

Landscape as ulpan: the development of an Israeli landscape architectural language

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ISRAEL IS A NEW NATION with ancient roots. Over the past century the Zionist return to the land and the building of a modern nation has had a counterpart in language: the revitalisation of Hebrew as spoken tongue. There is a design analogy with the immigrant process, learning Hebrew, and *ulpan* (language classes for new immigrants).¹ Designers too, have learned the basics of the landscape language, appreciated its character and nuance, and found out how to be expressive within its vocabulary and structure. For Israeli landscape architects there has been a conscious search for a language of landscape design. As a result of this quest, a palette of identifiable materials, forms, compositions, and functions has emerged, and these have been used to create a design narrative which speaks of Israel's complex national culture and identity. This paper explores the continuing process through a case study of one landscape space, the *wadi/nahal*.

KEY WORDS

Israel
Landscape
Language

IN JUDAISM THE TALMUD is a collection of commentaries on the Bible. The graphic layout of the Talmud is striking (fig.1). On each page a passage of text occupies the centre, surrounded by commentaries from the rabbis, additional notes and cross references. There are commentaries on commentaries and the implied interaction of the reader entering the discussion. Landscapes, like texts, can be 'read', having a composition and message to impart. Landscape literacy, therefore, necessitates an understanding of landscape vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and modes of expression. The landscape is much like a page of the Talmud. Over generations, there are commentaries—individual and collective designs—which 'speak' to the core text and then begin to 'speak' to each other. The form and content are subject to endless debate, annotation and interpretation. It is in the context of that discussion, that is, in the experiencing and understanding of landscape, that lie its lessons and meaning. Landscape architecture offers one of the commentaries on the central text. Sometimes it even succeeds in reconfiguring a 'page' by offering a bold new insight and interpretation, where the land and culture itself are seen anew. Occasionally, it even offers the moral and ethical guidance of the Talmud.

An amazing diversity of cultures has created the Israeli landscape; and the values, beliefs and aspirations of which they are composed, are visible on the land or may be hidden beneath the surface waiting to be revealed. For Israeli landscape architects there has been a conscious search for, and development of, a language of landscape design. This language has then been employed to create a design narrative, explicitly or implicitly telling a story of places and events. The history of the Israeli culture is the creation of the modern 'Israeli' in their many guises and varieties. This development is reflected in literature, visual arts, crafts, and in environmental design (architecture and landscape architecture).

Israel has begun to put its own stamp on traditional forms, and an example of this is the emergence of an 'Israeli' garden landscape, distinct in form and function. Gardens speak of landscape as the interaction of people and place, and thus, Israeli design communicates in a variety of dialects: the universal and

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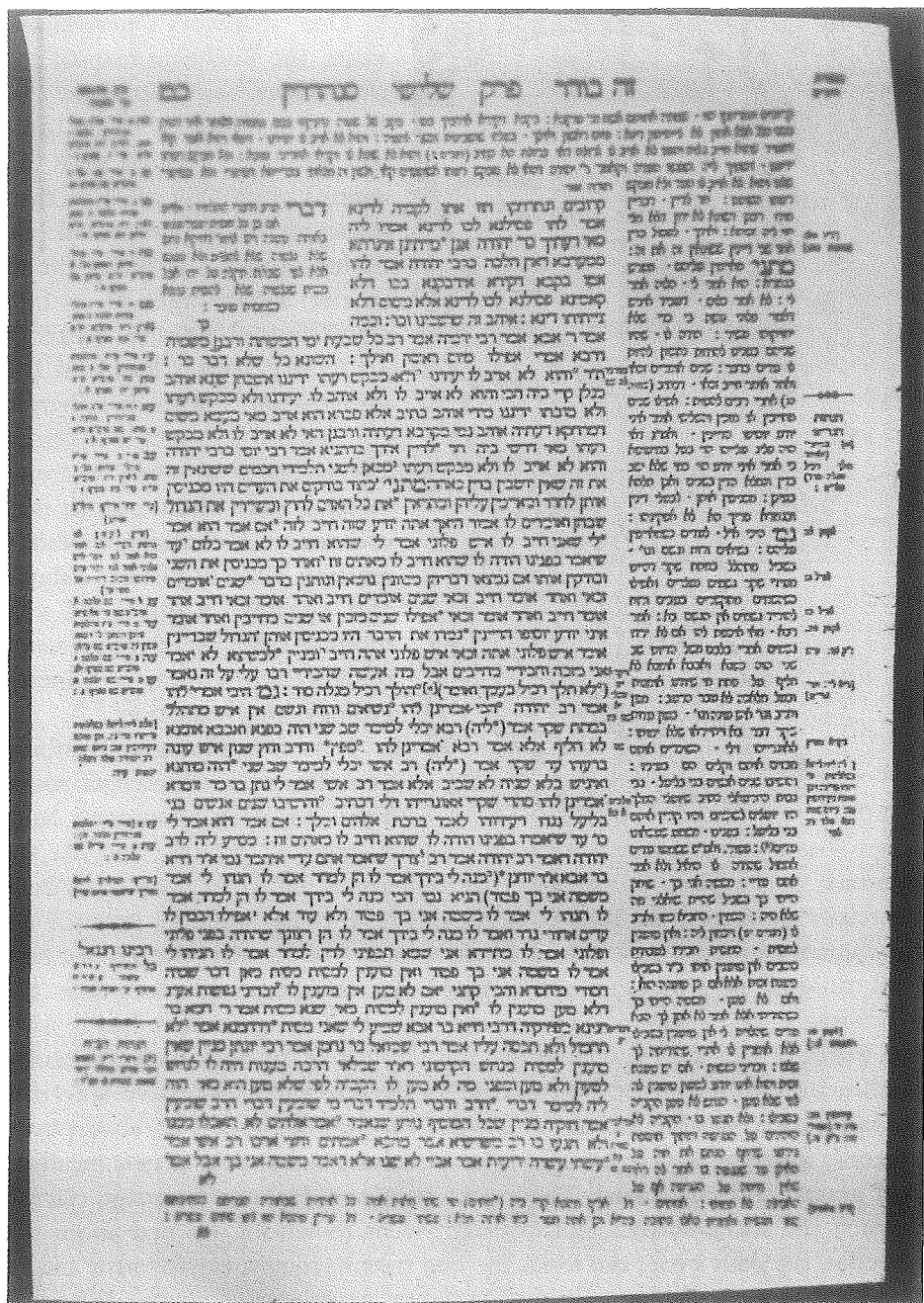


Figure 1: A page of the Talmud.

particular, indigenous and imported, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern, oasis or desert. It speaks in the vernacular and in the most elevated forms. It speaks of the complexities of Israeli culture: gardens which are Jewish or Arab, Ashkenazi or Sephardic, orthodox or secular, sacred or profane, idealistic or pragmatic, and those which are amalgams of these. The designs all speak of Israel, but also of places from whence its people came and of those who were there before. They speak simultaneously in the languages of the Land of Israel (Eretz Yisrael) and the Diaspora.² Thus, one can read and hear the voices and landscapes of Germany and Russia, Poland and Morocco, Persia and England.

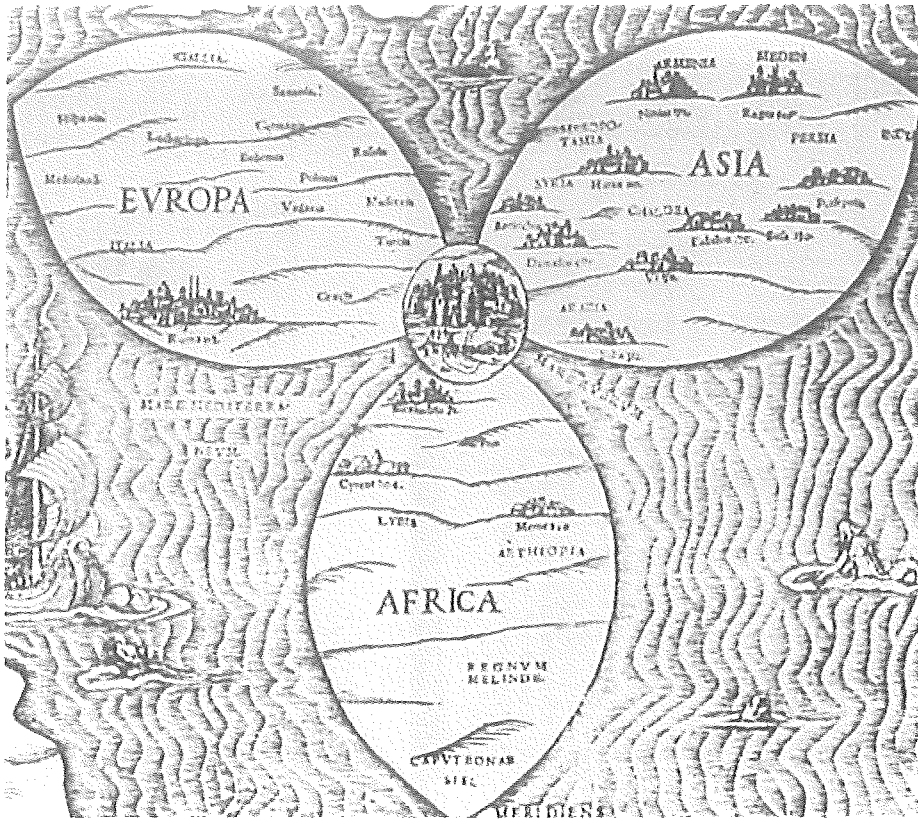


Figure 2: Buenting map 1580
(*Itinerarium Sacrae Scripturae*).

One of history's best known maps, the Buenting map of 1580 (*Itinerarium Sacrae Scripturae*), is a simple diagram of three intersecting ellipses which meet at a central circle (fig.2). The three shapes represent Europe, Asia and Africa. America is off in the far corner, a harbinger of its later significance. At the centre is Jerusalem, Israel's location. It is simultaneously at the periphery of continents, habitats and civilisations, and at the centre—a meeting place of cultures. It is an ecotone on a continental scale, a meeting place of distinct habitats and species. A place of very modest size, Israel possesses a remarkable richness of climate, geology, and vegetation.

Israel is an immigrant nation, a new nation with ancient roots. The idea of an 'immigrant land-

scape' has a cultural similarity to the natural meeting ground, and like the ecotone, it is a place of rich diversity. Where the influx of people has been especially rapid, as it has been in Israel, this rapidity has served to intensify the 'immigrant landscape' as a cultural phenomenon. The Zionist return to the land and building of a modern nation has had a counterpart in language: the revitalisation of Hebrew as a spoken tongue. Israeli designers have had to learn the basics of the landscape language and, ultimately, to learn to be expressive within its vocabulary and structure. In each *aliyah* (successive waves of immigration), people arrived and went through a process of absorption, whereby individuals were brought into the culture and society as new members and gradually acculturated. They went to *ulpan*, Hebrew language classes, learned the social system, got housing, went to school, learned about the calendar, the daily cycle, the food, the bus system, sought employment and so on. There is a parallel between the immigrant experience of *aliyah*, absorption and assimilation and the evolution of Israeli design. Israeli designers have to assimilate ideas and designs brought from the outside, which then go through a process of adaptation to new conditions. In the same way all *olim* (new immigrants) go to *ulpan* and learn Hebrew, one must study the Israeli landscape to be able to speak its language. It matters not if one is a *sabra* (native born) or an *oleh chadash* (new immigrant.) In Israel, language learning was complicated and enriched by the fact that Hebrew, like the land, was also ancient and in the process of adapting to the modern world. It was being recreated. In a sense, there has been a personal, professional and societal *ulpan* of learning and teaching a landscape language. Like the revival of Hebrew, it is the rediscovery

of 'speaking', and where the old language is inadequate, adapting and inventing new words. In adding new Hebrew vocabulary one typically returns to the *shoresh*, the three-letter root of a word and its essential meaning. From a single *shoresh* a litany of language results. Similarly in landscape, there has been a desire to discover the root (*shoresh*) of landscape design. Whilst this ancient/new language was being revitalised, the immigrants' former languages and cultures were not obliterated, but the imperative to learn Hebrew for immigrants was both practical and ideological. The commonalties of religion and language and the richness of cultural diversity are the building blocks of Israeli culture. The same holds true with landscape: even when learning and speaking a new landscape language, old ones are not forgotten. Understanding the full meaning of this dialectic—that is, of the importation of form, idea and meaning versus the indigenous—has been one of the fundamentals of landscape architecture in Israel.³

Landscape language

Israeli landscape architecture accentuates the modern world's critical task of rooting design in the essential qualities of a place, the '*genius loci*', whilst simultaneously being answerable to a broader set of desires and forces. It is a matter of being responsible to concerns both cosmopolitan and local, universal and particular. In Israel this quest has many forms and is sought in multiple ways. Designers 'learn' the place and become at home with its materials and language. Then, through their designs, they become language instructors, as they teach it to others by revealing the characteristics of the place and creating new traditions. This is not easy or facile, but a profound activity. In Israel there has been a search for a design language of form, space, and material. How to translate these raw and seemingly inert elements into something of substance and meaning has been the central task. It is a struggle to find the right proportion, the formula for what is appropriate, for what fits the essence of a place in a meaningful way.

Israel sits at the intersection of three continents. This meeting point of environments has been a centre of civilisation, a sacred place to the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, each of which is profoundly connected to the actual land and the landscape as the embodiment of history. The spiritual is not only present in sacred texts, but resides in the rocks, in the texture of stone, the quality of light, the pattern of plants, the shape of an arch. The spirit resonates with the tiers of history and association. Time is thick and deep, embedded in the strata of a cultural landscape encompassing thousands of years of habitation. The density of space and time has led to the creation of a modern landscape to which there are multiple claims and to which multiple meanings are attributed. In a place of such complexity, often the problem for designers is to decide which spirit, or spirits, need to be served.

When creating a design, artefact, building or landscape, the pertinent question is what does one want it to say. Landscape architecture is about functional and programmatic concerns, and about solving problems; but at a profound level it is about expressing ideas where the design is the result of that expression. Landscape architects learn how to write, in other words, how to inscribe their ideas in the design language of a place. When this is accomplished

with skill and artistry, we are invited to enter a created domain where the shape of space and the manipulation of materials creates places that are engaging and memorable, where we respond with our senses *and* our intellect.

The fundamental questions for Israel's designers are: what is the language of their design, and does it speak of Israeli culture and landscape, its history, present and future? What kind of landscape architecture is fitting for a nation which is the ancestral home of the Jewish people, a cradle of western civilisation and its religious traditions, a historic crossroads, and the modern home to diverse peoples? At its best, the design takes the materials, forms, and habits of the place and distils them. Returning to the Talmudic perspective, design creates places that are 'new pages', where a new text can be read and interpreted in a variety of ways.

Narrative and palette

What stories are told? The landscape narrative can take many forms, communicate diverse themes and can be expressed in many voices. Designs can tell the story of the landscape itself, revealing both natural processes and the interaction of people and place over time, or they can tell stories through the medium of landscape. When a design can be read at many levels, it means it is telling multiple stories. Good stories use the designer's landscape vocabulary well, with richness and subtlety. Some of the finest landscape narratives have the appeal of children's tales, where there is joy in hearing or seeing a story over and over.

There are many stories and themes in Israel's design narrative. Some are unique, others are universal. One theme is particularly powerful: how have landscape architects looked to the local, indigenous landscape yet also looked to the outside? In Israeli terms it is the relationship between understanding and learning from *ha-aretz* and from *chutz la-aretz* (literally, the land, and outside the land, but it also stands for the country and outside the country). These influences can be competing or complementary, assimilated or rejected. Through design, they are accommodated, adapted and expressed. For Israeli designers the question is how to understand and respond to a traditional landscape (to which most have been very sympathetic), whilst simultaneously creating a new landscape tradition.

Landscape language has a palette: elements, materials, forms and functions that are at the designer's disposal. From this palette an infinity of compositions and designs are possible, but the palette itself sets limits. The basic landscape elements of an Israeli landscape architectural vocabulary are: water, plants, stone, the shaping of space and the Israeli way of life. These elements combine to form compositions which have distinctive qualities of space and experience. This formal expression of materials embodies ideas and is laden with meaning. These primary elements are found in a rich variety of 'natural' sites, but they are also employed in the most constructed of circumstances. They are manipulated across a continuum from a natural or raw condition, to one that is more controlled or refined. Part of the designer's skill is the discovery of the poetic possibilities in modest materials. Eventually these characteristics may be described as a style, an emergent design language.

Land has shape. Israel's topography is one of coastal plain, modest mountains, desert plateaux, slopes and valleys. Landscape architects respond to

these spatial conditions, each of which demands and suggests its own design solution. Like potters, landscape architects sculpt out of the raw material of the earth. A spatial and topographic sensibility is characteristic of the best Israeli landscape architecture. It has an awareness of the three dimensional shape of the land and its symbolic properties, and defers to historic integrity, archaic patterns and practices. It is an appreciation of the sensory richness of space—of knowing it with your feet, the kinesthetic experience of moving up or down a hillside, walking across a ridge, as well as the more obvious visual appreciation of space, such as looking down a valley or gazing across a crater.

Wadi/Nahal

Let us look at the grammar of the spatial language by examining a single language element. *Wadi* in Arabic, *nahal* in Hebrew (the words are used interchangeably), are the country's natural drainage channels. There are hundreds of miles of these seasonally dry river beds (fig.3). The natural *wadi* has defined edges and a floor of loose stones punctuated by larger rocks. Plants appear in pockets or in a spring efflorescence. The *wadi* vary in scale from modest washes to grand canyons, with variability in width, height, slope, location, orientation, vegetation and the presence or absence of water; but whatever the magnitude, there remains a connection between the person and an enclosed space. One can walk the floor, follow the periodic course of water, overlook the *wadi* from above, or move up and down its slope. Water, the element which creates the *wadi*, is paradoxically most often absent. The effects of water are visible, for water has sculpted the terrain, and the seasonal patterns of fluvial movement are visible on the ground in soil, stones and the growth of plants. *Wadis*, both natural and designed, recall the 'dry' gardens of Japan where artistry has shaped and constructed space to imply the presence of water.



Figure 3: *Wadi Bokek, Dead Sea, Israel.*

A look at six projects by four designers illustrates ways of using this one language element to tell diverse tales, through a honed spatial and symbolic sensibility.

The new town of Modiin halfway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, planned by architect Moshe Safdie, is configured around three green valleys. One valley, designed by Iggy Blank, is characterised by a central pedestrian pathway, which descends the valley. At a lower level this dry pathway becomes a channel of water bringing the seasonal flow of the *wadi* into the city (fig.4).



Figure 4: Park, Modiin, Iggy Blank.

In Kreitman Plaza, the central garden courtyard of the University of the Negev in Beersheva designed by Shlomo Aronson, lies a constructed stone 'stream' which has multiple personalities and readings (figs 5 & 6). Its upper level is a path, its terraced edges a social space where people sit; the lower level is a water channel. In plan it also appears as a map, its scale ambiguous—is it a canyon or rivulet? It recalls Isamu Noguchi's California Scenario in its ambiguity and its symbolic resonance.

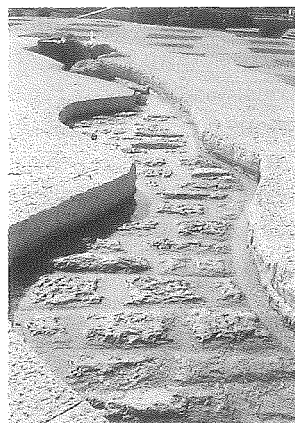


Figure 5: Kreitman Plaza, University of the Negev, Beersheva, Israel. Shlomo Aronson.

Figure 6: Kreitman Plaza, University of the Negev, Beersheva, Israel. Shlomo Aronson.

In a section of Gan HaSlaim in the Yarkon Park, Gideon Sarig has employed the abstracted spatial form of a portion of the *wadi* (its floor). In open terrain, without the enclosing walls, the ground pattern accentuates the stone character and meandering configuration of the dry river bed which is used as a setting for the display of a colourful array of geologic specimens found throughout Israel (fig.7).



Figure 7: Gan HaSlaim, Park Hayarkon, Tel Aviv, Israel, Gideon Sarig.

The entry to Ben Gurion's grave at Sde Boker in the Negev desert by Lippa Yahalom and Dan Zur is an abstraction and representation of a wadi, constructed in an unexpected location, on top of a plateau. The winner of a competition in 1987, the project inaugurated a new era in the development of a design language in Israel. To learn the qualities of the desert landscape Yahalom walked the desert and its *wadis* for days with local Bedouin. The result is a progression through an abstracted *wadi*, which uses the indigenous form and materials, but with a greater intensity of effect (fig.8). The climax is obscured until the passage culminates at a platform where the grave overlooks the surrounding desert, creating a dialogue between the wilderness and this constructed terrain (fig.9). The oscillation between these realms is apparent in another nearby pathway by Yahalom-Zur, constructed within a *wadi* landscape. From the terrace of Ben Gurion's tomb one looks out to the dramatic desert of Nahal Zin, at the threshold of the Negev that Ben Gurion urged to be settled. Directly south is Ein Avdat, a national park, where twin trails lead to a lush oasis hidden beneath its cliffs.



Figure 8: Entry passage. Ben Gurion National Park, Sde Boker, Israel. Yahalom-Zur.

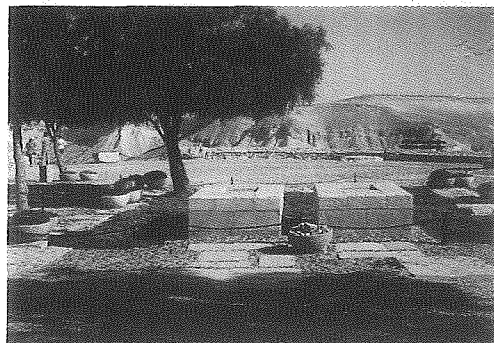


Figure 9: Grave site. Ben Gurion National Park, Sde Boker, Israel. Yahalom-Zur

Also designed by Yahalom-Zur, one trail leads up the wadi, the entry marked with minimal intervention, by a sculpted stone map of the park (fig.10). The other trail is a tour-de-force, a dramatic encounter with space and topography. It takes visitors down the almost vertical cliff face. Into the cliff face is sculpted a trail which is carved out of the limestone (fig.11). Within a few kilometers one experiences the intimacy of the entry to Ben Gurion's grave, the wonder of a hidden oasis and the adventure and grandeur of the Negev's topography.



Figure 10: Map/Model. Ein Avdat National Park, Israel. Yahalom-Zur.

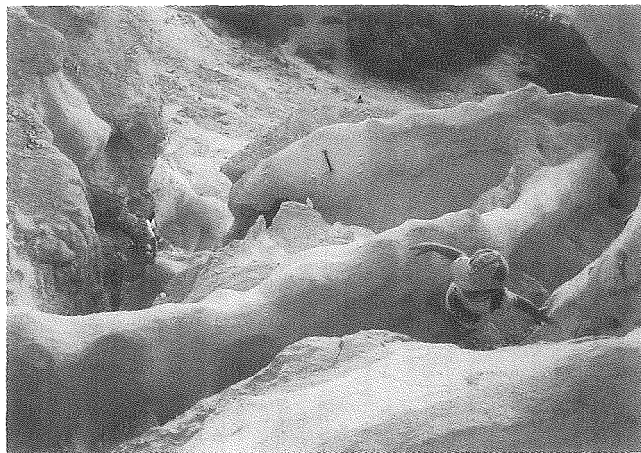


Figure 11: Cliff trail. Ein Avdat National Park, Israel. Yahalom-Zur.

The final project, also designed by Yahalom-Zur, is the Valley of the Fallen Communities, at Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem. Whilst the valley was created in memory of those who died in Europe, it is constructed in a landscape language, with a spatial form and use of materials which link the dead to Israel's landscape and nationhood. The memorial is a passage through a constructed maze of stone walls, where the only view is the sky (figs 12 & 13). Its references are multiple. The maze is resonant of *wadis* and their canyons in the Judean Desert and Negev, while the stone walls speak symbolically as a fundamental source and as a marker, a connection to the Wailing Wall of Solomon's Temple, ancient quarries, catacombs, headstones, sacred tablets, and the ruins of a city. In contradistinction to monument tradition which builds upwards, Yahalom-Zur elected to go down into the earth, like Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial. The story is embodied in space and material, and in a litany of place names, all in the original languages of the destroyed communities, transliterated into Hebrew and English and, even in the subtleties of type. For the designers, the valley's story has connections that run as deep as the prophet Jeremiah and his images of desolation and the Valley of Slaughter. In a project that took fourteen years from inception to completion, Yahalom-Zur used an indigenous landscape vocabulary, but only by creating a landscape like no other could it have the impact they desired. The many origins and sources of inspiration were filtered through their design, and thus, it resonates at many levels, communicating to visitors at different depths of emotional and intellectual experience.

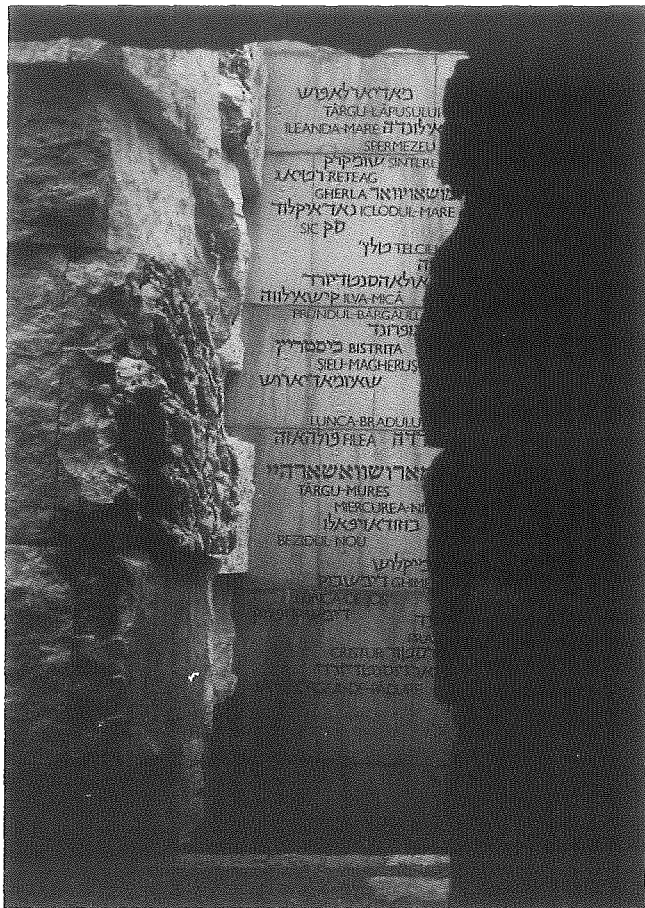


Figure 12, 13: Valley of the Fallen Communities, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem. Yahalom-Zur.

In 1998 Yahalom, a former immigrant, and Zur, his *sabra* partner, were awarded the prestigious Israel Prize for their body of work. Lippa Yahalom, originally from Beyelorussia, has said that as a newcomer to Israel he did not like the landscape, but had to learn to love it. Perhaps this process gave a certain insight and understanding, one wrought through a struggle. Yahalom and Zur's dialogue with 'place', and with each other, shows through in their design sensitivity, which demonstrates the complexities of how to speak of a place.

NOTES

¹ *Ulpan* classes are in levels from aleph (A) the most basic, to bet (B), gimmel (G), daled (D), to classes for specialists such as scientists or teachers.

² Israel's official name is the State of Israel, but it is more common to speak of Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel. The Diaspora refers to Jewish communities outside of Israel.

³ It should be noted that for a half century in Israel the questions of cultural assimilation have been much debated in terms of ideology, process and results.