

# Transformation and Stability

## The Impact of Women on the Built Environment

**Talia Abramovich**

Israel Institute of Technology

### Abstract

In late 19th century, a new form of colonies was established in Ottoman Palestine by Jewish immigrants, mostly from Eastern Europe. This paper will explore the initial four decades of these colonies, from the founding of the first one in 1878 to the beginning of the British Mandate in Palestine in 1918. During these years, the colonies experienced processes of reformation, enlightenment, modernization, and secularization, including advances in women's rights. The new colonies offered architects and entrepreneurs a rare opportunity to plan and implement a host of innovative ideas. Baron Edmond de Rothschild, a key figure in the colonies' development, hired architects and other professionals and promoted the education of young women. Public space in the colonies became a significant place where women were able to negotiate social change. This paper will present a few case studies of public spaces in the colonies -- streets, gardens, bathhouses, and synagogues: the ways they were planned and how they were transformed over time. Based on new archival materials, I will discuss topics such as work and education, water and hygiene, body and beauty, and the way women impelled changes in public space.

### Key words

public space, colonies, late 19th century, gender architecture, built environment's transformation

### How to cite

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## INTRODUCTION

The Jewish colony established in 19th-century in Ottoman Palestine was created as an innovative, modern settlement for immigrants mainly from Eastern Europe. Baron Edmond de Rothschild, the renowned French-Jewish philanthropist, played a central role in the maintenance of the colonies and their survival. Starting in 1882, Rothschild harnessed his economic resources and his contacts with the Ottoman authorities to launch new colonies (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> The planning of these colonies promoted modernity and relied on the import of both materials and professionals.<sup>2</sup> Planners, architects, engineers, and agricultural experts, mostly educated in Europe, were hired to do the planning. Rothschild also spearheaded the creation of a local professional work force. In 1887 he established a school for agricultural workers in Zichron Ya'acov; its students became interns of the French agricultural experts who advised and worked in various colonies.<sup>3</sup> During these years, under Rothschild's auspices, young men from the colonies were sent to study agronomy in France while a considerable number of young women were sent to study pedagogy in Paris.

The Jewish colonies evoked worldwide interest and attracted numerous curious visitors from around the world. The German Templar newspaper, *Warte des Tempels*, followed with great interest the colonies' advanced architectural and engineering projects. The Russian magazine *Voskhod* sent its representative, Dr. Haim Hissin, to investigate the development of the Ottoman colonies.<sup>4</sup> Professional articles reviewed the colonies' agricultural achievements.<sup>5</sup>

Immigration to 'the promised land' in the late 19th century was notable for its relatively large number of women.<sup>6</sup> The harsh physical conditions at the time, fraught with disease and high mortality rates, created a demand for workers; hence the concept that women can and should contribute to supporting the home economy spread rapidly in both ideological and spatial terms.<sup>7</sup> Women in the larger world were beginning to claim new rights at this historic juncture, emerging from the private sphere into the public one.<sup>8</sup> These transformations led to a greater share of visibility, function, and meaning for women in public spaces.<sup>9</sup>

This paper examines the design of three kinds of public spaces in the Jewish colonies: streets and gardens, *mikvehs* (public bathhouses), and synagogues. I will review their planning and transformation over four decades, from the foundation of Petah Tikva, the first colony, in 1878, to the establishment of the British Mandate in 1918. Looking at education and work, water and hygiene, and body and beauty in the colonies from gender perspective, as well as from architectural and design points of view, will make it possible to chart women's presence in the public space. Analysis of the transformation of public space design will also reveal the main actors who participated in this change.

## WOMEN IN PUBLIC SPACE

Women's presence in public space was limited in the early 19th century. Scholars have noted the social processes which assigned women to the private space of home and men to the public realm – the economic, political and cultural world. Janet Wolf, the art historian, portrays the way women were confined to their homes, leaving the public arena to men.<sup>10</sup>

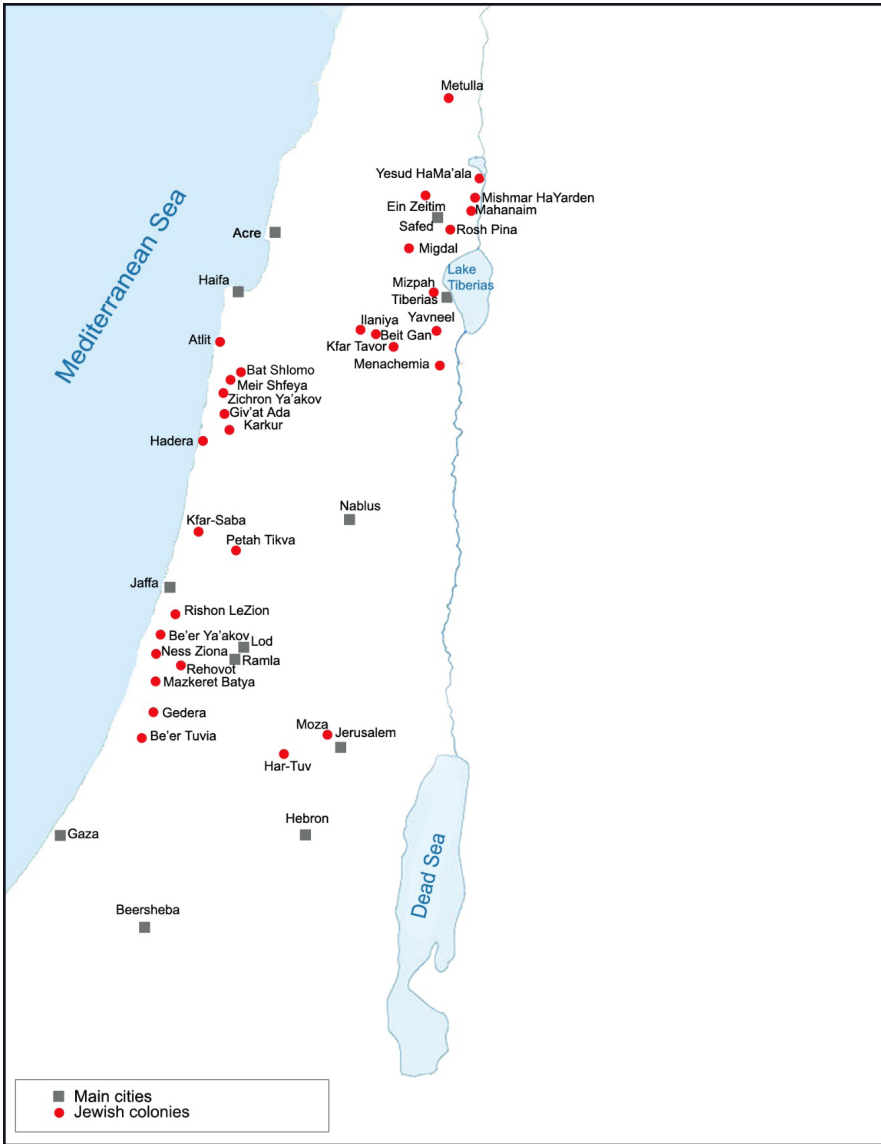


Fig. 1. Teachers and pupils in Zichron Ya'akov, c.1890s

Between 1890 and 1915, women become increasingly visible in the public spaces of the city.<sup>11</sup> Worldwide, women gained higher and professional education, enabling them to enter the workforce and the public arena.<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, the social historian, points out the role of literature, both architectural and utopian, in changing the cities' and women's everyday lives.<sup>13</sup> Hilde Heynen, historian and theorist of architecture, depicts the role of architecture in displacing domesticity, claiming that innovative spatial designs that did not adhere to traditional patterns began to dislodge gender norms.<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 2. Teachers and pupils in Zichron Ya'akov, c.1890s

According to De Certeau, formal planning is influenced by the users' everyday activities, negotiating, subverting, and appropriating public space.<sup>15</sup> He argues that spatial arrangements organize a range of possibilities (for example, a square invites passersby to walk in it) and prohibitions (such as a wall). Daily activities discount some of these while inventing others.<sup>16</sup> Hence, public space in the Jewish colonies was a significant place where women were able to negotiate social change. Its transformation reflects changes in women's lives and activities: reading, talking, walking, cooking, and shopping all affect the built-up space.

## EDUCATION AND WORK

Educating young women significantly impacted the colonies' public space. These women, known as the 'Baron's girls', returned to the colonies after completing their studies and became teachers in Zichron Ya'acov, Rosh Pina and other colonies (Figure 2).<sup>17</sup> Their European education gave them the chance to hold higher-status jobs and to access social and political power.<sup>18</sup> One of these women was Matilda Kofman, whose family emigrated from Romania to Ottoman Palestine in 1882. In 1890, after graduating from the Alliance teachers' training school in Paris, she returned to Zichron Ya'acov and taught French at the local school.<sup>19</sup> Disagreements between her and the school's principal, Rabbi Ze'ev Yavetz, over Kofman's attempt to institute a 'Parisian system of education' led to the rabbi's resignation and the appointment of Kofman, in 1899, as the school's headmaster. She continued to teach a variety of subjects in addition to her administrative duties.



Fig. 3. School parade, Zichron Ya'akov, late 1880s

The school played a major role in community life. Its female teachers organized local events, holiday festivals, and receptions for visiting dignitaries, most of which were held in the streets of the colony (Figure 3). On Baron de Rothschild's second visit to Eretz Israel, in 1893, he visited Zichron Ya'akov's school, where the pupils presented a show in Hebrew. At his request, the women of the colony gathered before the play, and he emphasized to them their role as educators, the value of daily prayer, and the importance of their help in their husbands' work.<sup>20</sup> The Baron's acknowledgment of women as influential figures in the colony gave them the legitimacy and power to play a greater role in its public life.

His approach was embedded in the planning of both the colonies' open spaces and their buildings. As the most important institution for the Jewish community, the synagogue served as a scene of action, and it mirrored the changes occurring in women's lives.<sup>21</sup> Historian Margalit Shilo has noted that women in early 19th-century Jerusalem hardly attended the synagogues due to their multiple tasks at home and their inability to follow the services without any knowledge of Hebrew.<sup>22</sup> As more women were educated, growing numbers of them were seen at public prayer services. This trend was reflected in the design of Zichron Ya'akov's Ohel Ya'akov synagogue. Built in 1886, it was known for its size and luxurious interior. Several prominent features differentiated it from synagogues built in colonies such as Petah Tikva, Rehovot and Mazkeret Batya. The design of its women's gallery, upstairs from the main sanctuary, was unique<sup>23</sup>: it contained a far larger number of seats for women than was customary.<sup>24</sup> These upstairs seats wrapped around three sides of the main prayer hall below and, unlike synagogues in most of the other colonies, reached all the way up to the Torah Ark, an arrangement similar to a theatre with stage and audience. Scheide, the colonies' head administrator, called attention to the exceptional planning of Zichron Ya'akov's synagogue, which allocated an equal number of places for women and men.<sup>25</sup>

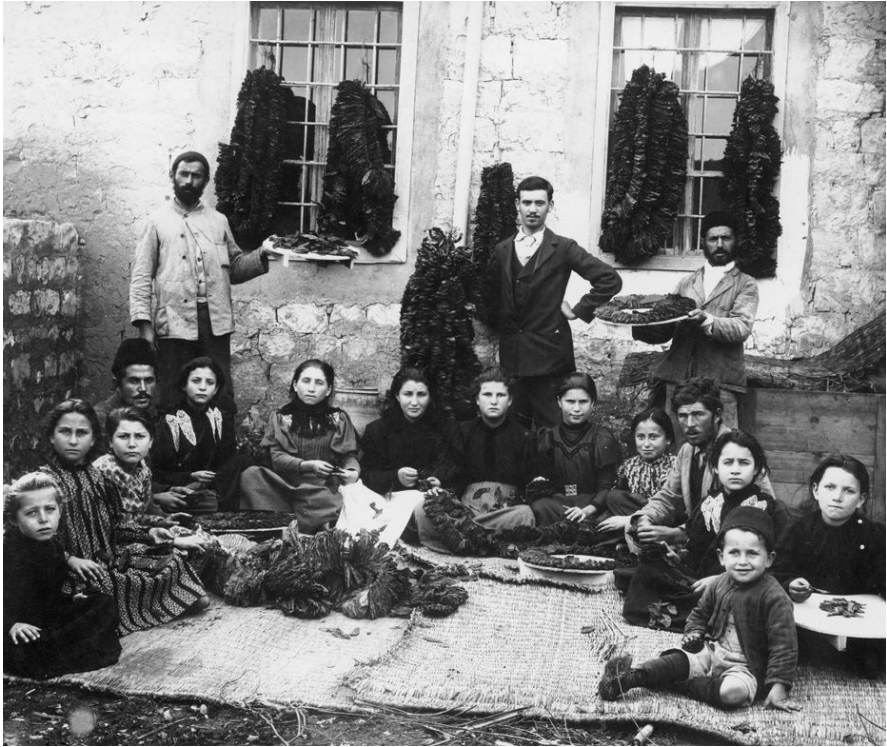


Fig. 4. Young girls sorting the tobacco leaves, Metulla, early 20th century



Fig. 5. Aaronson family strolling next to Ohel Ya'akov Synagogue, Zichron Ya'akov, early 20th century

The special structure of the women's gallery in Ohel Ya'akov, with its comfortable view of the men's prayer hall on the ground floor, facilitated women's participation in the ceremonies. This reveals the planner's intention to attract larger numbers of women there while raising the question of the architect's identity. One possibility is Abraham Adolf Starkmeth, who studied engineering in Paris and later became the chief engineer of Rothschild's administration. Another hypothesis suggests that the architect was Gottlieb Schumacher, a Christian and resident of the German Templar colony in Haifa. He drew the 1887 map of the colony, and he and his Templar colleagues were involved in the construction of Zichron Ya'acov's synagogue. Schumacher was invited to the inauguration of the synagogue along with Fritz Keller, the deputy consul of Prussia, and other Templars, and they were honoured to be the first to use the key to its door.<sup>26</sup> Others have speculated that, since the structure was clearly built in the spirit of contemporaneous Reform synagogues in Europe, its designer may have been a Reform Jewish architect.

As formal institutions provided work for growing number of educated women, an industry developed in the Near East offered another opportunity for women.<sup>27</sup> In the early 20th century the tobacco industry became prominent, and many colonies – among them Rosh Pina, Hadera and Metulla – started growing the crop in their fields. After the leaves were picked, they had to be sorted and dried, work that could be done by women close to their homes. In Metulla, the colony founded by Baron Edmond de Rothschild in 1890, the houses were planned and designed to allow space for drying the leaves.<sup>28</sup> The homes included halls with arched, vaulted ceilings where strings of tobacco could be hung.<sup>29</sup> Women, female relatives, and neighbours worked side by side, occasionally at the thresholds of the houses, sorting, threading and hanging the tobacco leaves (Figure 4).<sup>30</sup> This created semi-public spaces that increased women's visibility. The streets of the colonies became a communal, shared work space, part of the colony's public life. As international demand for tobacco increased and tobacco prices rose, the extent of women's labour in the industry expanded.<sup>31</sup>

## BODY AND BEAUTY

The ceremonial aspects of the Jewish Sabbath called for women and men to exchange their workday clothes for finer ones, which legitimised the innate desire to 'dress up' (Figure 5). The religious prohibition of work on Saturdays effectively mandated leisure time, when women, men and children strolled the colony's streets and gardens, planned largely by French landscape designers and aptly named 'promenade gardens'. These included winding paths, iron benches, and water pools. Featuring parterres of trees and flowers, the gardens celebrated beauty and provided a picturesque backdrop for the well-dressed community.

In a letter from the wife of architect Kantor Kalman to her sister-in-law, she describes her home, her daily schedule, and herself – on Saturdays:

*On Sabbath I am wrapped in a nice and beautiful headscarf... and, God willing, I go to a synagogue; our dresses too are beautiful and tastefully tailored. Over time, Zichron Ya'acov will become a city, as it already is now.*<sup>32</sup>



Fig. 6. Women next to a stone sebil in Zamarin (Old Zichron Ya'akov), c.1890s

Fabrics, luxury items and other goods imported from Beirut, Paris and elsewhere in Europe were sold in the colonies' general stores like The Depot, which flourished in Zichron Ya'acov. From 1912 to 1927 it was managed by Yechiel Diamant and his wife Deborah, who was the buyer; she traveled to Beirut and Egypt to pick up specialties for the shop. Fashion had been featured since 1904 in the local Jewish weekly, which published the personal column written by Hemda (Paula) Ben Yehuda. Born in Russia and raised in Moscow, Hemda moved to Jerusalem to marry the renowned reviver of the Hebrew language, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, after the death of her sister, his first wife. Hemda was a modern woman who brought the ambiance of the wider world to her new home. She redesigned the interior of their house in Jerusalem with carpets and furniture in the latest style, ran an 'open house' and European-style salons, and held parties and receptions. She also followed with interest the new colonies founded in the Galilee in the early 20th century and the new possibilities they offered women regarding job opportunities and voting rights.<sup>33</sup> She enthusiastically described trends in women's fashion in her column while suggesting new outfits suitable for the image of these newly advanced women.

## WATER AND HYGIENE

Many of the early homes in the colonies initially lacked indoor plumbing, and projects to install water pipes were delayed for many years. It was almost a decade after the establishment of Zichron Ya'acov when a reservoir was built and public water taps were installed on the street – a noteworthy event, as reported in 1890 in the German newspaper *Warte des Tempels*:

*Water faucet structures were placed with their facades facing the street, to allow water supply to several homes as well as to workers and visitors in the colony.*<sup>34</sup>

The livability of the streets was dependent on these public water faucets, housed in small stone structures named sebils.<sup>35</sup> Sebils had been erected in many Ottoman cities by local



rulers and governors, and historically were viewed as the hallmark of a beneficent ruler. In Zichron Ya'acov, the small stone sebils, restrained in design, were located near the homes facing the street. They reflected the vernacular architecture of the period and added a new, human dimension to the colonial streets.

The sebils, used for household tasks such as laundering and dishwashing, were extensions of the home in a public space (Figure 6). They also served as a daily meeting point for the colony's women. As Zichron Ya'acov developed into the economic and social centre of its rural environs and a transit point on the main traffic route from Jaffa to Haifa, merchants, visitors and workers with camels and horses stopped to refresh themselves at the water points. Hence these became the venues where women got news from the rest of the country and abroad, where they exchanged information and formulated ideas and strategies for action.

According to Jewish tradition, women were required to bathe regularly in a *mikveh*, a source of deep, running water, as a ritual of hygiene and purification. In many of the colonies including Zichron Ya'acov, a natural spring or pool served as the public bath (*mikveh*). In 1910, after water pipes were installed in Zichron Ya'acov's houses, the colony began planning its public bathhouse, and architect Cantor Eliyahu designed it.<sup>36</sup> In December 1911, he arrived in Zichron Ya'acov to scout a location for it.<sup>37</sup> Despite the plans that had been prepared in advance, however, the construction of the colony's *mikveh* was delayed for more than a year due to a protest from the women of the colony. According to a protocol of the community's meeting on 10 February 1912, the women objected to the architect's chosen site, a remote location at the edge of the colony near the cemetery.<sup>38</sup> The women threatened to boycott the building and not attend the bathhouse unless its location was changed. This threat held profound religious and feminist significance: according to Jewish law, their husbands would not be allowed to have any physical contact with wives who had not duly gone to the *mikveh*. Though their protest was most likely sparked by the proximity to the cemetery on the outskirts of the colony, it was probably also linked to the fact that the out-of-the-way site removed the women from the beating heart of the colony. Thus it is clear that women took an active role in changing the planned and built environment.

## TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Towards the close of the 19th century the transformation of women's activities become noticeable in the public space, where department stores, eating establishments and guest houses gave women a greater presence.<sup>39</sup>

In 1900, Rothschild handed over the administration of the colonies to the JCA-The Jewish Colonization Association. Among the most obvious results in Zichron Ya'akov were reduced numbers of officials, dismissals of gardeners and assistants, and changed curriculum and staff in the school:

*Mr. Epstein came, following Mr. Meirson's order, and arranged the school's affairs. The female teachers were dismissed and he took male teachers to replace them, teaching hours in the French language were reduced, and the number of school hours taught in Hebrew were increased.*<sup>40</sup>

Just some of the many radical changes JCA's administration made in the colony, these new conditions provoked the protest of the entire community.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, by the end of 1912, the women's demands for changes regarding the public bathhouse in Zichron Ya'acov were taken into consideration and ultimately the new *mikveh* was built in a more accessible location, in the centre of the colony.<sup>42</sup>

Meanwhile, changes were taking place in Zichron Ya'acov's synagogue and its role in the community, where it occasionally hosted weddings and other ceremonies. Threatened by the ongoing changes, the Orthodox establishment could not agree to them. In the winter of 1913, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the chief rabbi of Jaffa and the 'moshavot' (colonies), led a delegation of rabbis to the many newly-established colonies in Samaria and Galilee. Known as the 'Journey of the Rabbis', its goal was to strengthen religious observance and halt processes of secularization in the Jewish colonies.<sup>43</sup> When the rabbis arrived in Zichron Ya'acov they demanded that the interior of the synagogue be redesigned. The colony's leadership was not keen to make these structural changes, and the promised alterations were delayed. Consequently, a few colonists took matters into their own hands. Without official approval, they began to alter the interior of the synagogue to conform more closely to Orthodoxy.<sup>44</sup> Soon the synagogue stopped accommodating indoor weddings. The synagogue no longer allowed 'mixed' (not gender-separated) ceremonies.

After World War I, the Orthodox leadership grew stronger and initiated changes to the exterior of the building as well. Two new doors were created with two staircases leading directly to the women's gallery upstairs, effectively separating women from the main entrance which would henceforth be accessible only to men. In the following years spatial regulations for the colonies' synagogue buildings were defined and adopted.<sup>45</sup> In new synagogues, the banisters in the women's sections were raised and covered with curtains, limiting the view of the main prayer hall. These changes thereby codified physical, gender segregation in the synagogues and the isolation of women in their separate section.

## CONCLUSION

This study finds that the Jewish colonies in Ottoman Palestine were designed primarily by male planners and architects who sought to create a modern, improved, and progressive urban space. The built environment, however, was modified and changed both during the planning phase and after the projects were implemented. The relevant documents, plans, pictures, and testimonies indicate that lively discussions of construction projects took place with the communities, and women in particular were actively involved in their development and transformations. Women embraced modern planning, which offered them a greater opportunity to participate in public life, to be visible and heard; they rejected urban plans that did not further these aspirations. The impact of women on planning, both by protest and by daily activities, facilitated the change of public space and influenced the design of future colonies.

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## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

**Talia Abramovich**, Ph.D., is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning at the Technion, Israel Institute of Technology, and an architectural researcher. Her work on the architecture and urban design of the 19th century Eretz Israel has been widely published in articles and book chapters in Israel and abroad. Amongst her latest publications: "Imported Modernity and Local Design: The Creation of Resilient Public Spaces in Late Ottoman Palestine, 1878-1918" (*Planning Perspectives* 35, no.1, pp. 169-192, 2020). She is currently researching women and architecture in the early modern and the modern periods.

## ENDNOTES

1. Schama, *Two Rothschilds and the Land of Israel*; Aaronsohn, *Baron Rothschild and the Colonies*.
2. Abramovich, Epstein-Pliouchtch and Aravot, "Imported Modernity and Local Design," 188.
3. The school was called *Arbeiterschule* (German: a school for work). Ben Arzi, "*Arbeiterschule and Lustgarten*."
4. Hissin, *A Journey to the Promised Land*.
5. Such as Aaronson, "La colonisation Juive en Palestine."
6. Shilo, *Princess or Prisoner*, 15.
7. Epstein-Pliouchtch and Abramovich, "From Reform to Revolutionary Thinking."
8. Gómez Reus and Usandizaga, *Inside Out*.
9. Kark, Shilo and Hasan-Rokem, *Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel*. Köksal and Falierou, *A Social History of Late Ottoman Women*.
10. Wolff, *Feminine Sentences*, 12-33.
11. Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City*, 16; Montgomery, *Displaying Women*; Sewell, *Women and the Everyday City*.
12. Shilo, "A Cross-Cultural Message."
13. Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City*, 18-19.
14. Heynen, "Modernity and Domesticity," 25.
15. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.
16. Abramovich, and Nitzan-Shiftan, "From Public Space to Urban Square."
17. Szekely, "The Character of the *Teachers*," 146.
18. Hissin, *A Journey to the Promised Land*, 318-319.
19. Samsonov, *The Book of Zichron Ya'akov*, 188.
20. Samsonov, *The Book of Zichron Ya'akov*, 217.
21. Abramovich and Carmon, "Religion, Design, and Settlement," 7.
22. Shilo, *Princess or Prisoner*, 133-134.
23. The separate women's section derives from the traditional Jewish practice of separating men and women in public.
24. Scheide notes the minimal places allocated for women in other synagogues in the country, especially in Rosh-Pina. Scheide, *Mémoires sur les colonies Juives*, 131.
25. Scheide, *Mémoires sur les colonies Juives*, 81.

26. *Warte des Tempels*, 4.11.1886.
27. Hadar, "Jewish Tobacco Workers."
28. The Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem (CZA) J15/7569.
29. Abramovich, "First 'Moshavot' Settlements," 49-51.
30. CZA, PHG/1000419.
31. CZA, S8/1359/3-1kru.
32. *HaMelitz*, 27.6.1890.
33. *Hashkafa*, January 30, 1907.
34. *Warte des Tempels*, 6.3.1890.
35. Abramovich and Epstein-Pliouchtch, "Resilience of Public Spaces," 131.
36. CZA, J15M/235.
37. Zichron Ya'acov archive, Protocol no. 52 from December 14, 1911.
38. Zichron Ya'acov archive, Protocol no. 69 from February 10, 1912.
39. Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City*.
40. Samsonov, *The Book of Zichron Ya'akov*, 264-265.
41. *Ibid.*
42. As indicated by its name nowadays: The Central Mikveh for Women.
43. The journey reports were published in a booklet: <https://beta.hebrewbooks.org/36617>.
44. It included interior changes such as displacing the reading platform and removing some wall decorations.
45. Such as *in Ohel Sarah Synagogue, Rehovot*.

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## IMAGE SOURCES

- Fig. 1 Author's drawing
- Fig. 2 Zichron Ya'akov Archive
- Fig. 3 Zichron Ya'akov Archive
- Fig. 4 The Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem, PHG/1000419
- Fig. 5 Zichron Ya'akov Archive
- Fig. 6 Zichron Ya'akov Archive