Episode Book

EPISODE #5896

Modiin, Safdie, and the Suburb That Was Meant to Be a City

PUBLISHED	12 October 2026 at 11:48 UTC
DURATION	47:13
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/modiin-safdie-israel-urban-planning-75009/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.4
SOURCES	18 cited by the research (listed at the end)
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:41 UTC

SYNOPSIS

Israel is projected to grow by three million people in fourteen years, and most of that new fabric will be laid down after the car. What went wrong in Modiin — the best-documented Israeli new city that was explicitly designed to be urban and became a bedroom community — and what would it take to build differently? This episode digs into Safdie's own planning guidelines, the code that produced coherence across dozens of developers, and why the form was right while the life was wrong. Then: land, approvals, financing, transit, and the regulatory reforms moving through the Knesset right now, plus the case for a brand-new mid-sized Israeli city of fifty to a hundred thousand people, walkable and rail-connected, built on traditional urban principles with a contemporary neo-Levantine language.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

In nineteen eighty-nine, Moshe Safdie stood on a hill in the Ayalon Valley and promised he was going to build a normal city. Streets with shops. Boulevards. A real downtown. Not a suburb.



Herman

And thirty-seven years later, the residents of that city tell reporters there is nowhere to go in the evening.



Corn

That's Modiin. And it's what Hannah's asking about.



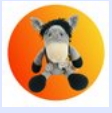
Herman

Hannah sent this one in.



Corn

She did. She's been chewing on the city versus suburb question with us for a while now, and she's noticed something about the way we talk about it. The research we keep reaching for is American. Jane Jacobs, Strong Towns, the whole canon. So she wants to bring it home.



Herman

To Israel specifically.



Corn

Her point is this. She loves living here. But so much of the country was laid down after the car arrived, under modernist planning assumptions, and outside of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa and a handful of older towns, a lot of places that are officially cities feel like suburbs. Modiin is her emblem of the missed opportunity. Big population, low character,



Corn (continued)

car-dependent, disconnected from anything that makes a city feel alive.



Herman

And then she goes further than diagnosis.



Corn

She does. She has a long-term dream as an architect. A brand new mid-sized city in Israel. Fifty to a hundred thousand people, somewhere in the north or the south, functioning as a real place rather than a dormitory for somewhere else. Walkable, mid-density, four to six storeys with some variation, mixed-use streets that can support actual businesses, good public space, real civic buildings, a contemporary neo-Levantine architectural language built out of local materials instead of generic concrete boxes. Fully modern, but organised on traditional urban principles. And plugged into rail.



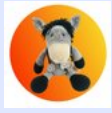
Herman

So the question is what it would actually take.



Corn

That's the question. How do you write an architectural and urban code strong enough to produce coherent character without turning the whole thing into pastiche, or requiring one architect to design every building? How do you get developers, government, the transit authorities and the planners pulling in the same direction? Poundbury is the obvious precedent and Israel plainly doesn't have the same landholding structure, so what's the local equivalent? And then the big one. What has to change in the regulations, because Israeli planning is slow, projects take decades, and the system still assumes you're arriving by car.



Herman

That last one is where the interesting material is.



Corn

Then let's get to it.



Herman

Here's the thing I want to establish before we get anywhere near the dream city. This is not a story about whether Israel can build something nice. Israel builds constantly. This is a story about why the machinery Israel already has produces suburban outcomes even when the stated intention is urban.



Corn

The intention was urban in Modiin.



Herman

Explicitly urban. And that's what makes it the case study rather than any random town. But before we get to Modiin, the scale of the thing. Israel is nine point six million people. Projected to hit twelve point eight million by twenty forty. That's three million more people in fourteen years.



Corn

Three million people need somewhere to live.



Herman

And they are going to get built for whether or not anybody plans it well. That's the frame. The country is going to lay down an enormous amount of new urban fabric in the next two decades. The choice between more Modiins and something better is being made right now, in committee rooms, by people who are not architects.



Corn

So the episode is really three questions stacked on top of each other.



Herman

Three. The diagnosis first. What actually went wrong in Modiin, which is the best-documented Israeli new city that was explicitly designed to be urban and became a bedroom community. Second, the design question, which is how a code rather than an architect produces coherent character across a whole city. And third, the machinery question. Land, approvals, financing, transit, and the regulatory reforms that are moving through the Knesset right now.



Corn

And the payoff, which I want to flag early because it's the thing that made me sit up. The answer to the design question is already sitting inside Modiin's own planning guidelines.



Herman

It is.



Corn

Which is encouraging and a little damning at the same time.



Herman

Both. Let's start with the diagnosis, because the most useful case study here is not a failure of architecture. It's a failure of everything around the architecture.



Corn

Take me back. Israel suburbanised. When, and why does it look the way it does?



Herman

So the massive suburbanisation happens over the last three to four decades. Which puts the bulk of it after the car was already the default assumption everywhere in the developed world. That timing matters more than people give it credit for.



Corn

Because if you're laying down new towns in the nineteen eighties and nineties, you're not building on a medieval street pattern with a few cars squeezing through. You're building from a blank site, and the blank site means you can do anything, and what you do is whatever the professional consensus of the moment is.



Herman

And the professional consensus of that moment was modernist, car-accommodating, zoned, separated by function. You've got the road hierarchy, you've got the separation of residential from commercial, you've got the assumption that a household has a car and maybe a second one. This is not an Israeli peculiarity. It's a global pattern.



Corn

But there's a local particularity.



Herman

There's a local particularity, and it comes from Israel's spatial history. Israel's new towns weren't conceived as urban places in their own right. They were conceived as instruments. Absorption. Dispersal. Populate the periphery. Establish a presence. Take pressure off the coastal strip. The town is a mechanism for achieving a national goal, not a settlement that grew because people wanted to live there.



Corn

Which produces commuter logic by design.



Herman

Produces commuter logic by design. If the point of the town is to house people who work somewhere else, you build for the commute. You build a good road out. You don't necessarily build a reason to stay in the evening, because staying in the evening was never the objective.



Corn

And you can build that way indefinitely. It's not that anyone sat down and decided to make bad towns. It's that nobody sat down and decided to make good ones.



Herman

And this is where Modiin comes in, because Modiin is the exception. Someone did sit down.



Corn

This is the part that surprised me.



Herman

Moshe Safdie. One of the most celebrated architects alive. He designed the city from eighty-eight, eighty-nine. First residents moved in ninety-six. And he's completely explicit about what he was trying to do.



Corn

What did he say?



Herman

He said the city needs to be an urban place, not suburban. It needs to be a normal city. And then he says it shouldn't look like a collection of building projects or a collection of autonomous neighbourhoods. There must be a city centre, architectural diversity, population diversity.



Corn

That could have come out of Hannah's prompt.



Herman

Almost word for word. And he's explicit about his reference points. He's drawing on A.B. Yehoshua's essay In Praise of Normalcy, and on old Tel Aviv. Rothschild Boulevard. He wanted streets with shops.



Corn

So the man who designed the city Daniel and Hannah hold up as the emblem of the missed opportunity designed it with their stated intentions, decades earlier, and wrote them down.



Herman

That's the central irony of the whole episode. The city that's the cautionary tale was designed by a world-class architect who said exactly the right things.



Corn

So what went wrong? Did he not get his way?



Herman

He got a lot of his way. Look at what he actually built. The plan is organised around east-west valleys as movement spines. He calls one of them a Cardo Maximus of community life. And at least fifty percent of each valley is devoted to parks, schools, synagogues and clinics. That's not suburban. That's a spine of public life running through the whole settlement.



Corn

Fifty percent of the valley is public.



Herman

Minimum. And then north-south parkways lined with thirty-metre garden strips. Housing generally limited to four storeys, terraced up the hillsides at fifty persons per acre. A majority of the housing is three and four storey walk-up flats, not detached houses.



Corn

Every unit has an outdoor space?



Herman

Every unit is required to have a garden, a roof terrace or a balcony. That's a written requirement. Not a bonus, not an upgrade. Every unit.



Corn

Fifty persons per acre. Put that in perspective for me.



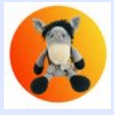
Herman

It's mid-density. It's not the tower-and-podium thing and it's not the villa-and-lawn thing. It's the in-between register that most of the English-speaking world abandoned in the twentieth century and has spent the last twenty years trying to rebuild.



Corn

So he built the density Hannah's asking for.



Herman

He built the density. He built the walk-ups. He built the valleys. And then there's the bit that should stop everybody who's been following the design debate.



Corn

The code.



Herman

Safdie's planning guidelines promote these urban principles by regulating setbacks, footprints and heights of buildings. And cladding guidelines apply to public, commercial and high-rise buildings. And then the sentence that matters.



Corn

Read it to me.



Herman

This allows planned growth to occur comfortably by different developers and architects.



Corn

Say that again slowly.



Herman

Different developers and architects. Not one master architect. Not a design review board approving every facade. A regulatory code governing setbacks, footprints, heights and cladding, and the coherence comes out of the code.



Corn

So Hannah's question about how you maintain coherent character without pastiche or a single-author city has an answer, and the answer is sitting in the planning documents of the city she considers a failure.



Herman

Which is either the most encouraging thing in this episode or the most damning, depending on how you read it.



Corn

I think it's damning.



Herman

Why?



Corn

Because it means the code was never the problem. If the code worked well enough that a whole city could be built coherently by dozens of different developers, then all the effort people spend arguing about design codes, all the Poundbury hand-wringing about pastiche, that's not where the failure lives. The failure lives somewhere else. Somewhere less glamorous.



Herman

It lives in the car infrastructure and the jobs-housing balance.



Corn

Say it plainly.



Herman

The form was right and the life was wrong. Modiin has good bone structure and no pulse.



Corn

That's the line.



Herman

The residents are blunt about it. There's a piece from twenty fourteen where people describe the city as a bedroom community. Almost no one works in the city, everyone commutes. Someone says there are no places that are late additions, so it lacks personality. Another resident says if you want to go out in the evening there are almost no options and you have to get in the car.



Corn

You have to get in the car.



Herman

That's the lot in one sentence. And the physical description matches. The Times of Israel describes a large number of single-storey red-roofed homes, mainly low apartment buildings, wide boulevards traversed mainly by private cars.



Corn

Wide boulevards. Safdie wanted boulevards.



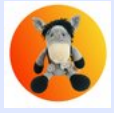
Herman

Wide boulevards traversed mainly by private cars. The form and the use came apart.



Corn

What about the town centre?



Herman

The town centre has a fifteen hundred car underground parking garage and a three hundred fifty seat community theatre.



Corn

Fifteen hundred spaces under the centre of a walkable city.



Herman

I don't think Safdie was trying to build a walkable city in the contemporary sense. He was building a normal mid-century city, and normal mid-century cities had parking. The garage isn't a betrayal of his intent. It's a faithful expression of it.



Corn

That's fair. And it's actually a better diagnosis than just saying he got it wrong.



Herman

He got the equation right on paper and the variables wrong in practice. If almost everybody who lives there works somewhere else, eighty percent of the adult population leaves every morning and comes back at seven. You can build the most beautiful main street in the Levant. It'll have a bakery and a falafel place, and the bakery will close at two because there's nobody on the street at eleven in the morning.



Corn

The shops need daytime footfall. The daytime footfall needs local employment. The local employment needs an economic reason to be there. That's not a planning problem, that's an employment geography problem.



Herman

And that's the hard part, because you can write a code that regulates setbacks. You can't write a code that regulates where the jobs are.



Corn

Unless you build the jobs into the original brief.



Herman

Unless you do. And Safdie's own retrospective is revealing. He says, in retrospect, the valleys are the great innovation and the success of Modiin.



Corn

The valleys.



Herman

The pedestrian-scaled public spines. The parts where people actually move on foot. He's not out there defending the road network. He's defending the bit that worked, and the bit that worked is the bit that wasn't car-shaped.



Corn

So the man who designed it, twenty years later, points at the walkable part and says that was the good bit.



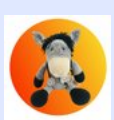
Herman

Which is either a vindication or a eulogy.



Corn

Which is a vindication of the argument and a eulogy for the city. Here's what I keep coming back to. Nobody in that planning process was ignorant. Safdie had read Yehoshua. He'd looked at Rothschild Boulevard. He knew what he was doing. And the result still has fifteen hundred parking spaces under the town centre.



Herman

Because every individual decision was defensible.



Corn

Say more.



Herman

Every individual decision in the chain is reasonable. Of course there's parking, because there's no transit yet. Of course there's no transit yet, because the density isn't there. Of course the density is capped at four storeys, because the Ministry pushed back. Of course the jobs aren't there yet, because the population isn't there. Of course the population isn't there yet, because the housing is what it is. You can defend every link and still end up with a suburb.



Corn

So the failure is systemic rather than local.



Herman

And the reassuring thing about a systemic failure is that it doesn't require a genius to fix it. It requires changing the rules so that the reasonable individual decision produces a different result.



Corn

Which is a much worse problem to have, actually. A stupid architect can be replaced. A system that punishes good architects is a lifetime's work.



Herman

That's why Daniel's question is hard.



Corn

Hannah's question.



Herman

Hannah's. Sorry.



Corn

And it's a question that's live right now, not just a thought experiment, because Modiin is expanding.



Herman

It is. The planned future population is two hundred fifty thousand, up from roughly ninety thousand today. Which means another hundred and sixty thousand people in the same city.



Corn

And there's a fight about how they get built.



Herman

There's a fight. Eighteen local organisations appealed to the planning authorities asking for more density. Five thousand people signed a petition. Ten thousand dunams of open space are zoned for construction.



Corn

So eighteen organisations, meaning multiple resident groups, asked for more density, not less.



Herman

Asked for more density. That surprises people who assume residents always fight density. Here, resident groups were on the densification side, at least in part, and the environmental organisations were the ones defending open space. The Society for the Protection of Nature planner, Moshe Perelmuter, says of the twenty forty plan, we've set the city's boundaries once and for all, and he calls it the best of its kind he's seen to date.



Corn

So the twenty forty plan is the one the environmental side is happy with.



Herman

And the resident side wanted more density inside those boundaries. And somebody had to lose, and it was the densifiers. That's what a new city's fight looks like in miniature. Density against open space, and the question of who gets to decide.



Corn

Because the twenty forty plan draws a line around the city, and inside the line you build and outside the line you don't. Which is good conservation policy and also a cap on how much the place can densify.



Herman

And you can't easily complain about that either, because every Israeli city that hasn't set a boundary is now eating its surrounding land. The Perelmuter approach is correct. It's just that correct approaches have consequences.



Corn

So the question of whether Modiin becomes a denser city or a wider city is already decided, and it's been decided denser.



Herman

It's been decided denser within a boundary that was drawn by planners rather than developers, which is the better outcome.



Corn

But not a walkable one.



Herman

Not automatically. Denser isn't walkable. You can stack apartments around a parking lot and call it density. The question of whether the new Modiin neighbourhoods are walkable is still open. And that's exactly the code question coming back around, isn't it? Because the code exists. The formula works. The problem is the will.



Corn

Whose will?



Herman

Everyone's. The developers would rather build what they know sells. The Ministry of Housing would rather hit unit numbers than design outcomes. The transit authority plans rail on a national timescale and a neighbourhood on a municipal timescale, and they never quite align.



Corn

And the residents want the city to be nice but they also want their parking.



Herman

And their parking. Everybody wants the parking. The parking is the one thing nobody wants to give up.



Corn

Parking is the load-bearing metaphor here.



Herman

Parking is the load-bearing metaphor.



Corn

So we've got the diagnosis. The code worked. The car infrastructure and the jobs balance didn't. What does that say about Hannah's dream city?



Herman

It says the code is the easy part. It says Safdie already solved the design problem and didn't get the outcome he wanted, which means the design problem was never the binding constraint.



Corn

And the binding constraint is the machinery.



Herman

The machinery. And that's where the last few years of Israeli legislation get interesting.



Corn

Let's go there. What does the machinery actually look like?



Herman

So the basic shape is that Israeli planning is centralised. National authorities can push things through, and there's a well-documented critique of this. The academic term for the fast-track bodies is supertankers, because they can bypass the existing planning process and even ignore existing statutory plans.



Corn

Supertankers.



Herman

Supertankers. The image is a floating city that doesn't turn for anybody. Once it's moving, it's moving.



Corn

And the critique is that this overrides public input and local plans.



Herman

That's the critique. And I'm going to be careful here, because a walkable-city advocate in Israel has an awkward relationship with this critique.



Corn

Why awkward?



Herman

Because the supertankers are the only thing in the Israeli system that can actually deliver a project in less than twenty years. If you want to build a city from scratch inside a human lifetime, you need the thing that overrides the process. And if you're the sort of person who thinks public input matters, you also hate the thing that overrides the process. You can't have both.



Corn

So the mechanism Hannah needs is the mechanism she'd otherwise be suspicious of.



Herman

And I don't think that tension gets resolved. I think a serious advocate just picks a side and lives with it. Every fast-track city in the world makes that trade.



Corn

Give me the concrete Israeli version.



Herman

VATMAL. The National Committee for Planning and Construction of Preferred Housing Complexes. Chaired by Rabbi Natan Elnatan. It approves large plans at speed. South Glilot, for example, went through it. Nineteen thousand three hundred and twenty units, up from eighteen thousand five hundred.



Corn

Nineteen thousand units in one approval.



Herman

In one approval. South Or Yehuda, another eight thousand six hundred units. And the law establishing VATMAL passed the Knesset seventeen to one.



Corn

Seventeen to one. That's not a contested vote.



Herman

It wasn't. Because everybody in the room wants housing built, and VATMAL is the machine that builds housing. The argument is about where and how, not whether.



Corn

So the mechanism for getting government on board with a big new settlement is not a coalition of willing developers. It's a statutory committee with override power.



Herman

Correct. And that reframes the whole question. When Hannah asks how you get developers, government, transit authorities and planners on board, the Israeli answer is not to build consensus, because consensus in that system is what produces the twenty-year delay. The Israeli answer is to get a statutory vehicle and use it.



Corn

Which is not the answer a Western urbanist would give.



Herman

Not remotely. But it's the one that matches the system.



Corn

And the most recent development on that front is a bill about new settlements specifically.



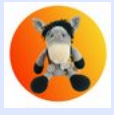
Herman

Twenty twenty five. Expedited Procedures for Establishing New Settlements. This is the single most actionable regulatory fact for what Hannah's asking.



Corn

What does it do?



Herman

It would let the government declare a strategic national need, and on that basis grant exemptions from permits or from plans for new settlements. And the recommendation could come from the Settlements Minister, the National Security Minister, or the Defense Minister.



Corn

So the state is already legislating a fast path to new settlements.



Herman

Already legislating it. Which means the vehicle exists. It's just designed for strategic and security purposes rather than for urbanist ones.



Corn

That's the twist. The mechanism Hannah would need is being built right now, but it's being built for a different purpose.



Herman

And a serious advocate has to decide how to relate to that. One option is to try to ride it, to argue that a well-planned new city is itself a strategic national need. The other is to accept that the vehicle is going to be pointed at places a walkable-city advocate doesn't want it pointed at, and to try to build a parallel vehicle through ordinary legislation.



Corn

Which raises the question of how long a parallel route takes.



Herman

The ordinary legislation route is probably a decade of political work. And then another decade for the first residents. So the answer to inside a human lifetime is yes, but only if you're comfortable working on a twenty-year horizon before anything is built.



Corn

That's not nothing. If you're thirty, twenty years is fine. If you're seventy, it's not your project.



Herman

The time horizon is the whole game. Because by the time you've built the city, the population has grown by the amount the city houses, and the demographic pressure that justified it is still there, and someone's already asking about the next one.



Corn

So the design is not the slowdown. The land allocation is.



Herman

Weren't we going to talk about the smaller regulatory moves?



Corn

The amendments.



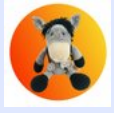
Herman

Amendment one sixty. Passed the Knesset thirty-first of March twenty twenty five, published third of April. A package of amendments to the Planning and Building Law from sixty-five.



Corn

Wait, nineteen sixty-five?



Herman

The Planning and Building Law dates to sixty-five. That's part of the problem. The system that governs a country of nine point six million people was written when Israel had fewer than two and a half million.



Corn

Say that again.



Herman

Fewer than two and a half million. The law has been amended about a hundred and seventy times, and it still carries the bones of a sixties statute.



Corn

So every reform is a fight against the template.



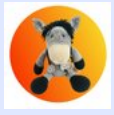
Herman

Every reform is bolted onto a sixties skeleton. And then Amendment one seventy, published twentieth of July twenty twenty six, amends Section six of that law to add the phrase or commerce alongside employment in the land-use provisions.



Corn

Or commerce.



Herman

Small phrase. Big deal.



Corn

Say why.



Herman

Because in the original framing you had employment zones, which means offices and industry, and residential zones, and commercial zones if you wanted them, but you didn't have mixed-use. Adding or commerce to the employment provisions is the smallest possible statutory nudge toward mixed-use streets.



Corn

So the legal system is, very slowly, admitting that a street can be a shop and an apartment and a small workshop all at once.



Herman

That's exactly what it's admitting, and the admission is one phrase long.



Corn

One phrase. In twenty twenty six.



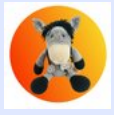
Herman

And I want to be clear, I'm not being sarcastic. This is how planning law moves. You don't get mixed-use by legislating mixed-use. You get mixed-use by inserting or commerce into Section six and letting four thousand local committees figure out what it means.



Corn

That's the work. That's the unglamorous work.



Herman

That's the work Hannah would be signing up for. Getting the or commerce into the statute.



Corn

And that gets us to transit.



Herman

Transit. Because you can zone the perfect mixed-use street and nobody will walk it if the rail doesn't come.



Corn

What's the Israeli transit-led planning model?



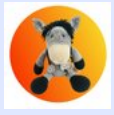
Herman

TAMA seventy. It's the national outline plan for the Tel Aviv Metro. The requirement is that new development is designed around high-capacity transit.



Corn

So the plan draws the transit and the development follows the transit.



Herman

It draws the transit and requires the development to be fit for it. And then the more interesting part is TAMA seventy A, which enables an entire urban district above the M1 metro depot in Rishon LeZion.



Corn

Above the depot.



Herman

On top of the maintenance facility. And the Israeli planners call it the first planning initiative of its kind in Israel.



Corn

Because nobody's ever done air rights over a rail depot here.



Herman

And that's directly relevant to Hannah's question, because it shows that when the state has a strategic reason to build a transit-led district, it can do it. The Rishon LeZion district exists because the metro needed a depot and the planners asked what else could go on top.



Corn

So the model for the dream city is not Poundbury.



Herman

The model for the dream city is TAMA seventy A, plus Safdie's code, plus a VATMAL-style vehicle.



Corn

That's an Israeli synthesis, not an import.



Herman

It has to be. Because the Poundbury question has a specific answer, and the answer is that it doesn't map.



Corn

Say why.



Herman

Poundbury works because there's a single landowner capturing the land value uplift. The Duchy of Cornwall owns the land. It builds the streets, it builds the houses, it rents and sells, and it captures the difference between agricultural land value and urban land value and reinvests it in the place. When the code says the corner building needs to be three storeys with a stone front, the Duchy can afford to build it, because the Duchy captures the uplift.



Corn

And in Israel?



Herman

In Israel, the land is overwhelmingly publicly owned and administered by the Israel Land Authority. The state is the landowner, but it doesn't act like the Duchy of Cornwall. It auctions land to private developers, who build and sell, and the uplift goes mostly to those developers.



Corn

So the Israeli state is the big landowner but without the big landowner's incentive to build well.



Herman

The Poundbury model requires a landlord who cares about the long-term character of the place, because the landlord holds it forever. The Israeli state owns the land forever but auctions the use on a seventy-year lease and doesn't have a long-term character interest.



Corn

Which is why the Israeli equivalent wouldn't be Poundbury.



Herman

The Israeli equivalent would be a state-led or state-chartered development corporation, with a long-term land lease and a design code, closer to a Dutch or Singapore model than a British one.



Corn

Singapore, then. The Housing Development Board.



Herman

The HDB model. The state owns the land, the state builds the housing, the state captures the uplift and reinvests it. The tradeoffs are different, obviously. The HDB model is not libertarian and it's not a small-government solution. It's a state solution.



Corn

But it's the one that matches Israel's landholding structure.



Herman

It's the one that matches. Which means the Poundbury fantasy is the wrong fantasy. The right fantasy is a national development corporation with a mandate to build a specific city and a statutory code, funded by the land uplift, and designed to sell or lease out once it's complete.



Corn

Does that exist anywhere in Israel?



Herman

It doesn't. We looked. There's no dedicated Israeli Poundbury. There's no built or planned project explicitly modelled on the Duchy of Cornwall approach. The closest analogues are government-initiated new towns like Modiin and Harish, and metro-led districts like TAMA seventy A in Rishon LeZion.



Corn

So there's no Israeli precedent.



Herman

There's no single-project precedent. There's an intellectual movement.



Corn

Which leads us to Buras.



Herman

Which takes us to Nir Haim Buras. He's an Israeli-American architect and urban planner. He's a leading figure in the New Classical Architecture movement. He founded the Classic Planning Institute in Washington, D.C. in twenty twenty one.



Corn

And he's Israeli.



Herman

He started as a military architect and planner in the IDF. He holds a doctorate from the Technion in Haifa, and he's taught at the Technion.



Corn

So the intellectual heavyweight of the traditional urbanism movement is a Technion graduate with an IDF background.



Herman

And his book is the manifesto. The Art of Classic Planning, Building Beautiful and Enduring Communities, Harvard University Press, twenty nineteen. He visited over a hundred cities to write it.



Corn

What are the principles?



Herman

Five of them. Plan cities based on community aspiration. There is no good urbanism without good architecture. Plan and design for long-term resilience. Respect the magic of a place, and balance town and country. Design and build cities based on timeless wisdom.



Corn

That last one is going to make half the profession wince.



Herman

It does. And the book has critics. The architectural historian Mark Alan Hewitt called it spurious and historically flawed, with a polemical, skewed history of urbanism and architecture.



Corn

Hewitt's not wrong that it's polemical.



Herman

Hewitt's not wrong. But polemical isn't the same as wrong, and the criticism doesn't invalidate the argument. It means Buras is fighting a war and the war has two sides.



Corn

Now the important caveat here.



Herman

The important caveat. There is no evidence of a Buras-led Israeli new-city project. His ties to Israel are educational. The doctorate, the teaching. The Classic Planning Institute is in Washington. He's an intellectual reference point, not a builder of the Israeli city Hannah's describing.



Corn

Which means if she wants a Buras, she's got the man for the philosophy and not the man for the shovels.



Herman

She's got the philosophy. The shovels are her problem.



Corn

And the philosophy might be the easier half.



Herman

It usually is.



Corn

Okay. Let's assemble the roadmap. Because this is what Hannah actually asked for, and I don't want us to leave it as a pile of interesting facts.



Herman

Fair.



Corn

Land first. Because you can't build anything until you've got the land, and in Israel the land is the state's.



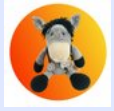
Herman

Land first. A new city requires a government decision to allocate land and establish a development body. And that decision is going to go through either the strategic national need mechanism in the twenty twenty five bill, or a dedicated Knesset law, or a national outline plan that carves out the site.



Corn

And the Knesset law route is the safest but the slowest.



Herman

Safest and slowest. The fastest route is the twenty twenty five bill's vehicle, and the fastest route is also the one that puts the decision in the hands of whoever controls the strategic national need declaration.



Corn

Which is the Settlements Minister, the National Security Minister, or the Defense Minister.



Herman

Which is who it is.



Corn

So the fastest path to a walkable city in Israel runs through the national security committee.



Herman

It runs through whichever office the bill designates as the recommender. And if you want to build a city in the Negev, or the Galilee, or the Arava valley, you probably want that recommender to be somebody with a reason to say yes.



Corn

That's the land step. Approvals second.



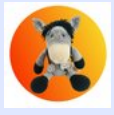
Herman

Approvals. Two paths. There's the standard statutory route, which is decades. And there's the VATMAL-style fast-track route, which is months to a couple of years, with override power.



Corn

Which is the one anybody serious is going to reach for.



Herman

And the reason is not that they're impatient. It's that the standard route is so slow that by the time you've finished the approvals, the land values have moved and the financing has collapsed.



Corn

So the standard route isn't just slow, it's uninvestable.



Herman

It's uninvestable. Which is why VATMAL exists, and why it passed seventeen to one. Because the Knesset decided a decade ago that the standard route was not a serious pathway to building housing.



Corn

Financing third.



Herman

Financing. And this is where the Israeli answer gets uncomfortable for a liberal urbanist.



Corn

Why?



Herman

Because the development economics of Israel are dominated by the Israel Land Authority's land auctions and by the major developers who bid on them. And the ILA auctions land at market price. Which means a new city at the periphery gets a land price that reflects the periphery's market value, which is relatively low. And the developer who wins the auction has no reason to reinvest the uplift because the uplift was already paid to the state.



Corn

So the state captures the uplift at the land auction and doesn't reinvest it in the city.



Herman

The state captures the uplift at the auction and reinvests it wherever the treasury decides to reinvest it. Which is usually not in the specific district where the auction happened, because the treasury is a national treasury.



Corn

So the funding mechanism for the new city's public realm is broken by construction.



Herman

Broken by construction. And the fix is either a state-backed development corporation that holds the uplift, or a special levy that captures a portion of the uplift for local infrastructure. Both require legislation.



Corn

Transit fourth.



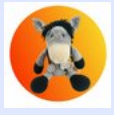
Herman

Transit fourth, and this one is the one to get right at the beginning, because if you build transit after the city, you've built a Modiin.



Corn

Say the Modiin mechanism explicitly, because this is what Hannah's worried about.



Herman

Modiin's problem is that the rail came later. The city proved itself as a commuter town first, and the rail connection followed, and by the time the rail got there, everybody had a car and the street pattern was built around the car. The rail is fine. It's not solving the problem because the problem was locked in before the rail arrived.



Corn

So the rule is transit-first.



Herman

Transit-first, and connected to the national rail network from day one, not in a second phase, not subject to the second five-year plan. Day one.



Corn

Which means the transit authorities are sitting at the initial planning table, not consulted after the plan is finished.



Herman

Which means the planners go to the transit authorities and say, we're building a new city, where can you put a station, and the transit authority tells them, and the city is planned around the station.



Corn

That's the TAMA seventy logic imported to the periphery.



Herman

That's exactly what TAMA seventy does, just applied to the Tel Aviv metro area instead of to a greenfield site. The logic is portable.



Corn

Architectural code fifth.



Herman

And here's the good news. Safdie already showed how. Regulate setbacks, footprints, heights. Regulate cladding on public, commercial, and high-rise buildings. Specify that units must have outdoor space. Set a minimum density and a maximum height. And then let dozens of different architects and developers build inside those rules.



Corn

And the coherence comes out of the code.



Herman

The coherence comes out of the code. And a mixed-use land-use regime on top, which is where Amendment one seventy earns its keep, because the or commerce clause is the statutory hook for the street-level shops and workshops.



Corn

Construction sixth.



Herman

Construction sixth, and this is the least uncertain part. Israel has construction capacity. The country builds tens of thousands of housing units a year. The bottleneck is not the cranes.



Corn

The bottleneck is everything upstream of the cranes.



Herman

Land, approvals, financing, transit alignment, code, and then cranes.



Corn

So if I'm Hannah and I'm thirty-five, and I actually want to do this, what's the schedule?



Herman

The schedule is that the first five years are land allocation and the statutory vehicle. Five years of getting the land designated and the development corporation chartered and the funding mechanism legislated.



Corn

Five years of nothing to look at.



Herman

And then five years of approvals through whatever fast-track vehicle you've built. And then ten years of construction and build-out, because a hundred thousand people is a lot of building.



Corn

Which puts the first residents in around year eleven.



Herman

Around year eleven or twelve. And the last residents around year twenty.



Corn

So it's doable inside a human lifetime. It just requires the first five years to be spent on the thing nobody wants to spend five years on.



Herman

The legal architecture.



Corn

And that's the answer to Hannah's question. A statutory answer.



Herman

The most actionable version of the answer is that if she wants to help create a new walkable Israeli city, the career move is not architecture school. The career move is getting a law degree and going into planning reform.



Corn

That's a brutal answer.



Herman

It's the honest one.



Corn

Before we get to Hilbert, one more document let me flag, because it's the missing input.



Herman

The OECD report.



Corn

Redefining Spatial Planning and Development in Israel. Published August twenty twenty five. A full country review of Israeli spatial planning, from the OECD. That is the single most authoritative external assessment of exactly the system Hannah's asking about.



Herman

Which we couldn't get.



Corn

The PDF returned as binary and the web page was blocked. We know it exists. We know it's from August twenty twenty five. We know it's a full country review. We don't know what it recommends.



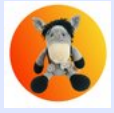
Herman

Which is frustrating, because it's exactly the document you'd want if you were going to spend a decade working on this.



Corn

So anyone listening who has institutional access, please retrieve that document, because it should be sitting in this conversation and it isn't.



Herman

It should be.



Corn

One more thing before Hilbert. The Modiin expansion fight is the live test case for all of this.



Herman

The twenty forty plan.



Corn

Eighteen local organisations appealing for denser building. Five thousand people signing a petition. Ten thousand dunams of open space zoned for construction. And the SPNI planner saying they've drawn the city's boundaries once and for all.



Herman

Calling it the best plan of its kind he's seen.



Corn

Which is the pairing. Because the twenty forty plan is a good plan on environmental terms and a tight plan on density terms, and the residents who wanted more housing wanted to break the boundary, and the environmental groups wanted to hold the line. And they can't both be right.



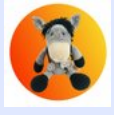
Herman

They can't both be right, and the plan chose the line.



Corn

Which means the densification Hannah would want is now living inside a boundary set by planners. Which is the good version of the constraint.



Herman

The good version.



Hilbert

The third architect on the project was named Yossi Kapon, and I want that on the record, because the hosts have been saying Safdie designed Modiin as if nobody else was there.



Hilbert

There were two architects of record on the original Modiin plan. Two. And my cousin insists he was the third.



Corn

The third architect.



Hilbert

On a team of two. He was an assistant site planner for the northern valleys in eighty-nine, and he says he was kept off the drawings because of a disagreement about the town centre, and specifically about whether the central garage should be underground.



Corn

Underground versus surface.



Hilbert

The argument was that the underground garage would put a roof over the space where the market was supposed to go. The plan called for a covered market square in the centre of Modiin, on the surface, with stalls, and my cousin says the covered market got moved into a building with a roof and doors and air conditioning, and it stopped being a market and became a supermarket.



Corn

And you believe this?



Hilbert

No. I said he was the third architect on a team of two. My cousin is a man who has been wrong about every major decision in his life and right about this one detail, and I have never worked out which one of those is the problem.



Herman

What did he do after Modiin?



Hilbert

He sold industrial tile in Ashdod for thirty years and retired to Modiin, where he lives now, in the northern valleys, in a fourth-floor walk-up he complains about because there is no lift.



Corn

The man who helped plan the walk-ups complains about walking up.



Hilbert

He complains about the walk-ups. And he complains about the parking. And he complains about the fact that if you want to get a coffee at nine in the evening, you drive to the mall.



Corn

Which was his warning.



Hilbert

Which was his warning, and he has a framed copy of the original plan on the wall in his hallway, with his annotations on it in a particular shade of green ink that he says is the Minister of Housing's approval ink.



Herman

Is that a thing?



Hilbert

It is not a thing. And I have asked him, and he says I would not understand the ministry's procedures.



Corn

Do you know what I love about this? Your cousin's whole account is that one specific building in one specific location would have made Modiin work.



Hilbert

That is his account. He is wrong about that. Nothing would have made Modiin work unless people worked in Modiin.



Corn

He's wrong but not as wrong as he thinks you think he is.



Hilbert

He's wrong about the market. He's right about the jobs. And I will say, because I want it on the record, that the man has a photograph of himself standing on the site in eighty-eight, in his shirtsleeves, holding a surveyor's rod.



Herman

The photograph is dated.



Hilbert

The photograph is dated the fourth of March, eighty-eight. And Safdie's own account says he first saw the site from a helicopter, in the summer of eighty-eight.



Corn

Your cousin was standing on the site with a surveyor's rod four months before Safdie flew over it.



Hilbert

I have not asked him about this.



Corn

Why not?



Hilbert

Because I would rather not know.



Corn

Fair.



Hilbert

His name is Yossi. He is seventy-nine. And if you want a market in the middle of Modiin he will tell you where it was supposed to go, and he will be wrong, and he will be a little bit right, and you will leave his flat with a strong opinion about something that never got built.



Herman

Which is a good description of Modiin, actually.



Hilbert

It is not a description of Modiin. It's a description of my cousin. He is a difficult man and I am fond of him. And one of you dropped your level about five minutes ago, the room tone is up on the left channel.



Corn

We'll fix it.



Hilbert

The surveyor's rod is still in his hallway, by the way. Next to the framed plan. He says it was the only rod on the site for the first eighteen months.



Corn

Which is either a tool or a trophy.



Hilbert

It's a trophy.



Corn

Okay. Leaving aside Hilbert's cousin for a moment. Let's pull the threads together, because we've covered a lot of ground and the picture is more interesting than I expected.



Herman

It is.



Corn

The design question has a working answer and it's Safdie's code. Regulate setbacks, footprints, heights, cladding, and outdoor space, and let dozens of different developers and architects build inside those rules. And Hannah's anxiety about pastiche is misplaced, because the code isn't the thing that produces pastiche. Pastiche is what happens when you skip the code and try to reproduce a look.



Herman

The code was never the constraint. Safdie's code was shot through with good intentions and the city still has fifteen hundred parking spaces under its centre.



Corn

Which means the design answer is the easy part, and the regulation is the hard part.



Herman

The regulation is the hard part. And the regulation is actively being rewritten, right now, in the Knesset. VATMAL is in place. The twenty twenty five settlements bill is tabled. Amendment one sixty has passed. Amendment one seventy has passed. TAMA seventy is being implemented. The or commerce clause is on the books.



Corn

The machinery is being built on multiple parallel tracks.



Herman

On multiple parallel tracks, and none of them are aimed at a walkable city. They're aimed at housing and at strategic settlement. Which means a serious walkable-city advocate could try to ride those vehicles.



Corn

Or get shut out by them.



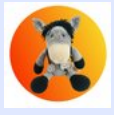
Herman

That's the live question.



Corn

What's not decided is the political question.



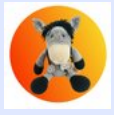
Herman

What's not decided is the political question.



Corn

Because none of this answers who gets to decide where a new city goes and who it's for. The mechanism is neutral. The choice of site and the choice of who lives there is not.



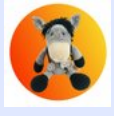
Herman

That choice is the one that never gets written into a planning code.



Corn

Right.



Herman

Which is the honest answer to Hannah's question, if I had to give one sentence.



Corn

Give it.



Herman

The design question is solved, the regulatory question is being legislated, and the political question is the one nobody has answered.



Corn

That's the episode. One forward thought, and then we'll wrap.



Herman

Go.



Corn

Israel is going to build for twelve point eight million people by twenty forty. Which means the country is going to lay down more than a Modiin in the next fourteen years, whether or not anyone plans it carefully. And the choice between more Modiins and something better is being made right now, by people who are not architects, in committee rooms that almost nobody is paying attention to.



Herman

That's the useful thing about Hannah's question. It reframes a design conversation as a political one.



Corn

It means the person who reads the OECD report and the text of Amendment one seventy might have more influence on the shape of the country than the person who wins the architecture competition.



Herman

Might have more influence than a hundred architecture competitions.



Corn

Which is either the most depressing or the most hopeful thing we've said.



Herman

I think it's hopeful.



Corn

Producer credit. Hilbert Flumingtop, for the levels and for giving us his cousin.



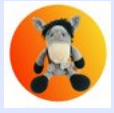
Herman

Hilbert Flumingtop. Also for the reminder that there were two architects of record.



Corn

There were two. For more along these lines, there's episode thirty-four thirty-nine, Why Ashdod Feels Like a Parking Lot; episode five oh four, How to Start Thinking Like an Urbanist; and episode thirty-four thirty-eight, What Makes a Beach Town Charming. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

If you like what we do, drop us a review wherever you're hearing this. It helps.



Corn

If you want us to take on a question of your own, send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot.



Herman

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. **Classic Planning Institute [primary]**
   Bio
   https://www.classicplanning.org/bio

3. **Harvard University Press [primary]**
   The Art of Classic Planning
   https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674919242

4. **Knesset [primary]**
   Law on National Planning and Building Committee for Priority Housing Areas (2021)
   https://main.knesset.gov.il/EN/News/PressReleases/Pages/press050821p.aspx

5. **Knesset Book of Laws [primary]**
   Planning and Building Law (Amendment No. 170), 2026, 2026-07-29
   https://fs.knesset.gov.il/25/law/25_lsr_143008432.pdf

6. **Israeli government [primary]**
   Planning and Building Law (Amendment No. 160), 2025, 2025-04-03
   https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/guide/legislative_updates/he/law_amendment_160.pdf

7. **Globes**
   Modi'in at 20, vision and reality, 2014-07-06
   https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-modiin-at-20-vision-and-reality-1000952124

8. **The 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/

9. **Wikipedia**
   Nir Buras
   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nir_Buras

10. **Globes**
Plans for huge new Tel Aviv gateway project approved (South Glilot)
https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-plans-for-huge-new-tel-aviv-gateway-project-approved-1001520731

11. **The Jerusalem Post**
8,600 new homes approved near Ben Gurion Airport
https://www.jpost.com/business-and-innovation/real-estate/article-851212

12. **Ynetnews**
Inside Israel's next-generation urban renewal plans
https://www.ynetnews.com/real-estate/article/sj5zczsxzx

13. **buyitinisrael**
TAMA 70: Revolutionizing Israel with the Tel Aviv Metro
https://www.buyitinisrael.com/news/tama-70-revolutionizing-israels-urban-future-with-the-tel-aviv-metro/

14. **ScienceDirect**
Playing with Supertankers: Centralization in Land Use Planning in Israel
https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0264837717311456

15. **knessetvotes.org**
Amendment No. 160 vote, 2025-03-31
https://knessetvotes.org/en/votes/43938

16. **OECD**
Redefining Spatial Planning and Development in Israel, August 2025 [primary, inaccessible]
https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/redefining-spatial-planning-and-development-in-israel_2eb14d94-en.html

17. **Semantic Scholar**
paper on Israeli densification/population growth
https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/aa0b/ee6def68ddde7219797ccd0078e0088f1701.pdf

18. **haipo**
This is what the first neighborhood in Haifa Bay will look like (TAMA 75)
https://haipo.co.il/en/item/629250