Episode Book

EPISODE #5934

Why Modiin Is Ugly Despite Its Form-Based Code

PUBLISHED	13 October 2026 at 15:56 UTC
DURATION	36:52
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/modiin-form-based-code-beauty-05378/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.4
SOURCES	13 cited by the research (listed at the end)
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:41 UTC

SYNOPSIS

Modiin is one of the few Israeli cities built from a master plan, complete with a form-based code — the exact tool New Urbanists say produces coherent, beautiful cities. It still reads as extremely ugly. This episode uses Modiin as a test case against Paris as a success case, asking what a code actually has to regulate if beauty, not just order, is the goal. The answer sits in the gap between regulating massing and siting and regulating proportions, materials, facade composition, and architectural language.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Hannah sent us something this week, and it lands right on top of a thread we have been pulling for a while now. She has this long-running ambition to design a new mid-sized Israeli city from scratch, traditional urban principles, walkable, coherent, the whole thing. And what she wants to go deeper on now is the seam between the planning and the buildings.



Herman

The seam. That's the right word for it.



Corn

There's a school of thought that says if you get the streets, the blocks, the density and the public realm right, the architecture can basically take care of itself. Hannah doesn't buy it. She says most cities people consider beautiful are beautiful partly because the buildings themselves are beautiful, and that can't be left to chance.



Herman

And she's right to push on that.



Corn

Modiin is her test case. She uses it as an example of bad planning, and you pointed out last time that it actually has a form-based code, which theoretically is exactly the tool you'd want to shape a coherent city. And the result is still, in her words, extremely ugly. So the code isn't enough. What would a code have to regulate differently if the goal was not just orderly development but beautiful streets and buildings?



Herman

And then compare with Paris, where the rules are loose in some ways and the character is incredibly strong.



Corn

Right. How specific should a code be about proportions, materials, facade composition, roofs, windows, setbacks, street walls, ornament, architectural language. And how do you get control without pastiche or monotony. So the real question is: what does a code have to do to produce beauty, not just order?



Herman

There's a whole school of thought behind the claim she's pushing back on, and it has a name. It's the form-based code tradition, the new urbanist toolkit, and the core argument is that if you regulate the shape of the public realm, the building envelopes, the street wall, the block structure, the transition from public to private, then architecture sorts itself out. The claim is that architecture is downstream of urbanism.



Corn

And that claim is testable. That's the part I like about Hannah's framing. She's not asking a philosophical question. She's pointing at a city and saying, this had the tool and it still doesn't work.



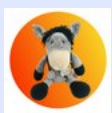
Herman

Let me define form-based code properly so we can be precise for the rest of this, because the term gets used loosely. A form-based code regulates the relationship between building facades and the public realm. It regulates the form and mass of buildings in relation to one another. And it regulates the scale and types of streets and blocks. That's the definition, and it's worth noting what's not in it. It doesn't say anything about window proportions. It doesn't say anything about materials. It doesn't say anything about ornament.



Corn

It regulates where a building sits and how big it is. Not what it looks like.



Herman

And the crucial sentence about the whole tool, which I think Hannah is intuiting even if she hasn't read it stated this way: a form-based code is a tool, and the quality of development outcomes depends on the quality and objectives of the community plan that the code implements. The code isn't the goal. The code is the instrument. If the goal is



Herman (continued)

order, you get order. If the goal is beauty, you have to actually write that into the plan.



Corn

So the thesis of this episode, then. Beauty is not an emergent property of good urbanism. It lives in the specific things that massing codes ignore. Proportions, window composition, materials, ornament, architectural language. And the interesting question is how much of that you can regulate without producing either pastiche on one side or monotony on the other.



Herman

And we can answer that with two cities.



Corn

One is Modiin, the failure case. One is Paris, the success case. Let's start with Modiin, because it is the cleanest test case we have.



Herman

The thing most people don't know about Modiin is that Safdie's own ambition was explicitly architectural. It was never just about orderly massing. He said the city needs to be an urban place, not suburban. It should not look like a collection of building projects or a collection of autonomous neighborhoods. There must be a city center, architectural diversity, and population diversity.



Corn

That's ambition. Architectural diversity is right there in the sentence.



Herman

He wanted it to look more like old Tel Aviv. Rothschild Boulevard. Not like the familiar Ministry of Housing projects. He was actively trying to avoid the thing that Israeli residential construction defaults to. And in the same retrospective he pointed at the



Herman (continued)

valleys as the real success, the densely planted areas between the ridges, said the mix of architecture and the planting already gave the city the character of somewhere that had been around a long time.



Corn

Which is a landscape argument, not a building argument.



Herman

That's exactly the tension. He wanted the buildings to be beautiful, and he designed the landscape to compensate when they weren't.



Corn

Alright. What did the code actually regulate? This is the crux of the whole episode.



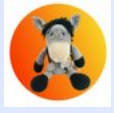
Herman

Safdie Architects' own project page is unusually candid about it. The planning guidelines regulate setbacks, footprints, and heights of buildings. And then cladding guidelines apply to public, commercial, and high-rise buildings. And it says this allows planned growth to occur comfortably by different developers and architects.



Corn

Sit with that last clause for a second.



Herman

Different developers and architects.



Corn

That's the whole design intent right there. The code was built so that dozens of different builders could fill in the lots without stepping on each other. It's a coordination document.



Herman

Yes. And look at the limits of it. Cladding guidelines applied only to public, commercial, and high-rise buildings. Ordinary residential buildings were governed by setbacks, footprints and heights. Nothing about the facade. Nothing about the window.



Corn

So the average Modiin apartment building was regulated on how far it sat from the sidewalk, how much ground it covered, and how tall it could go. And then the developer picked a cladding color from a stack of catalogues and went home.



Herman

That's the Modiin paradox resolved. The code controlled massing and siting but not the things that make a facade beautiful. It is not a failure of form-based coding as such. It's a failure to code the things that matter for beauty. It's a massing-and-siting code, not a facade-and-beauty code.



Corn

There were other coded parameters, right? The four storeys, the density figure, the balcony requirement.



Herman

Buildings generally limited to four storeys. That was the tree-top height rule, the idea that the city shouldn't poke above the ridgelines. Density of fifty persons per acre. Every housing unit required to have access to a garden, a roof terrace, or a balcony. And the hilltops reserved for larger structures as identifiable crowns.



Corn

Fifty people an acre is not dense by any measure.



Herman

It's low. It's a garden suburb's density with an urban street pattern laid over it.



Corn

Which is why the streets feel empty.



Herman

And why there's no street wall to speak of. With four storeys and fifty people an acre, the buildings are spread out enough that the street doesn't enclose. It's a very tidy arrangement of freestanding blocks.



Corn

And the cladding guidelines only applied to the buildings that would be seen by a lot of people. So public buildings, commercial, the towers. The entire residential fabric, which is most of the city by area, was left to whichever builder bought the lot.



Herman

The guideline logic was, protect the landmarks, let the background be background. It's the opposite of what produces a beautiful street.



Corn

Because a beautiful street is made of the background.



Herman

The background is the city. The landmarks are punctuation. If you regulate the punctuation and leave the background to chance, you get a legible sequence of public buildings surrounded by generic apartment slabs.



Corn

Let me read you the resident. There's a woman named Ruti Weisberg in Globes from 2014, twenty years on, and she says, and I'm quoting: "It is a very well planned city, too planned. There are no places that are late additions, or different areas to wander around, like in a big city. It is missing the spontaneity that is a part of every city, it lacks personality."



Herman

And the line everyone remembers from that piece.



Corn

"I sometimes joke with friends that we want to go to the big city to see some dirt."



Herman

That's not a complaint about cleanliness. It's a complaint about the absence of the accidental.



Corn

There's nothing in the city that wasn't planned. Including the things that feel planned to have been unplanned.



Herman

Right. There's no accretion. Nothing layered up over time because somebody added a lean-to, or a balcony, or a shopfront, or a coat of paint in 1974 that everyone has since refused to remove. The city went up in one gesture and then stopped.



Corn

And here's the thing I keep noticing about Modiin, going back to Safdie's own retrospective. He said he wanted architectural diversity. And what you actually get is a specific kind of diversity, which is dozens of interpretations of the same four-storey residential block by different architects who each got a different cladding budget.



Herman

Sameness dressed up as variety. Which is the opposite of the Rothschild Boulevard he was pointing at.



Corn

Rothschild Boulevard is a street where every building is doing something different, but they're all doing it in the same relationship to the street.



Herman

They're all sitting on the same line. They're all the same rough height, or working within the same envelope. And then within that frame, the facades are wildly individual. Some are Eclectic, some are Bauhaus, some are Ottoman, some are 1950s brutalism, some are newer and trying to be polite about it. The street holds because the frame is tight, not because the buildings agree.



Corn

Modiin had the frame loose and the buildings unbounded. And what you get is neither consistency nor variety. You get statistical spread.



Herman

Statistical spread.



Corn

Different developers, different materials, different heights within the band, no street wall, no proportional system. It's like a spreadsheet of buildings.



Herman

There's a framing from ArchNewsNow in 2002 that names the exact thing we're circling. It said Modiin is one of the few designed cities in Israel where individual buildings are conceived as part of an integrated urban design model. And then it says most contemporary urban architecture in Israel has degenerated to collections of competing corporate icons with little attention to urban fabric and natural context. And it names the challenge as the sensitive integration of their individual buildings with the land and cityscape.



Corn

And it says the realm of town planning has been passed on to planning engineers.



Herman

Which is a very pointed line. Planning engineers optimize for flow, capacity, cost. They don't optimize for beauty. Not because they can't, but because it isn't a parameter.



Corn

So Modiin's planners tried to do something different, and they succeeded partially. They got integration at the level of site planning. They failed at integration at the level of the building.



Herman

And here's the general point. Form-based codes regulate the relationship between the facade and the public realm, and the massing of buildings relative to one another. That's what the definition says. But the quality of the outcome depends entirely on the community plan the code implements. Modiin's community plan objectives were about order, controlled growth, landscape preservation. Those are legitimate objectives. They just aren't beauty.



Corn

The code did what it was told to do.



Herman

And the thing Hannah is asking is, what would the code have to be told to do differently? And the classic proof that a code can regulate beauty is Haussmann.



Corn

Go.



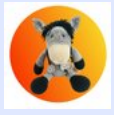
Herman

Haussmann's renovation of Paris ran from 1853 to 1870, and the code he imposed stipulated precise ratios of building heights to street widths. It stipulated disposition and sizes of windows and doors on building facades. It stipulated consistent planting of street trees. It stipulated standardization of material colors to bring unity and harmony to the public environment.



Corn

Window sizes.



Herman

Window placement. Look at that list again. Heights to street widths. Window disposition and size. Trees. Material colors. That's a facade code. That's a code that regulates the surface of the building relative to the street, not just its volume.



Corn

So we have documented proof that a nineteenth-century code can regulate window composition and material palette, and the result is a city that people travel from all over the world to look at.



Herman

And Napoleon the Third's instruction to Haussmann is the phrase everyone quotes. He told him to give Paris air, to unify it, and to make it more beautiful. Three objectives. Air, unity, beauty. Beauty is named.



Corn

Which Modiin's brief did not name.



Herman

Modiin's brief named order, growth, and landscape integration. Which are three fine objectives. Beauty was hoped for, not specified.



Corn

So the code can regulate beauty. The question is whether it should.



Herman

And this is where the counter-argument comes in, and I want to state it fairly because it's a good one. Adrian Moore at the Reason Foundation has written about this. His warning is that overly prescriptive subjective criteria around look and feel, replacing more objective criteria like use and size, can hinder trying new looks. And that allows for less creativity and innovation, and can make for a more cohesive but less interesting city.



Corn

More cohesive but less interesting.



Herman

He also flags the litigation problem. Form-based codes are more prone to lawsuits because what typifies a certain design, whether that's Cape Cod or Mediterranean, differs by individual. So the moment you write a style into a code, you have created a definition of that style, and someone will disagree about whether their building is inside it.



Corn

And also less than one percent of US cities have put a form-based code into place at all.



Herman

Less than one percent.



Corn

That's a startlingly low number for a tool this well-known.



Herman

And there are academic critiques too. Lolita Buckner Inniss wrote a paper called "Back to the Future," arguing that the benefits of form-based codes are eclipsed by some of the problems. A critique of the Buffalo Green Code, which was adopted in 2017, found it left two pressing challenges unaddressed. Urban integration of vacant lots, and lack of affordable housing. And another paper notes that critics say form-based codes unnecessarily increase project design costs and fail to create meaningfully distinctive products.



Corn

That last one is the direct hit. Increase costs and fail to create distinctiveness.



Herman

Which is the Modiin outcome, funnily enough. Modiin had a code, the code cost money to write and administer, and the outcome is not meaningfully distinctive.



Corn

So the case against coding beauty is not just aesthetic squeamishness. It's about cost, litigation, and the risk of flattening the range.



Herman

And you have to take that seriously because it's documented. If you write the code too specific, you get pastiche. If you write it too loose, you get Modiin.



Corn

So the interesting zone is in the middle. Which is where Paris lives.



Herman

Exactly.



Corn

But before we go to Paris, I want to sit with the Modiin thing for one more beat. Because the Modiin lesson isn't just that the code regulated the wrong things. It's also that the code was fine for what it was trying to do.



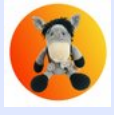
Herman

Say that again in a different way.



Corn

The code coordinated dozens of developers. It produced a legible city with a working center, functional infrastructure, coherent landscape. Those are not trivial accomplishments. Modiin works as a machine. It just doesn't work as a place you want to walk around.



Herman

And this matters for the new-city conversation, because the temptation is to conclude that the code isn't worth having. And that's wrong. The code is worth having. What you have to add on top of it is a second thing.



Corn

The facade layer.



Herman

Massing on one side, facade composition on the other. And the Paris PLU is the best modern example of how to do both.



Corn

So if Modiin's code regulated the wrong things, what would a code that regulated the right things look like? Paris is the obvious place to look.



Herman

The Paris PLU is the local urban plan, and the current version was approved in July 2016, with the most recent update in July 2025. It's organized into fifteen articles per zone, across four zones. General urban, which is most of the city. Major urban services. Green urban. And natural and forest space.



Corn

Four zones, fifteen articles each. That's a specific document.



Herman

And the important articles for our purposes are UG.6, which is siting relative to roads. UG.9, building footprints. UG.10, maximum height. And UG.11, which is the one we care about most. External appearance of buildings and development of their surroundings, and protection of buildings and landscape elements.



Corn

So the code has an article called external appearance.



Herman

It does. And then it has UG.11.5, which specifically protects urban structures and architectural heritage.



Corn

Two different things in the same code. One regulates what new buildings have to do. The other protects what older buildings already do.



Herman

And then there's the alignement rule, which is the structural backbone of all of it. UG.6 says the vertical part of the facade of any construction to be built at the edge of a road must be implanted at the alignment or at the de facto limit of the road.



Corn

Put that in plain English.



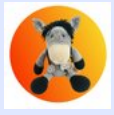
Herman

Buildings sit at the street line. Not behind it. Not forty feet back with a lawn. At the line.



Corn

And that's what produces the continuous street wall that Paris is famous for.



Herman

It's rigid. And then here's the interesting bit. The code allows exceptions. A building can set back from the line, but only where the setback is justified by the environment, or by the safety of pedestrians and persons with disabilities, or by the expression of an architectural research.



Corn

"Architectural research."



Herman

It means, basically, if you want to do something formally experimental, you can pull the building off the line. But you have to make a case for it.



Corn

So the code is tight on the street wall and loose on the experiment.



Herman

And the height envelope is the other half of the frame. UG.10 sets a maximum height with something called a gabarit-enveloppe, a template envelope, at the road edge. Which means the height limit is a shape, not a number. The building can be tall on the street side and then has to slope or step back as it moves away from the street.



Corn

So the roofscape is regulated by geometry.



Herman

The roofscape is regulated by geometry. You get the mansard profile because the envelope forces it, not because the code says "build mansards."



Corn

Which is a very clever way to get a consistent roofscape without prescribing a style.



Herman

And then there's the vista protection. The PLU includes a general height plan, and it includes Paris vista protection spindles. Protected panoramic views, partial views, and restricted views. And those override ceiling heights.



Corn

So the height limit in a given block isn't just a number. It's a number that bends around protected sightlines.



Herman

Which means the city is thinking about what you can see from a building, not just how tall the building is. And there are special sectors too. The Marais, the seventh arrondissement, Montmartre, the Maisons and Villas Sectors, each of which carries additional graphic provisions on top of the general regime.



Corn

So Paris is layered. A general regime plus special regimes for areas of particular character.



Herman

And that's the whole trick, if there is one. The code is loose where it matters and tight where it matters. It is relatively permissive on architectural expression. Setbacks are allowed for architectural research. But it is rigid on the street wall, the height envelope, the material palette, and the protected views.



Corn

The character comes from the framework, not from prescribing facades.



Herman

That's the answer to Hannah's question. Paris does not prescribe what your building looks like. It prescribes where it sits, how tall it can be, how it steps back from the street, and what views it must not block. Then it lets a hundred and fifty years of architects fill in the rest.



Corn

And the result is a city that has Eclectic, Haussmannian, Art Nouveau, Art Deco, modernist, brutalist and contemporary buildings, all sitting in the same relationship to the street, and none of them looking like each other.



Herman

That's not pastiche. That's a framework.



Corn

So the reverse of Modiin. Modiin was tight on massing and silent on the things that make a facade beautiful. Paris is rigid on the frame and permissive on the facade.



Herman

And that's a much smarter distribution of regulatory attention, because it means you're not paying the cost of writing a style into the code. You're not defining what a Parisian building looks like. You're defining what a Parisian building has to do to the street.



Corn

The street is where the beauty actually lives, because the street is what people experience.



Herman

You don't stand outside a building and admire it in isolation. You walk past it. The experience is lateral. The experience is the rhythm of the facades along the street, the variation, the containment, the sightlines down the block. None of that is a property of a



Herman (continued)

single building.



Corn

The code should regulate the rhythm, not the notes.



Herman

The code should regulate the rhythm. Which means it should be specific about street walls, height envelopes, and material palettes, moderately specific about proportions and window composition, and relatively permissive about architectural language and ornament, as long as the first three are right.



Corn

Let me test that with the pastiche problem. If a code is specific about material palette, isn't that pastiche? Isn't a creamy limestone city inevitably fake?



Herman

Not if you understand material palette as a constraint rather than a prescription. Haussmann's Paris standardized material colors to bring unity and harmony to the public environment. He didn't mandate a style. He mandated that all buildings were going to be made of roughly the same stone, because that stone was local and beautiful and it aged well.



Corn

The trick is to regulate the substrate, not the surface.



Herman

Regulate the substrate. And that's actually easier in Israel than people think, because Israel has a very strong local material tradition. Jerusalem stone. But that raises a problem the Modiin code never had to face, which is that if you build a new city out of Jerusalem stone, you have made Jerusalem.



Corn

You've made a very expensive Jerusalem.



Herman

You've made an expensive Jerusalem in a place that isn't Jerusalem, and it will read as pastiche immediately. So the material question for a new Israeli city isn't "which historic material do we copy." It's "what's the equivalent for this landscape."



Corn

Which is the harder question, but it's the right one.



Herman

Which is why the Modiin code's material silence isn't entirely a failure. It's a failure to answer a hard question, which is different from not knowing the question.



Corn

The other trap is monotony. The fear is that if you regulate anything, every building looks the same. But look at what actually makes Paris varied.



Herman

Different architects, different periods, different styles, within a tight urban frame.



Corn

Variety comes from the buildings themselves.



Herman

The code provides the frame. The variety is what fills it. That's the opposite of the "every building looks the same" fear. It's "every building sits in the same relationship to the street, and then does whatever it wants within that."



Corn

Which produces a city where the eye isn't bored, because the eye is following the street wall and reading the variation, not scanning a flat plane of identical boxes.



Herman

You know, the Modiin code's four-storey rule, the tree-top height, was probably an attempt at the same kind of thinking. It's just that the envelope was step-shaped differently. It was a flat ceiling rather than a template envelope with a slope.



Corn

The difference isn't scale. It's the shape of the constraint.



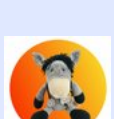
Herman

The shape of the constraint is doing a huge amount of the work in Paris, and almost none of the work in Modiin.



Corn

This is where I want to bring in the classic-planning school, because they've written the version of this argument that looks most like what Hannah is after. Nir Buras wrote The Art of Classic Planning, published by Harvard University Press in 2019, and he's a Technion PhD, so he's directly relevant to the Israeli conversation.



Herman

He visited over a hundred cities to write it, which is a real research effort, not an essay.



Corn

The book's core argument is that nearly everything we treasure in the world's most beautiful cities was built over a century ago, and a great deal of the knowledge and practice behind successful city planning has been abandoned over the last hundred years. Not because of traffic or population growth or other practical hurdles, but because of ill-considered theories emerging from Modernism and reactions to it.



Herman

That's the diagnosis that Modiin's planners were operating without. They weren't consciously rejecting traditional practice. They just didn't have access to it, because it had been off the curriculum for two generations.



Corn

The other piece of Buras's project that's relevant is that the Classic Planning Institute researches the science behind environmental neuroaesthetics. The emotional connection between people and the built environment.



Herman

That's the part I find most interesting for the Israeli context, because in Israel you can't say "beauty" in a planning meeting without someone calling it subjective. If you can say "this produces measurable stress reduction," you're playing a different game.



Corn

Which is not to say neuroaesthetics is settled science.



Herman

Not settled. But it's a serious research programme, and it's useful for pushing back on the reflex that beauty is a matter of taste.



Corn

There's a resonance here with what Hannah herself has argued, which is that the supposed tension between aesthetics and function is a false one. That function is already baked into architecture, and beauty is part of wellbeing.



Herman

Which is exactly what a neuroaesthetics argument would say. The building that reduces your cortisol is doing a functional job. It's just a job planning engineers aren't asked to measure.



Corn

We have two things on the table. One is Paris, which is a modern regulatory system that produces beauty through a tight frame. The other is Buras, which is a research programme that says beauty is real and can be studied.



Herman

The third thing is Israel's demographic freight, which is the reason any of this matters.



Corn

Three million new people in fourteen years, and most of the new fabric laid down after the car.



Herman

Which is why the question isn't "should we build new cities." We're going to build them. The question is what code we write.



Corn

What code would you actually write? Because that's the ask. If we're writing an architectural and urban code for a new Israeli city, how specific should it be about proportions, materials, facades, roofs, windows, setbacks, street walls, ornament, architectural language.



Herman

Let me go through it in order. Street walls: very specific. Non-negotiable. Buildings sit at the line, exemptions for accessibility and for architectural research. That's the Paris alignement rule, and it's the single highest-leverage thing in the whole code.



Corn

Height envelope: specific, but as a shape, not a number.



Herman

Envelope, not ceiling. Slope it back from the street. That's what produces a coherent roofscape without dictating roof style.



Corn

Material palette: specific, but constrained by availability and by local landscape, not by historical reference.



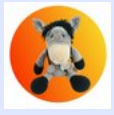
Herman

Specific about the substrate. Permissive about the surface.



Corn

Proportions: moderately specific.



Herman

This is the one where I'd be cautious. Regulating the ratio of window to wall, or the relationship between storey heights, is doable, but if you go too fine you start producing a code that only a specialist can administer, and that itself becomes a barrier to entry.



Corn

Window composition: moderately specific.



Herman

Same category. Regulate the rough rhythm, the spacing of openings relative to the facade, so the street reads as a coherent sequence. Don't regulate the mullion profile.



Corn

Ornament: permissive.



Herman

Permissive. If a developer wants to build a plain wall, they should be allowed to build a plain wall. The code isn't trying to enforce decoration. It's trying to enforce a coherent relationship between the building and the street.



Corn

Architectural language: permissive.



Herman

The most permissive parameter in the whole code. The code should not have an opinion about whether a building is classical, modernist, or something neither of those. It should have an opinion about where it sits and how tall it can be.



Corn

Roofs: moderately specific.



Herman

Moderately, because the roofline is what the man on the street actually sees. A consistent roofscape does more for the perception of the city than almost any other parameter, and you can get it through the height envelope alone, as Paris does.



Corn

Setbacks: specific.



Herman

Just a restatement of the street wall rule, plus a carve-out for accessibility, plus a carve-out for architectural research.



Corn

The meta-question. Who writes it.



Herman

That's the one nobody has answered in the Israeli context, and I don't have a good answer. Israel doesn't have the equivalent of Poundbury's landholding structure. There's no single owner of a large site who can impose a code across decades.



Corn

Which is what made the Modiin code possible in the first place. The state owned the land, so the state could set the rules.



Herman

A code has to be enforced by someone with an ongoing interest. Otherwise it dies with the initial plan. That's exactly what happened with the cladding guidelines in Modiin. They applied to the buildings the original designers cared most about, the public and commercial and high-rise buildings. Nobody cared about the apartment buildings, so nothing was specified for them, so nothing was enforced.



Corn

The code is only as strong as the last person who cares about it.



Herman

That's the real lesson from Modiin. The failure isn't design intent. The intent was there. The failure is that the intent only covered half the buildings, and the half it didn't cover is the half that makes up the city.



Corn

The answer to Hannah's question is, write the code about the street, not the building. Regulate the frame tightly, the surface moderately, and the style not at all. And then find someone to enforce it for fifty years.



Herman

That last part is the hard part.



Corn

It is.



Hilbert

Six hundred and forty-two thousand shekels.



Corn

What's that.



Hilbert

That's what the residential cladding budget was on one of the first phase contracts in Modiin, in the Buchman neighborhood. I've got the file. Six hundred and forty-two thousand shekels, spread across fourteen buildings. And you were both wrong about where the problem was.



Herman

Wrong how.



Hilbert

You said the code regulated the wrong things. The code regulated the right things for the buildings it was written for. The problem was the developers. The cladding guidelines applied to public, commercial and high-rise buildings. Right. But the residential buildings weren't left out by accident. They were left out because the developers negotiating the contracts refused to accept facade specifications, and the planners traded them away to keep the density and the setbacks. That's the deal. You get settlement form, they get facade discretion.



Corn

The code itself was fine.



Hilbert

The code was fine. The code was better than fine. It was doing its job. The problem was the guy signing the contractor's side of the table, and he's the reason the apartment blocks in Buchman all look like they were designed by the same accountant.



Herman

How do you know the number.



Hilbert

I was in the room.



Corn

In the room where.



Hilbert

In the room where the standard residential facade palette was discussed, in a hotel on King George Street in Jerusalem, in seven months ago, and I was there because a man named Avi Kessler needed somebody who could read a load calculation, and I can read a load calculation, and I was sitting next to Avi Kessler for four hours while a woman from the planning administration explained why a particular limestone cladding specification was going to add eighteen percent to the per-unit cost and the contractors' representative said, quote, the market won't pay for that, and the planning administration woman said nothing, and that was the whole negotiation.



Corn

You were at a planning meeting for Modiin.



Hilbert

I was at a planning meeting for the next phase of Modiin. There's been a second code written. You'd know that if you'd read the current draft.



Herman

There's a second code.



Corn

What does it say.



Hilbert

It says what you said. It says the street wall matters. It says the envelope matters. It says the residential facades matter now, not just the public and the commercial. And it has a man's name on the front of it who will not be there in fifteen years when the enforcement question comes up. Which is the part you got right and didn't push hard enough. The problem isn't writing the code. The problem is that the person who wrote it will retire, and there's nobody behind him.



Herman

The second code is there, and the enforcement question is the same question.



Hilbert

The enforcement question is the same question, and I'd bet against it.



Corn

You'd bet against it.



Hilbert

I'd bet a hundred and forty thousand shekels against it, which is about what I lost on a similar bet in a different year about a different city and I'd make the same bet again.



Corn

On what terms.



Hilbert

No terms. It's a bet with myself. I win either way.



Herman

Hilbert, that is not helping.



Corn

It does raise the question, though, of who would actually write and enforce a code like this in the Israeli context.



Herman

It's the right question, and it's the one Hannah is going to have to answer before the design question.



Corn

Because the design question has an answer. We've just spent forty minutes giving it.



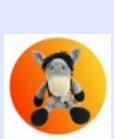
Herman

Write the frame, not the building. Regulate the street wall, the height envelope, the material palette, and the vista. Leave the style alone.



Corn

Then find a person who will sit in a room on King George Street for four hours in the middle of a negotiation and refuse to trade the facade away. Which is the part that has no code in it.



Herman

That's the part this episode can't solve, because it isn't a design problem.



Corn

It's a personnel problem.



Herman

I want to hold that as the open question for the next episode in this thread, because I think it's the actual bottleneck. The landholding question, who owns the site and enforces the code across decades, and the personnel question, who's sitting in the room when the trade is being made. Those two things determine whether the design framework means anything.



Corn

The other thread that's still live is the architectural language question for an Israeli city. We got to the level of, regulate the substrate, not the surface. But we didn't get to the level of, substrate in this landscape, in this climate, with this stone supply, looks like what.



Herman

Which is where the neuroaesthetics angle from Buras might have something to say, because it would let you test more than one substrate and see which one people actually respond to.



Corn

All three threads are open.



Herman

All three are the same episode, in a sense. Which city do we want, and who's going to make sure we get it.



Corn

If you enjoyed this, the previous episode on Modiin, Safdie, and the suburb that was meant to be a city is the natural companion. And the whole archive is at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

We had help from Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer.



Corn

Send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot.



Herman

If you want more of this, try episode twenty, Architectural AI; episode three sixteen, The Broken Chain of Design; and episode fifty-eight ninety-six, Modiin, Safdie, and the Suburb That Was Meant to Be a City. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Corn

We'll be back soon.

SOURCES

What the research for this episode read before the script was written. Primary sources first.

1. **Safdie Architects [primary]**
   New City of Modi'in project page
   https://www.safdiearchitects.com/projects/new-city-of-modiin

2. **Paris PLU [primary]**
   Land Use Plan Regulations, General Urban Zone (UG), approved 2016-07-04/07, updated 2025-07-17
   https://cdn.paris.fr/paris/2020/02/26/16107d9c38a049046444a7b6301df1aa.ai

3. **Paris PLU [primary]**
   Marais regulation
   https://cdn.paris.fr/paris/2020/02/26/231c8fcc289ecfb8462074c893c2eb71.pdf

4. **Harvard University Press [primary]**
   The Art of Classic Planning by Nir Haim Buras
   https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674919242

5. **Classic Planning Institute [primary]**
   Dr. Nir Buras bio
   https://www.classicplanning.org/bio

6. **Globes**
   Modi'in at 20, vision and reality, Ori Chudy, 2014-07-02
   https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-modiin-at-20-vision-and-reality-1000952124

7. **ArchNewsNow**
   The Master Plan for the New City of Modi'in, Len Abelman, 2002-04-29
   https://www.archnewsnow.com/features/Feature22.htm

8. **Wikipedia**
   Form-based code
   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Form-based_code

9. **Your Observer**
   Opinion: The Promise and Pitfalls of Form-Based Codes, Adrian Moore, 2018-02-01
   https://www.yourobserver.com/news/2018/feb/01/the-promise-and-pitfalls-of-form-based-codes/

10. **Wikipedia**
    Haussmann's renovation of Paris
    https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haussmann%27s_renovation_of_Paris

11. **Plink**
    Modiin, Safdie, and the Suburb That Was Meant to Be a City, 2026-10-12 (prior episode)
    https://plinkhq.com/i/1868354117/e/1000795947121

12. **Times of Israel**
    Modiin expansion plan divides green organizations from residential groups
    https://www.timesofisrael.com/modiin-expansion-plan-divides-green-organizations-from-residential-groups/

13. **Haaretz**
    Was Building City of Modi'in a Mistake? Guy Liberman, 2008-07-14
    https://www.haaretz.com/2008-07-14/ty-article/was-building-city-of-modiin-a-mistake/0000017f-f975-d318-afff-fb77d4990000