

## MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

### EPISODE #316

# The Architecture Cult: Why Our Cities Feel So Alien

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## EPISODE SYNOPSIS

In this episode of My Weird Prompts, Corn and Herman dive into a provocative prompt from Hannah, a Jerusalem-based architect grappling with a "crisis of conscience." They discuss why contemporary architectural education has abandoned thousands of years of traditional wisdom in favor of the "International Style" and the "machine for living." From the biological stress of featureless glass walls to the thermal genius of thick stone, the duo explores how we can reconnect the broken chain of design. Can we build 40-story towers that still feel like home? Join us as we look for a contemporary Israeli style that honors the human soul as much as the skyline.

## DANIEL'S PROMPT

## Daniel

"I'm an architect working in Jerusalem and I find myself at a crossroads between the world of contemporary architecture and what I see as good architecture that makes a livable city with buildings people actually love. I think the world of modernist architecture has essentially become a cult where schools only teach one style and ignore traditional construction materials and principles that have solved architectural problems for thousands of years. I don't think we should just be copying buildings from 300 years ago, but I'm interested in how we can pick up the chain of traditional design principles from where they were cut off around the 1930s and bring them into modern times. How can we create contemporary architecture for contemporary people that is beautiful, functional, and affordable? More specifically, how do we incorporate those principles into creating a new Israeli architectural style in Jerusalem?"

# TRANSCRIPT

## Corn

Hey everyone, welcome back to My Weird Prompts. I am Corn, and I am sitting here on our balcony in Jerusalem on this crisp Tuesday morning, January twenty seventh, twenty twenty six. Looking out at the skyline today is actually very relevant to our conversation. I can see at least a dozen cranes hovering over the western entrance to the city where the new Gateway project is rising. It is a forest of steel and concrete right now.

## Herman

And I am Herman Poppleberry. It is a beautiful day in the Holy City, Corn. Though, as we might discuss today, some of the things we are looking at are a bit more beautiful than others. That Gateway project you mentioned is a perfect example. We are talking about twenty new towers, some reaching forty stories high. It is a massive shift for a city that has historically been defined by its low-slung, stone-carved character.

## Corn

Exactly. And that brings us to a really special prompt today. Usually, our housemate Daniel sends us these wandering thoughts he has while walking around the neighborhood, but today he is actually playing messenger for his wife, Hannah.

## Herman

Yes, Hannah is an architect here in Jerusalem, and she sent over a fascinating, and I think quite brave, reflection on the state of her profession. She is feeling a bit of a crisis of conscience between what she was taught in school and what actually makes a city livable and loved by the people who live in it. It is a deep, philosophical struggle that touches on the very soul of urban design.

### Corn

She did not hold back, Herman. She mentioned that contemporary architecture has essentially become a cult that ignores thousands of years of traditional wisdom. She is looking for a way to pick up the chain of design that was cut off around the nineteen thirties and figure out how to create a contemporary Israeli architectural style that is beautiful, functional, and affordable. She feels like she is fighting against an entire educational system.

### Herman

I love this because it touches on something we have all felt but maybe lacked the vocabulary to describe. Why do we walk through an old neighborhood like Nachlaot or the German Colony and feel a sense of peace and beauty, but walk through a brand new development in North Jerusalem and feel... well, nothing? Or worse, a sense of alienation? It is as if we have lost the recipe for making places that feel like home.

### Corn

Right. It is that feeling of being in a place versus being in a space. So, Herman, let us start with this idea of the cult. Hannah says architecture schools only teach one style and ignore traditional principles. Is that an exaggeration, or is there a real ideological wall in the world of design?

### Herman

Oh, it is very real, Corn. If you look at the history of architectural education, there was a massive pivot in the early to mid twentieth century. Before that, architecture was taught through the lens of the Beaux-Arts tradition or other classical schools. You studied the past to understand proportion, scale, and materials. You learned how to use the orders of architecture not just as decoration, but as a language of stability and human resonance. But then came the International Style, the Bauhaus movement, and the idea that the past was a burden to be discarded.

### Corn

I have heard that term, the International Style. It sounds very... well, placeless.

## Herman

That was exactly the point! The goal was to create a style that could work anywhere, regardless of climate, culture, or history. It was the architectural equivalent of Esperanto. They wanted buildings to be machines for living in. That is a direct quote from Le Corbusier. And once that took hold, anything that looked traditional was labeled as kitsch or dishonest. In many architecture schools today, the culture of the studio crit is brutal. If a student designs a building with a pitched roof or a decorative cornice, they are often laughed out of the room. It is seen as regressive, or worse, as a form of intellectual cowardice. They are taught that every building must be a revolutionary statement, a break from everything that came before.

## Corn

That is wild to me because, as Hannah pointed out, those traditional elements often solved very practical problems. She gave the example of cornices. Most people think of a cornice as just a fancy molding at the top of a building, but it actually protects the facade from rainwater. By removing it for the sake of a clean, minimalist line, modern architects actually created a technical problem.

## Herman

Exactly! They traded a proven, thousand year old solution for an aesthetic preference. And the results are visible all over the world. We have modern buildings with massive water damage and streaking on their facades because there is nothing to divert the rain. This is what Hannah means by the chain being cut off. We stopped iterating on what worked and decided to start from scratch with materials like glass and steel that do not always play nice with the environment, especially here in the Middle East.

## Corn

I want to dig into that nineteen thirties cutoff point. Why then? What happened in the nineteen thirties that made us collectively decide to throw away the rulebook?

## Herman

It was a perfect storm of technology and ideology. After World War One, there was a genuine, and perhaps noble, desire to build a new world that was different from the one that had just destroyed itself. Modernism felt like progress. It felt like democracy and hygiene. At the same time, we got reinforced concrete and mass produced steel. Suddenly, you did not need thick, load bearing stone walls to hold up a building. You could have a thin curtain wall of glass.

## Corn

So the technology allowed for a different style, and the ideology demanded it.

## Herman

Precisely. But what we lost was the human scale. Traditional architecture is often based on the proportions of the human body. We find symmetry and certain patterns naturally pleasing because they reflect the natural world. When you move to the nineteen thirties and beyond, you see the rise of what I call the bird's eye view architecture. Architects started designing buildings based on how they looked as models on a table or as drawings on a page, rather than how they felt to a person standing next to them on the street. They became obsessed with abstract geometry rather than human experience.

## Corn

That is a great point. It reminds me of what we talked about back in episode two hundred eighty seven when we were discussing the reality of Jerusalem. The city is so tactile. When you walk through the Old City or neighborhoods like Nachlaot, you are constantly touching stone, moving through narrow passages that open into courtyards. It is a very sensory experience. You feel the weight of the history.

## Herman

It is! And that brings us to the Jerusalem context. Hannah is asking how to create a new Israeli style. Jerusalem is such a unique case because of the British Mandate law that requires all buildings to be faced with Jerusalem stone. This was the nineteen eighteen ordinance by Sir Ronald Storrs, the first British governor. He wanted to preserve the biblical character of the city. It was a romantic, almost Arts and Crafts movement idea. And it has preserved the character of the city, in a way. But Hannah's point is that just slapping a thin layer of stone onto a concrete box does not make it traditional or even good architecture.

## Corn

Right, it is like a stone wallpaper. I see it everywhere in the newer neighborhoods. It looks like Jerusalem from a distance, but when you get close, you realize it is just a veneer. The soul of the building is still that modernist machine. It feels fake.

### Herman

It is what some critics call a lobotomy of the material. Stone is a structural material; it has depth and weight. When you use it as a thin tile, you lose the play of light and shadow that gives a building its life. So, if we want to pick up the chain, how do we do it? We cannot just build crusader castles or Ottoman villas anymore. We have elevators, we have air conditioning, we have high density needs. We are in twenty twenty six, and the housing crisis in Israel is real. We need to build fast and high.

### Corn

So how do we bridge that gap? How do we build forty story towers in the Gateway project that still feel like Jerusalem?

### Herman

Well, I think we have to look at the principles, not just the ornaments. One of the biggest principles of traditional design is the transition between public and private space. Think about the classic Jerusalem courtyard. It is a semi private space that acts as a buffer. It is where neighbors meet, where kids play safely. Modern apartment buildings often have a very harsh transition. You are either on the street or you are behind a locked door in a sterile hallway. There is no middle ground.

### Corn

I have noticed that. In the older neighborhoods, you often have these small front gardens or raised porches where people sit. You are technically on your property, but you are part of the street life. It creates a much safer and more social atmosphere. It is what Jane Jacobs called eyes on the street.

### Herman

It really does. Traditional architecture naturally encourages that. Another principle is the idea of the hierarchy of scale. A good traditional building has details that look good from a block away, details that look good from ten feet away, and details that look good when you are right up against them. Modernism tends to focus only on the big, bold gesture. You get these massive glass towers that look impressive in a skyline photo, but when you stand at the base of them, they are just flat, cold surfaces. They do not give the human eye anything to rest on.

### Corn

This actually reminds me of some research I was reading recently about neuro-aesthetics. Have you heard of this, Herman? There are studies using eye-tracking technology to see how people respond to different types of buildings.

### Herman

Oh, I am so glad you brought that up! Yes, researchers like Ann Sussman and Justin Hollander have done fascinating work on this. They found that our brains are actually hardwired to look for patterns that resemble faces or natural fractals. When we look at a traditional building with windows that look like eyes and a door that looks like a mouth, our brains relax. We feel safe. But when we look at a featureless glass wall, our eyes literally do not know where to land. It triggers a subtle stress response.

### Corn

That is incredible. So Hannah is not just fighting for an aesthetic; she is fighting for our biological well-being. There was a study published just last year, in twenty twenty five, that confirmed seventy two percent of people prefer traditional building styles over modern ones when shown images of federal buildings. It is not just a matter of opinion; it is a deep-seated human preference.

### Herman

Exactly. And in a place like Jerusalem, where the light is so intense, this becomes a matter of survival. Modern architecture loves big windows, which in Jerusalem means you are basically living in a greenhouse for half the year. Then you have to blast the air conditioning to survive. A truly contemporary Israeli style should be obsessed with thermal mass and natural ventilation. Traditional stone buildings are naturally cool in the summer and warm in the winter because the thick walls act as a thermal battery. We should be using modern engineering to enhance that, not replace it with glass curtain walls that are expensive to maintain and environmentally disastrous.

### Corn

That brings up the affordability part of Hannah's question. People often assume that beautiful, traditional looking buildings are more expensive because they require more craftsmanship. Is it possible to build this way without making every new project a luxury development?

## Herman

I think it is, but it requires a shift in where we spend the money. Right now, we spend a massive amount of money on high tech glass, complex climate control systems, and expensive structural gymnastics to make buildings look like they are defying gravity. If we shifted that budget toward better masonry, thoughtful window placement, and high quality public spaces at the base of the building, the cost could be comparable. In fact, a study from twenty twenty four showed that while traditional masonry has a higher upfront cost, the long term maintenance and energy savings make it more economical over a fifty year period.

## Corn

It is also about longevity, right? A well built stone building with traditional proportions can last hundreds of years and still be desirable. A lot of the modernist social housing from the nineteen fifties and sixties is already being torn down here in Jerusalem through these Pinui Binui projects because it is crumbling and nobody wants to live in it. It is actually more expensive in the long run to build ugly, disposable buildings.

## Herman

Spot on. There is a concept in architecture called loose fit, long life. Traditional buildings are often very adaptable. You can turn an old villa into an office, then a restaurant, then apartments. Modernist buildings are often so specifically designed for one function that they become obsolete very quickly. If we want to be sustainable, we should build things that people will want to preserve for two hundred years, not things that will be landfill in forty.

## Corn

I want to go back to the idea of the cult for a second. If Hannah is right, and the schools are the gatekeepers of this one specific style, how do we break through? How does a young architect like her actually get these ideas built in twenty twenty six?

## Herman

It is a struggle, but there is a growing movement. We are seeing more interest in New Urbanism and the New Classical movement. There are architects like Leon Krier or the firm Duany Plater-Zyberk who have been fighting this battle for decades. They argue that we should be looking at the city as a collection of neighborhoods, not just a series of isolated objects. And we are seeing some successes. Look at projects like Poundbury in the United Kingdom or Seaside in Florida. They proved that you can build new, high density communities using traditional principles and people will flock to them.

## Corn

It seems like the public is already on their side. Whenever there is a poll about which buildings people like best, they almost always pick the traditional ones. It is usually only the critics and the architects themselves who prefer the jagged, deconstructivist stuff. It is almost like a language that only the initiated can speak.

## Herman

It is a disconnect that Hannah is living every day. There is a famous study where they showed pictures of buildings to architects and non architects. The two groups had almost diametrically opposed views on what was attractive. The architects liked the buildings that were intellectually provocative or broke the rules. The non architects liked the buildings that looked, well, like buildings. But a city is a public resource. Everyone has to look at these buildings every day. It feels a bit undemocratic for a small group of professionals to decide that beauty is no longer a valid goal for a city.

## Corn

I agree. And in a place like Jerusalem, it is even more sensitive. This is a city with three thousand years of history. Every new building is a conversation with that history. If you build something that completely ignores the local vernacular, you are essentially saying that the history of this place has nothing left to teach us. It is a form of cultural erasure.

## Herman

Exactly. So, let us get specific for Hannah. If she is designing a new apartment block in Jerusalem today, what are the first three things she should do to pick up that chain?

## Herman

First, I would say focus on the street level. Forget the top of the building for a second. How does the building meet the sidewalk? Can we have small storefronts or individual entrances for ground floor units instead of one big, sterile lobby? This creates life on the street. It makes the walk to the grocery store an interesting experience rather than a chore.

## Corn

That is huge. It turns a neighborhood into a community.

### Herman

Second, use the stone honestly. Even if it is a veneer, give it depth around the windows and doors. Use arches or lintels that actually look like they are supporting weight. Our brains are very good at sensing when something is fake or flimsy. If the stone looks substantial, the building feels permanent and trustworthy. It gives the resident a sense of security.

### Corn

And third?

### Herman

Proportions. Study the Golden Ratio and the traditional proportions of Jerusalem's old neighborhoods. There is a reason those buildings feel right. You can use modern materials like steel for the balconies, but if the ratio of window to wall is balanced, and the height of the floors feels human, the building will fit in naturally. I love the idea of steel balconies on a stone building. That feels very Israeli to me. It is that mix of the ancient and the modern that defines this country. We are a startup nation, but we are also an ancient people. Our architecture should reflect that tension.

### Corn

You know, we should probably mention that we are not just talking about aesthetics here. There is a real psychological impact to the built environment. We mentioned neuro-aesthetics, but there is also the social aspect. People are more stressed and less social in neighborhoods with monolithic, modern architecture. A beautiful city is a form of public health.

### Herman

It really is! It encourages people to get out of their cars, to walk, to interact with their neighbors. It builds social capital. And in a city as diverse and sometimes tense as Jerusalem, we need every bit of social capital we can get. Architecture can either be a wall that divides us or a bridge that brings us together.

### Corn

This is making me want to go for a walk and really look at the buildings around us. I think I am going to be a lot more critical of the new glass boxes going up near the entrance to the city. They could be anywhere in the world. There is nothing about them that says Jerusalem. They are just symbols of global capital.

### Herman

Hannah is right to be worried. If we keep building like that, we will lose the very thing that makes this city special. But I am hopeful. There is a maturation process happening in the Israeli urban renewal market right now. We are seeing a shift toward more responsibility and less copy-paste development. People are starting to demand better.

### Corn

Well, before we wrap up this part of the discussion, I want to pivot slightly. Hannah mentioned that she had to figure a lot of this out on the fly. Are there resources or books that you would recommend for an architect or even just a curious listener who wants to understand these traditional principles better?

### Herman

Oh, definitely. The bible for this is A Pattern Language by Christopher Alexander. It is a massive book, but it breaks down design into two hundred fifty three patterns that make us feel at home in a space. It covers everything from the height of a window sill to the way a neighborhood should be laid out. I would also recommend The Timeless Way of Building by the same author. It is more philosophical and really gets to the heart of what makes a building alive.

### Corn

I have seen those books on Daniel's shelf! They are fascinating because they are so intuitive. You read a pattern and you think, "Of course, that is why I like that specific park or that specific room."

### Herman

Exactly. Another great one is *The Architecture of Happiness* by Alain de Botton. It is a beautiful look at why architecture matters to our emotional lives. And for the technical side of the traditional revival, anything by Robert Adam or Leon Krier is essential reading. They show that you can be a modern, forward-thinking person and still value the wisdom of the past.

### Corn

That is a great list. I think it is important for people to realize that this isn't just about being old fashioned. It is about using the best tools we have, whether they were invented three thousand years ago or three years ago. The value is the human experience. The technology is just a means to an end.

### Herman

Precisely. We shouldn't be afraid of technology, but we shouldn't let it dictate our values. If we can use three-D printing to create beautiful stone ornaments at a fraction of the cost of hand carving, let us do it! That is how we pick up the chain and bring it into the twenty first century.

### Corn

I really hope Hannah finds a way to implement these ideas. It takes a lot of courage to go against the grain of your own profession, especially when you are just starting out. But maybe she can be one of the leaders of this new Israeli style.

### Herman

I suspect there are a lot of architects out there who feel the same way she does. They are just waiting for someone to lead the way. And with the amount of building happening in this country right now, there is a huge opportunity to do something different.

### Corn

Well, maybe this episode can be a little nudge in that direction. We should probably take a quick break, but when we come back, I want to talk about the practical takeaways for our listeners. What can the average person do if they want to see better architecture in their own city?

**Herman**

That is a great question. Let's dig into that in a minute.

**Corn**

And hey, while we are taking a second, if you are enjoying this conversation, we would really appreciate it if you could leave us a review on your podcast app. We are currently at episode three hundred ten, and it is the support from listeners that keeps us diving into these rabbit holes. A quick rating on Spotify or Apple Podcasts makes a huge difference in helping other curious people find the show.

**Herman**

It really does help. We love seeing the community grow.

**Corn**

Alright, we will be right back.

**Corn**

Welcome back. So, Herman, we were talking about what people can actually do. If you are not an architect like Hannah, it can feel like you have no control over the buildings going up in your city. It feels like these decisions are made in closed rooms by developers and city planners.

**Herman**

It can feel that way, but the public has more power than they realize. Most cities have a planning commission or a zoning board where new projects have to be approved. Those meetings are usually open to the public. If a developer is proposing a massive glass box in a historic neighborhood, the neighbors can show up and demand better. We have seen this happen in Jerusalem with the protests against some of the high rise projects in the city center.

## Corn

And it works! Or at least, it can force the developers to make concessions. But even better than just saying no to things we hate is saying yes to things we love. We need to be able to articulate why we like certain buildings. If we can say, "We want more human scale, we want more stone, we want usable balconies," it gives the planners a clear mandate.

## Herman

That is where the vocabulary comes in. If people understand these principles we've been talking about, they can be much more effective advocates for their neighborhoods. And for those who are looking to buy or rent, your choice is your vote. If everyone refuses to live in these sterile, poorly designed buildings, the developers will stop building them. Of course, that is easier said than done in a housing crisis, but the market does eventually respond to demand.

## Corn

It is also about supporting local craftsmen. If you are doing a renovation, try to find people who know how to work with traditional materials. Keep those skills alive. We have incredible stone masons in this region, and we should be celebrating their work.

## Herman

Yes! And if you are a student or a young professional in any field, don't be afraid to question the status quo. If something feels wrong or ugly to you, trust that instinct. Just because an expert tells you it is brilliant doesn't mean you have to agree. Trust your eyes and your heart. After all, you are the one who has to live with it.

## Corn

I love that. Well said, brother. I think we have covered a lot of ground today. Hannah, thank you so much for that prompt. It really struck a chord with both of us. And thank you to Daniel for passing it along. It is always interesting to see what is on the minds of the people in our own house.

## Herman

Especially when they are as thoughtful as Hannah. I hope she keeps fighting the good fight in the world of architecture. The city needs her.

**Corn**

Me too. Well, that is about all the time we have for today. This has been My Weird Prompts.

**Herman**

You can find us on Spotify and at our website, [myweirdprompts.com](http://myweirdprompts.com), where we have the full archive of all three hundred ten episodes. We also have a contact form there if you want to send in your own prompt. We love hearing from you, whether you're an architect, a student, or just someone who's been thinking about something weird.

**Herman**

Until next time, I am Herman Poppleberry.

**Corn**

And I am Corn. Keep asking questions, everyone.

**Herman**

And keep looking at the buildings! You never know what you'll notice when you really start paying attention. Take care, everyone.

**Corn**

Bye everyone.