



# Cultural heritage and its economic potential in rural society: The case of the kibbutzim in Israel



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## ABSTRACT

For nearly a century, the kibbutz – an Israeli communal settlement form based on total cooperation and equality in production, marketing, and consumption – has been part of the Israeli legacy, expressed in its many historical assets and cultural landscapes. In recent decades, the economy, society, and landscape of the kibbutz-type settlement have undergone significant changes, affecting its very identity. The purpose of this research was to examine the attitudes of different population groups (young and veterans members, and newcomers residing in the expansion neighborhoods) towards the tangible heritage of the kibbutz from the perspective of these changes. Differences in the attitudes, willingness to become involved, and perception of conservation and economic development of cultural built heritage assets were found to correspond with age and membership status. Examination of the attitudes of people living on kibbutz to its cultural heritage and eventual economic potential may inform the development of general guidelines for the maintenance and sustainable development of these cultural assets in the “new kibbutz.” Such guidelines might also be applicable to other rural societies that are undergoing significant identity-shaping changes.

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## 1. Introduction

The kibbutz is a rural settlement form in Israel. For about 100 years, it was known for being completely communal, based on cooperation and equality in every aspect of production and consumption. Currently, however, the kibbutzim (plural for kibbutz) are undergoing a process of restructuring, involving significant identity-shaping changes, including economic diversification, privatization, expanding inequality, and changes in the kibbutz's green image. The pressure to change the nature of the kibbutz stems among others from (a) ideological changes among the younger generations, which are moving away from the philosophy of the kibbutz founders (Gal, 2011); (b) trickling down of current privatization processes based on neoliberal economics in Israel, in general, to the economic structure and land values of rural societies (Ben-Rafael and Topel, 2011); and (c) the establishment of nonagricultural activities in the rural space (Pavin, 2011).

Alongside the shift in the economic base and the increased demand for privatization, the kibbutzim are attracting new resi-

dents as part of their establishment of expansion neighborhoods (Charney and Palgi, 2011; Greenberg, 2011). Most of the new arrivals are settling in these new neighborhoods, in many cases located at the edges of the kibbutz built-up area (they are also known as “community extensions” or “extensions”). The influx of newcomers actually represents a type of amenity-led migration of people seeking houses, quality of life, participation in a small community, and even new economic opportunities. The new residents do not become kibbutz members; they are considered kibbutz “residents” (Arbel and Czamanski, 2001; Getz, 2009). As such, they are involved in the communal life (cultural and social activities), but do not share ownership of the economic and public assets of the kibbutz.

The space of the kibbutzim and their environs contain a large inventory of sites and buildings with historical and architectural values that reflect past events, social ideology, and lifestyles that no longer exist. Most of these buildings reflect “everyday life” – agricultural uses and technology, vernacular architecture, local building materials, residential buildings, and ordinary community facilities (Lowenthal, 1997). Only a few sites reflect heroic historical events or unique architectural styles (Amit-Cohen, 2012, 2014). Nevertheless, the economic changes since the mid-1980s, together with social and ideological shifts, have threatened this unique cultural built heritage. One of the explanations for this is that the

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kibbutz population is often unaware of the economic potential of vernacular cultural built heritage. To them, the assets represent mundane culture and are regarded as ordinary buildings with ordinary uses; as a result, the kibbutz population, members and residents alike, are indifferent to them (Amit-Cohen, 2012).

The purpose of this research was to examine the attitudes of different population groups (younger and older people, born in the kibbutz and newly arrived) towards two phenomena – the changes in the kibbutz and the economic potential of vernacular cultural built heritage sites that are located within the kibbutzim. To the best of our knowledge, no previous study has focused on the attitudes of kibbutz members and new residents towards the kibbutz's heritage sites. Such an examination is particularly salient in light of the current shift of the kibbutzim towards becoming multi-social community settlements. Increased awareness and recognition among all the social groups involved of the historical value and economic potential of the buildings as means for development could change the status of vernacular sites as perceived by the people living on kibbutzim, veterans and newcomers alike.

This paper begins with a theoretical discussion of the issues of rural restructuring in Israel, the changes that the kibbutz-type settlements have undergone, and the status and role of vernacular cultural built heritage in the rural space. This is followed by a description of the methodology employed, a review of the cultural heritage of the kibbutzim and its potential value, and examination of the attitudes of kibbutz members and new residents. Finally, the discussion focuses on the role that vernacular cultural built heritage sites and their related land uses play in the kibbutz environment today and their potential role in the future economic development of kibbutzim.

## 2. Transformation of the rural space in Israel and the kibbutz

### 2.1. The restructuring of the rural space in Israel

In recent years, long-term economic, socio-demographic, and environmental processes have been affecting rural areas in developed economies, generating significant multidimensional changes. These changes have brought to the forefront a perception that rural landscapes and their related land uses possess several different commodity and non-commodity uses simultaneously, and therefore should not be linked to the traditional view of being solely agricultural, but rather seen as multifunctional spaces (McCarthy, 2005; Robinson, 2004). The idea of multifunctional space includes, among others, concepts such as rural historic landscapes (Countryside Agency, 1999) and rural heritage landscape fabric (Amit-Cohen and Ben-David, 2012). These terms are associated with approaches that consider agricultural settlements and cultivated land as part of the overall open space system and emphasize their unique character as cultural landscapes (Eetvelde and Antrop, 2005; Maruani and Amit-Cohen, 2010; Stern and Rabinowitz, 2006).

Such processes of change are evident in Israel, where agriculture was the mainstay of rural settlements for many decades but has declined in importance to the national economy in recent years. For example, its contribution to the GDP in 2012 was a mere 1.7% (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013). At the same time, the productivity of this sector has significantly increased, in terms of both output per unit of labor and output per unit of capital. This has been combined with worsening terms of trade, fluctuation in income derived from agricultural production, and decline in the number of self-employed farmers (Ministry of Agriculture, 2011). The outcome has been an increase in the rural population's employment share of other sectors, particularly the public services, and, to a

lesser extent, commerce and tourism. Some of the commercial and tourist activities are taking place in warehouses and sheds that were used for agricultural activities in the past (Bittner and Sofer, 2013), but very few of these activities emphasize or present the historical or cultural values of the rural landscape and its historical built heritage.

At the same time, socio-demographic changes have been underway: new expansion neighborhoods have been established in rural settlements, attracting young families in particular, and thus transforming the local demographic structure and the pattern of demand for services and goods. In response to this pace of change, green organizations have been investing greater effort in protecting the natural environment and open spaces, which have been jeopardized by the increasing number and expansion of rural settlements, based on the view that open space and the rural way of living mean better quality of life (Applebaum and Sofer, 2012). These changes have especially affected the cooperative farming communities, of which the kibbutz is a major pillar (Greenberg, 2011).

### 2.2. The nature of the changes in the kibbutz

There are 270 kibbutz-type settlements in Israel with about 145,000 residents, which account for about 1.9% of the state's population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013); all of them are undergoing a process of change to some degree. The widening gap between the current economic and social situation and the original values of the kibbutz has become a catalyst for change. For some, the cumulative effect of these changes was tantamount to a revolution (Ravid, 1994), while others have insisted that the changes express a shift towards market operating principles and mechanisms (Ben-Rafael, 1997; Rosner and Getz, 1994). However, there is a wide consensus that these changes are spreading and an increasing number of kibbutzim are adopting them, albeit in a wide range of variations (Lapidot et al., 2006; Mort and Brenner, 2003; Palgi and Getz, 2014; Sofer et al., 2015). At present, the kibbutz movement recognizes two main types of kibbutzim: (1) collective and (2) renewed. Only 27% of the kibbutzim are now considered to be fully collective, and the dynamic change process is not operating in favor of this type (Green Time, 19.8.2014; <http://www.kibbutz.org.il/cgi>).

The main changes in the kibbutz structure can be divided into several domains. In the realm of production, particularly of the nonagricultural type, there has been a growing trend of partnerships with external sources of capital and even selling production units such as factories; the responsibility of each economic unit to provide profits (to be "profit centers"); the establishment of a "managerial class" to run enterprises according to the rules of competitive markets (Ben-Rafael and Topel, 2011; Sofer et al., 2015); growing encouragement of members to take responsibility for choosing their jobs and earning income; and, significantly, relaxation of the original principle of self-labor and acceptance of hired labor as a vital necessity (Gal, 2011; Palgi and Getz, 2014). A fundamental change was the decision to allow members to establish their own enterprises, such as workshops, consulting services, or retail activities. In addition, the number of members working outside the community, mostly in urban localities, has greatly increased. The changing business environment required a reshuffling of the former economy and opening it up to private investment. Numerous kibbutz industries have been merged with other kibbutzim or with private firms. There has been a significant trend of regional affiliations for common projects, which to some extent have replaced the weakened internal institutions in each kibbutz (Degani, 2006).

In the realm of consumption, there has been a major transfer of responsibility from the community – the collective purse – to the individual and the family unit. In most kibbutzim, salary is the main source of income of the households; this allows a growing degree of spending freedom. Moreover, most of the kibbutzim pay differen-

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