

Re-inventing the planned city

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This is a bird's-eye view of Kiryat Gat. Credit: American Friends of Tel Aviv University

In response to population growth, many "new towns" or planned cities were built around the world in the 1950s. But according to Dr. Tali Hatuka, head of Tel Aviv University's Laboratory for Contemporary Urban Design (LCUD) at the Department of Geography and the Human Environment, these cities are a poor fit for modern lifestyles – and it's time to innovate.

TAU has launched a pilot project, in collaboration with a team from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology led by Prof. Eran Ben-Joseph, to revitalize this aging model. Last month, a team of five TAU and 11 MIT graduate students visited Kiryat Gat, a mid-sized town in the south of Israel. Home to branches of industrial giants Hewlett-Packard Company

and Intel, Kiryat Gat was chosen as a "laboratory" for re-designing outmoded planned civic spaces.

Based on smart technologies, improved transportation, use of the city's natural surroundings, and a reconsideration of the current use of city space, the team's action plan is designed to help Kiryat Gat emerge as a new, technologically-advanced planned city — a prototype that could be applied to similar urban communities.

Planning a future for the mid-sized city

The project, jointly funded by TAU's Vice President for Research and MIT's MISTI Global Seed Funds, will create a new planning model that could reshape the future of Kiryat Gat and similar cities across the world which are often overlooked in academia and practical planning. "Our goal is to put a spotlight on these kinds of towns and suggest innovative ways of dealing with their problems," says TAU student Roni Bar.

MIT's Alice Shay, who visited Israel for the first time for the project, believes that Kiryat Gat, a city that massive urbanization has left behind, is an ideal place for the team to make a change. "The city is at a catalyst point — an exciting moment where good governance and energy will give it the capacity to implement some of these new projects."

To tackle the design and planning challenges of the city, the team of students focused on four themes: the "mobile city," which looked at transport and accessibility; the "mediated city," dealing with technological infrastructure; the "compact city," which reconsidered the use of urban space and [population growth](#); and the "natural city", which integrated environmental features into the urban landscape.

Finding common ground

Ultimately, the team's goal is to create a more flexible city model that encourages residents and workers to be a more active part of the urban fabric of the city, said Dr. Hatuka. The current arrangement of dedicated industrial, residential, and core zones is out of step with a 21st century lifestyle, in which people work, live, and spend their leisure time in the same environment.

"Much of the past discourse about the design of sustainable communities and 'eco-cities' has been premised on using previously undeveloped land," says Prof. Ben-Joseph. "In contrast, this project focuses on the 'retrofitting' of an existing environment — a more likely approach, given the extent of the world's already-built infrastructure."

The students from TAU and MIT have become a truly cohesive team, and their diversity of background helps challenge cultural preconceptions, Bar says. "They ask many questions that help us to rethink things we took for granted." Shay agrees. "Tali and Eran have created an incredible collaboration, encouraging us all to exchange ideas. Our contexts are different but there is a common urban design language."

The team estimates that they will be able to present the updated model of the [city](#) early next year. The next step is further exploring the project's key themes at a March meeting at MIT. And while the project has provided an exceptional educational experience for all involved, ideas are already leaping off the page and into the city's urban fabric. "In the next two months, the Mayor of Kiryat Gat would like to push this model forward and implement the initial steps that we have offered," says an enthusiastic Dr. Hatuka.

More information: To learn more about the project, visit: kiryatgat.mit.edu/

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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