

Shira Shenton

The completion of the Porter building for Environmental Studies at Tel Aviv University has brought increased exposure for the three architectural firms involved in its design after winning an international competition: Axelrod Grobman Architects, Geotectura, and Chen Architects - a relatively young office. This article is based on an interview with partners - Nili and Nir Chen.

"I arrived at the Faculty of Architecture at the Technion in 1982 where I met Nili - today my partner and mother of our three children. Our prospect said nothing about our work together, and after graduation in 1987, I started working in the office of Yaakov Rechter, my final project supervisor and an impressive *mensch* whose authority derived from a deep and quiet place, in complete contrast to the aggressive authority we are used to. Later, I set up my own office with architect Zvi Dunsky, where for seven years we dealt mainly with public buildings and offices in the high-tech industry. Nili, who worked as a senior architect for Moshe Tzur, joined me only eight years ago, forming the present format of the office where we are engaged in a wide variety of works.

How does a person get up one morning and decide to become an architect?

My first contact with the world of architecture came from a gramophone I received for my Bar Mitzvah. The first record I bought was Bridge over Troubled Water by Simon and Garfunkel. Among the songs I heard over and over again was a sort of lullaby - a beautiful bossa nova called So Long Frank Lloyd Wright. There was no Google then and, a curious child, I went to the public library to find out who this Frank Lloyd Wright was. The library was exactly where the new wing of the Tel Aviv Museum is located. The librarian gave me a book, in which I soon found myself astounded by the House on Falling Water. I thought that the solitary house in the forest "generated" by a waterfall was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen, mainly because it was the total opposite of the grey Tel Aviv of the 70s that surrounded me. I think that Wright's ability to create such a powerful

connection between architecture and the environment ingrained in me the need to search perpetually for what does not exist in a place, and should.

Do American architects speak to you?

Sometimes... about a year ago, Yasha Grobman phoned to tell me that Thom Mayne was visiting the Faculty of Architecture at the Technion, and they were looking for someone to accompany him on a tour of the new wing of the Tel Aviv Museum. I was glad of an opportunity to meet the founder of Morphosis who, during the late 80s, helped save the world of architecture from sinking into postmodern madness. Morphosis, and other offices that flourished in the early nineties, did for architecture what Eric Clapton, Bob Dylan and Jim Morrison did for music. When the taxi stopped in front of the museum and Mayne emerged - a tall, pleasant man - he shook my hand and stood for a moment to scan with interest the huge empty square on which stood the impressive buildings of the Tel Aviv Museum and municipal library. He gazed in amazement at the military camp across the street, and I think he was a little shaken by its proximity to one of the main cultural centers of Tel Aviv.

The Porter Building is probably the most important building you have worked on. How can three different architectural firms manage to design one building?

Collaboration between firms is sometimes problematic - a process that always involves critical perspective, a desire to provide creative solutions, trying to overcome conflicts between the planners. For us it was a seminal event. To such an extent that when we were

recently invited to take part in a competition for an Education, Culture and Sports campus on Kibbutz Shoval, we invited T.A. Architects, a young firm whose two partners worked at our firm. We won, and today enjoy working together on the project.

Who's we, you and Nily?

There is a scene in the film Jungle Fever, in which a black architect, after a talk with his boss, understands that he will not be promoted. He leaves and pointing at projects hanging in the corridor, mutters: "That's mine, that's mine, and that's mine, too ...". The owner of the firm ran after him, shouting, ego, ego, ego... Architects really do have an ego and a great tendency to say "I"... When Nili and I say "we", we don't only mean us two. We have an excellent team - most of them are a generation younger than us, and their positive energy has significant impact on our work.

Nili, do you also play the gramophone?

I used to play the piano but I stopped because I didn't have the patience to practice... so I mainly painted, danced, and I was also a scout... I grew up in the Carmel Center, and when I had to decide what I'd do when I grew up, I deliberated between art (in my free time I did copper engraving and drawing) and psychology. My Polish side (Hungarian actually) pushed me in the direction of "practical" architecture. I went to Bezalel for the art... and distant, exotic Jerusalem away from home... I'll never forget my mother's joy when I was told I'd been accepted. I completed my architectural studies at the Technion to receive a degree. At the time, Bezalel studies were not accredited.