

The Technion Affair: Aerospace Engineering Lab, Haifa, Israel, 1964–67

Zvi Hecker, October 2008

The “Technion Affair” had all the essential features of a classic melodrama: an uncompromising artist fighting the corrupt villains. What began as a difference in opinion between the user and the architect evolved into a serious disagreement and eventually erupted into an open conflict. The press in Israel coined it “The Technion Affair.” It unfolded gradually, but with precise predictability.

The Aerospace Engineering Lab at the Technion in Haifa is a kind of self-conditioning structure breaking away from flat curtain-like walls and their many sun-breaking systems. It regulates the intensity of indirect light entering the laboratory space. Reflected onto the prismatic walls, the light illuminates the interior. In order to increase the intensity of the reflected light, the walls had to be painted white and yellow. Special windows were also incorporated into the roof.

The faculty professors objected to our scheme from the beginning of the design. At first the pretext was the excessive cost of construction. When this proved incorrect, a new obstacle was found: the design provided insufficient natural light for their work. It became evident that the professors’ objections were rooted in the very originality of the design itself.

The faculty professors’ opposition to our design led the president of the Technion to end the controversy with a public opening of the building. This occasion would be used to declare the building complete though it had not yet been painted nor had the special windows yet been installed in the roof. My objections to this decision were dismissed by the Technion.

On the morning of the opening ceremony, with the help of my assistant Henry Hutter, and unnoticed by the catering staff preparing the reception, we started to paint the interior of the prismatic walls in white and yellow, as specified in our plans. It took some time for the catering staff to find out that something strange, and totally unrelated to the preparations for the opening, was going on. By then we had already painted a noticeable part of the interior walls. Once informed of our activities, the Technion’s administration director promptly arrived and commanded us to stop painting and to leave the premises immediately. We refused; he presented us with an ultimatum: if we didn’t leave, we would be removed by force.

We decided we’d welcome such a scenario, since journalists were already arriving and our protest would certainly be a much more interesting story than the opening speeches.

As we continued to paint, the next to arrive was Al Mansfeld, the Dean of the Faculty of Architecture, on a mission from the president to try to convince me to stop painting. I asked Mansfeld to bring a letter from the president confirming that the building would indeed be completed as designed. It was difficult to believe, but, just before the opening ceremony, Al Mansfeld arrived with the letter. We could celebrate, but it would not be for long.

As articles and photos on our painting protest and its background appeared in the daily press, we noticed that simultaneously, newspapers were carrying an ever-increasing number of reports about important scientific findings being carried out by scientists at the Technion. It was an obvious public relations campaign by the Technion to improve its public image, undermined by its handling of the controversy. It seemed to be in preparation for something to come.

Sure enough, the contractor had received instructions to install simple windows in the roof instead of the reflecting ones we had designed. I called the office of the president. His secretary said that he had left for the US one day previously and would be away for two weeks. I called Al Mansfeld, but he knew nothing about the instructions left by the president before his departure.

The contractor informed me in confidence that, following the installment of frames for simple windows in the roof, he had been ordered by the Technion to install permanent windows, but not of my design. I consulted my lawyer, who had doubts about the likelihood of obtaining a court injunction since the Technion was in the process of completing the work. He thought that suing the Technion for breaching architect's rights would be lengthy, costly, and not necessarily successful.

I felt that there was no other option left but to prevent the Technion from accomplishing their scheme myself.

I arrived in Haifa with Henry on the night of October 31, 1966. At 2 a.m. we drove up to the Technion campus. It was very quiet. We climbed onto the roof of the building, equipped with two heavy metal crowbars. In less than two hours we'd bent and twisted all twenty-eight window frames so that they could not be repaired and no permanent windows could be installed. Because the campus was very quiet and our work was very noisy, we feared being caught before having had a chance to complete our task. However, we were lucky; security was not so tight. We hung the "tools of the crime," the two crowbars, on a tree and drove back to Tel Aviv. On the highway, a police patrol stopped us. We wondered how fast they had been informed of our actions. Fortunately, it was only a blinking headlight that had caught their attention.

We arrived in Tel Aviv in the morning. It was November 1, 1966 and I went directly to the hospital where my wife Dvora had just given birth to our daughter Ella.

I think Dvora waited until I had finished my work.

My lawyer Aahron Aderet, when informed of my actions, resigned in protest. Amos Eylon, a journalist at *Haaretz*, maintained that this was a case for the police and not for his newspaper. He had not foreseen the public interest it would accrue. I had also called the police and admitted to breaking the windows of the Technion building. The "Technion Affair" received yet new acclaim in the daily press. I was summoned to the police headquarters in Haifa for interrogation, but surprisingly no criminal charges were laid against me. The press impressed even the police. The Technion, however, sued me for damages to its property.

My new lawyer Eliezer Levin asked for a court injunction against the Technion and, despite the fact that I had taken the law into my own hands, we were granted the injunction. The Technion was not allowed to install their simple windows until the case had been settled. The newspapers carried sensational stories about the architect's night adventure, but a significant cultural aspect of the case was also revealed. An open letter, signed by the most prominent Israeli artists, writers, and poets, supported my actions as carried out in defence of cultural values. The Technion was silent and no reports about new inventions by its scientists appeared in the newspapers.

Only in parliament, in response to a question posed by member of Parliament Uri Avneri, the then Prime Minister Golda Meir deplored my actions as antisocial behavior.

The "Technion Affair" raised public awareness on the architect's rights to his work. On a personal level, I ended up with many copies of Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* sent by enthusiastic students.