

Art of the APS – Apartment Protected Space

From the catalog of *Shod Vashever (Good Grief)*, solo exhibition of *Roy Menachem Markovich*, Artists Residence Herzliya, 2017

Like a ship towing a rescue boat behind it, so is the Israeli apartment umbilically linked to the "emergency space" of the MAMAD (or APS – apartment protected space).

The MAMAD is built according to a standardized protocol, per Homefront Command guidelines, always at least 9 square meters in area and made of a single slab of fortified concrete, without any beams or pillars. The idea for this room began with a 2007 government decision, determining that any new buildings in Israel must include a defensible room to provide protection for tenants against attacks when they cannot be alerted in time to find shelter in public bunkers.



The Israeli family does not leave the room empty throughout the year, and many find myriad functional uses for it. A space designated for times of emergency becomes a regular, livable space, transformed into storage, or a child's bedroom, a home-based clinic, study or art studio.

This matter-of-fact treatment of a space dedicated to disaster raises many questions regarding the lifestyle of the Israeli household. The normalization process to internalize Israel's constant security threats (and of Israeli society, always at ready for emergencies), is concretely tangible within the family space, with this particular room straddling the great divide. On the one hand – an internal and intimate space, and on the other – a space perpetually prepared against outside attack. This duality has generated intense interest in the aesthetic measures available to hide the disastrous aspect of the MAMAD, with numerous home design blogs and articles offering recommendations of MAMAD design options.

The artist and designer Eti Yakobi, for example, recommends "placing a padded sofa facing the MAMAD doorway, something soft and comfortable, so that the entrance is a calm area opening into the room". Best would be a sofa bed, in case you need to spend the night there. A cabinet for foodstuffs and coffeemaker should be placed to the right of the door, in a corner hidden from immediate line of sight¹. Yakobi suggests treating the protected room as a space to design and decorate, presumably a method to silence the inherent dread it evokes. Yakobi and others believe that art and design can provide comfort to insulate against its built-in stress. For example, she explains that – "colors can have enormous impact on mood, either soothing or stressful". She remarks that MAMADs should be painted with mild pastel tones, such as peach, mint or pale blue". Feng Shui consultant Meirav Eichler, also interviewed at the time, does not recommend painting the walls white. "White is an alienating color", she explains, "and so I recommend incorporating very light colors in gentle tones, such as blue, lilac or yellow".

¹ "Optimistic Color: How to Create a Safe, Pleasant and Comfortable Space" (Roni Arkush, *Living* (Home styling), Mako, Nov 18 2012) <http://www.mako.co.il/living-home-styling/accessories/Article-9388a831ab31b31006.htm>



In contrast, the theoretical debate regarding MAMADs does not seek to blur boundaries or soothe. The exhibition curators and catalogue editors of "A Sheltered Homeland: The Construction of Civil Defense" (2011), Sheli Cohen, Tola Amir, Nir Rotem, Dafna Levin, and Ofir Zinati, express in the catalogue their misgivings of this extreme defensiveness so emblematic of Israeli construction². They claim that this over-protection is a self-perpetuating cycle: excessive protection breeds further excess. The heightened awareness of daily security threats "feeds into and strengthens the sense of victimization, which encourages a belligerent attitude that rejects any peace efforts of state leadership, a rejection that then spurs the need for further protection"³.

Thus, the MAMAD functions as a kind of Israeli microcosm. It reflects Israeli society's attempts to cope with the constant state of emergency that is its reality. And it is therefore relevant to

² "A Sheltered Homeland: The Construction of Civil Defense" (2011). Exhibition Catalogue; Editors: Sheli Cohen, Tola Amir, Nir Rotem, Dafna Levin, and Ofir Zinati. Schreiber University Art Gallery.

³ Ibid.

ask: does the artwork presented in such rooms take part in these security efforts, focused primarily on blurring defensive elements, camouflaging an atmosphere of looming disaster? For Yakobi, the art in MAMADs is another means of disguising the sociopolitical content embedded within it: "To create an illusion of spaciousness inside a small space, you can dedicate one wall to artwork or wallpaper with open motifs, a horizon or a field with a pathway. The intimidating sight of the heavy reinforced door can be softened by extending the wallpaper across the door, so that it is swallowed into the space and no longer stands out"⁴.

One could view the display of sculptures in "Shod Vashever" (Good Grief), Roy Menachem Markovich's exhibition in the Herzliya Artists' Residence as a "proposal of presentation" that addresses the small and protected space of the MAMAD, and the way in which it reflects Israeli reality. The abstract sculptures are presented on glass cases and bits of shelves, seeming at first glance as if fused together by chance in the daily clutter of home and office shelving. On second glance, the items are revealed to be meticulously selected, as if weeded out from the panoply of Israel's peripheral streets and alleys: items from second-hand stores, old perfumeries and galanteries, flea markets and one-dollar shops, alongside things plucked off the streets (such as Ackerstein bricks and an ancient urn). The witty combinations of these elements testify not to "coincidence", but rather "transience".

⁴ See: <https://www.mako.co.il/living-home-styling/accessories/Article-9388a831ab31b31006.htm> (last accessed 15/1/22(Hebrew))



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In "Authenticity, Ideology, and Israeli Society", Moshe Zukerman ruminates on –"What could establish 'authentic' art in a society so fundamentally heterogeneous since its inception, typified by such a marked gap between the national-ideological pretensions of its institutions, and the actual cultural practices of the diverse groups within it?"⁵. Zukerman then adds –"A society established in such 'inauthentic' circumstances [...] is not meant to create an 'authentic culture' [...] at best, it has the means to create an authentic expression of its inherent inauthenticity."

The transitory assembly of exhibition items, their impermanent materials, seem to reflect this "authentic inauthenticity" of the Israeli living space. The eclectic aesthetic creates a lexicon for remodelers: pebble and concrete rock with a nipple-handled kitchen cabinet knob, or a cluster

⁵ *Hebrew Work: Israeli Art 1920s-1990s*, Catalogue editor: Galia Bar-Or, Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod; Israel Culture and Arts Forum, 1998 (Hebrew).

of rocks riding a metallic medal stand from some sport event. Moreover, the sculptures appear as a funny reference to the tremendous momentum of creativity in the early days of Israeli sculpture, particularly the great monuments created by Israel's most prominent founding artists and the generations of sculptors that followed: Shemi, Danziger, Kadishman, Feigin, and Tumarkin.



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The haphazard-seeming connections between parts of items evicted from our daily life perfectly reflect the view so prevalent among many of Israeli art's third and fourth generations. Following generations rejected out of hand the profound seriousness that epitomized our local art scene's founders, so busy creating giant geometric shapes in tons of concrete and steel. In the history of European art one could easily find examples of using daily objects to express a place's atmosphere, its standing and the markings of an era. One famous example is "The Ambassadors" (1533) by Hans Holbein the Younger, depicting two respectable figures clad in their finest, leaning on a carpet-laded cabinet. The top shelf holds celestial items, while the

bottom displays worldly objects. In her book - "Art Within the Fields of Power", Lea Dovev writes that – "the silks, furs, needlework, gold jewelry and polished stones are products of a system of labor, commerce, and credit. They were created through the fields of knowledge and art symbolized by the array of objects on the shelves. The first thing they convey is the economic power of their owners [...] power, as evidenced [in the painting] is a tangible thing, very immediate, material and present". Markovich's gathering of sculptures can clearly be interpreted as such a tangible representation, concrete evidence of presence.



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Their miniature size and the relations of their components elude to the density, sparseness and urgency in which they were made. Their seemingly random links between each and every sculptural piece, and their presentation on home-made bases (also a product of this "junkyard"

approach), establish a network of significant markers similar to that in Holbein's work. And yet, while the ornamented artifacts in Holbein's painting project a sense of wisdom and wealth on their owners, the vulnerability and bareness of Markovich's sculptures are evidence of their origins as industrial castoffs ejected from the capitalist mechanism after their usefulness was exhausted. The use of "knickknacks", their ad-hoc associations and DIY painting job expose the Israeli "instant-styling" attitude (eclectic ornamentation using broken bits, fabrics scraps, wallpaper and color), and the way it's enlisted in the service of the national cause, camouflaging and masking catastrophe, facilitating the process of collective repression required to conduct life in a state of perpetual emergency.



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