incongruences. In his attempt of “re-hebraizing” the Jew and of creating a ‘palestiniality”, he imposed his ideals upon the region. In a colonial imperialist way he intended for the “renewal” of Palestine. However, taking into consideration the different factors and contexts, a synchronic portrayal of history lends better for the understanding of the phenomenon. Behind the myth of the Israeli state lies Tel Aviv, a white mirage emerging within the ideals of confronting ideologies and circumstances.



List of Figures

- Fig. I : The Valley Section

Source: "The Valley Section, Sir Patrick Geddes Memorial Trust, Scotland." Sir Patrick Geddes Memorial Trust. Accessed April 1, 2015. <http://www.patrickgeddetrust.co.uk/valleysection.htm>.

- Fig. II: The Valley Region Diagram

Source: Welter, Volker. *Biopolis Patrick Geddes and the City of Life*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2003. p.72

- Fig. III: Geddes 1925 Plan for Tel Aviv

Source: Ramedhan-Levi, Sabaï Anouk. "Implementation of the Propositions of Patrick Geddes for Tel-Aviv, 1925." April 17, 2001. Accessed April 1, 2015.

- Fig. IV: Eclectic Style in Tel Aviv

Source: "Stanford University : Eliasaf Robinson Tel Aviv Collection." Stanford University : Eliasaf Robinson Tel Aviv Collection. January 1, 2009. Accessed April 1, 2015. <http://collections.stanford.edu/telaviv/images/index.htm>.

- Fig. V: The Weizmann House (1936)

Source: "Weizmann House." Weizmann House. Accessed April 1, 2015. <http://visitors-center.weizmann.ac.il/weizmannHouse>.

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