

MAYLISTS KASSIF ARCHITECTS: THE ARCHITECTS OF THE CITY'S FRINGES

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Udi Kassif welcomes us to the present headquarters of **Mayslits Kassif Architects**, a studio founded with his wife **Ganit Mayslits** in 1994. We are on the outskirts of **Tel Aviv**, on a beautiful day in June, and the light of the Mediterranean seeps through the Venetian blinds that screen the large ribbon windows, lighting up the fair-face concrete of the walls and the simple elegance of the interiors.

Leading players on the Israeli architecture scene, Mayslits Kassif Architects (joined in 2008 by the partner Maor Roytman) have done many important **projects** in the fields of **urban planning**, **landscape design** and **public buildings**. The works have often been the result of victories in competitions, and the studio has gained international acclaim for its extraordinary ability to regenerate, revitalize and upgrade neglected urban spaces.

Like **the port of Tel Aviv**, which from a fragile, decaying area has been transformed into a beautiful promenade with a view of the sea (now with “almost 5 million visitors per year, more than the Western Wall,” Kassif emphasizes).

But the **social and public focus** of the activities of the studio can also be seen in the decision to work inside this building, in most rundown district of Tel Aviv (in the southern part of the city, near the Ayalon Highway that crosses metropolis from north to south). Kassif tells the story.

“We arrived three years ago: the building was in very bad condition, partially abandoned, partially occupied by refugees and immigrants mostly from Africa, living in very precarious circumstances (no running water, lack of bathrooms, etc.).

We thought it could be a good opportunity to trigger a **virtuous process** in disadvantageous urban situation, renovating part of the building – the basement and the top three levels – and moving our workspaces here.

Our previous studio, on the seaport, in a central location, had gotten too expensive: the whole waterfront area, once frontier territory, has gone through a phase of total renewal (also thanks to the award-winning project of the new waterfront in 2010 by Mayslits Kassif Architects, ed.), and today there is fierce competition to build there... This is why we decided to move to **the city's outskirts**.

When the renovation was finished, we began to focus on the **neighborhood**, starting with the areas near our studio. With the direct involvement of the mayor's team and the local community body, we got them to transform a **dump** and a **parking** area into a **public park**: an area once frequented by drug addicts and prostitutes is now a place for kids and their moms.

Because there are plants, flowers, benches: in short, we did **small virtuous 'worksites'** to combat tension and fear, to restore faith... A wager we wanted to make, directly involving people who live in a difficult situation on a day-to-day basis.

Today the studio is absolutely inserted in the life of the neighborhood. In this zone, once a year, between Christmas and Hanukkah (a Jewish festivity, also known as the Festival of Lights, ed.), a large celebration **Menorat Laila** is organized: a sort of **festival** with **art** and **music** in the streets of the neighborhood.

We opened the roof terrace of our studio, and it became a sort of extension of the festivities. We also invited some African women to teach people how they make their beautiful colored baskets, transforming the studio into a sort of neighborhood micro-market!

By now making projects that have **positive social impact** is part of our Dna. We think that when architecture becomes an active practice, which embraces existing diversities, it can accomplish small miracles. We have seen it happen here, around us, where a place at the margins of the city life is transforming into a little gem, and becomes a part of the urban fabric...”

Text by Laura Ragazzola – Photos by David Zanardi



Details



The work area on the first level. The studio employs 16 persons, of which 14 are architects.



The staircase connecting the three levels.



The terrace, looking towards Tel Aviv.



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