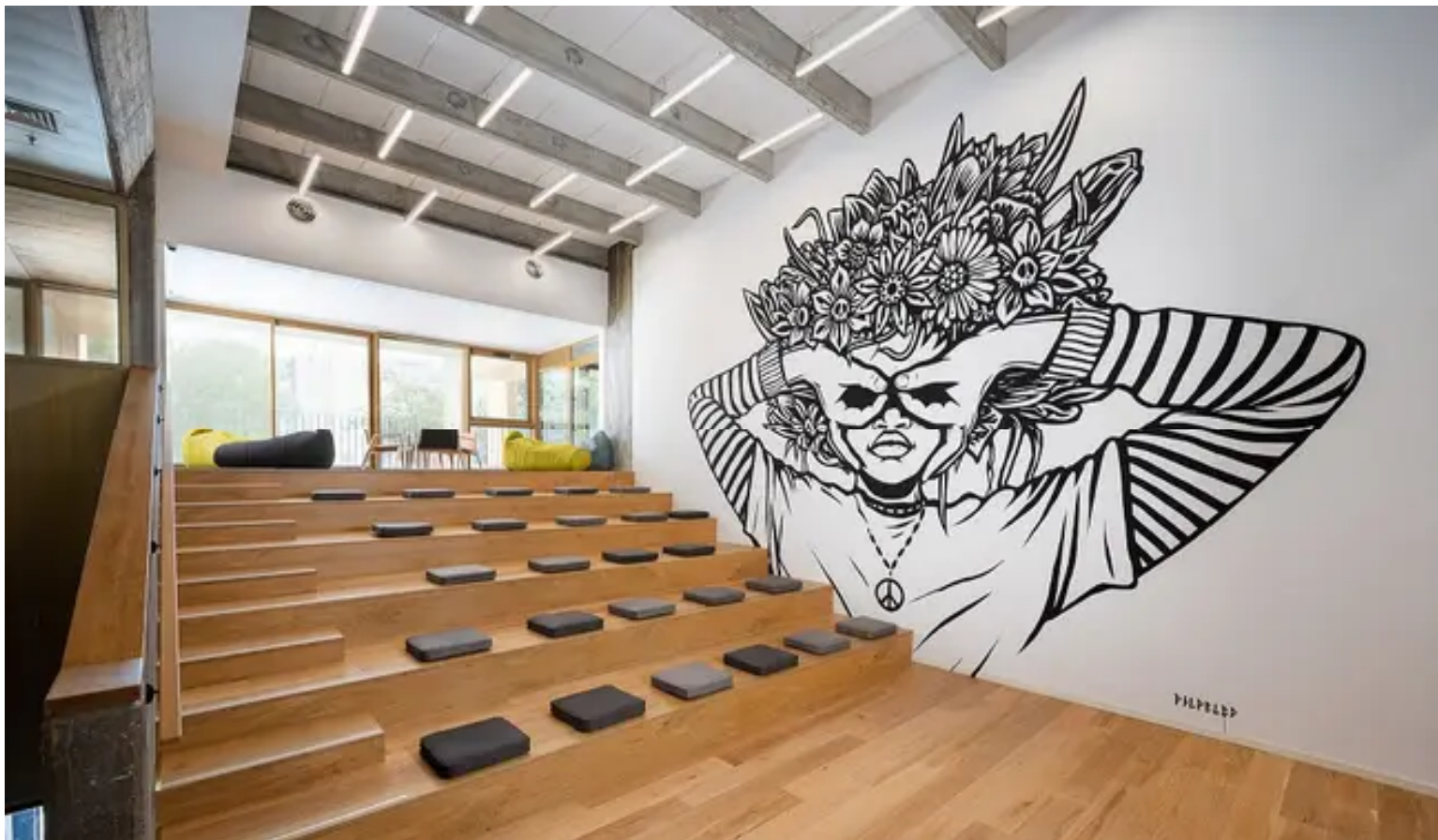


A Tel Aviv Landmark Gets a Facelift Revealing Its Brutalist Charms

The renovation of the city's central library is the first step in revamping a cultural hub that includes a museum, opera house and theater

Naama Riba Mar. 3, 2021 [Follow](#)



A black and white wall mural by street artist Pilpeled at the newly renovated Beit Ariela Public Library and Cultural Center.

Credit: Amnon Horesh

After a decade of renovations at a cost of 72 million shekels (\$22 million), the Beit Ariela Public Library and Cultural Center, which covers an area of 10,000 square meters in the heart of Tel Aviv, was rededicated last month. It was supposed to open earlier this year, but the coronavirus lockdown caused a delay.

Public buildings constructed in Israel in the 60s, 70s and 80s were often built in the Brutalistic style, which is characterized by massive walls with small windows and with exposed concrete beams and pillars. This library – dedicated

in 1977 at its current location on Shaul Hamelech Boulevard after previous incarnations at other locations – was also constructed in that style. Beit Ariela was designed by architects Moshe Lufenfeld and Giora Gemerman, who are also responsible for the Beit Megirot (Drawer Tower) in Be'er Sheva and Beit Dani, a community center in south Tel Aviv.

But over the years the building stopped meeting the requirements of a 21st-century library – a dynamic meeting place and a space for various types of activities. Miriam Posner, the director of the library up until a few months ago, says that when they thought of making a change in the library about a decade ago, they decided to start with renovating the children's library.

At the same time, the Mayslits Kassif Roytman architecture firm started working on a master plan for the entire space – which would also include the adjacent [Tel Aviv Museum of Art](#), the Israeli Opera and the [Cameri Theater](#) buildings. “This space contains the largest and most important cluster of public buildings in Israel, and many people come here – but they go directly into the buildings. They don't stay

outside and don't roam around," says architect Ganit Mayslits-Kassif. "We reached the conclusion that changing the entire area should begin with Beit Ariela, ... which is totally disconnected from its surroundings."



A floor-to-ceiling painting by Shiff Prize winner Yisrael Dror Hemed in one of the sitting rooms at Beit Ariela. Credit: Amnon Horesh

In the book "Aphoria – Architecture of Independence" the architects in the Tel Aviv municipality preservation department, Dr. Jeremie Hoffman and Hadas Nevo-Goldberst, discuss the Brutalist style, in which the building's

basic interior and exterior components – ceilings, roofs, the concrete skeleton and more – are displayed “without plaster surfacing, without systems concealed in the wall – everything is exposed, emphasized, illuminated, functional and direct.”

Although Beit Ariela is composed of impressive concrete construction, like the concrete mushrooms in the reading rooms, natural stone surfacing that wouldn't put a Jerusalem building to shame, surprising ceiling windows and inner courtyards, many of these lovely elements were hidden by partitions, additions, shelves, old-fashioned furniture and carpets, which created a dark and suffocating feeling for employees and those using the building.

In effect, most of the architects' work was to expose the building's qualities, to remove superfluous walls and to find the optimal locations for the various uses required by the building in its contemporary incarnation.

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Another step that Posner describes is moving 30,000 of the books into warehouses – those that were less used or of which there are several copies (the entire library contains 400,000 catalogued items and about another 100,000, mainly old books, that are not catalogued). That freed space and made it possible to enlarge the many open areas now available for visitors to the building.



Book shelves seen behind a winding concrete staircase at the newly renovated Beit Ariela.

Credit: Amnon Horesh

Paintings by the street artist

The renovation was carried out in three stages: In the first, the lending libraries and the research hall were renovated, and dedicated in 2017. In the second, the newspaper library, the design library and the group study rooms on the second floor were renovated. This floor also contains the Maimonides library and the impressive office of Ahad Ha'am

(Asher Zvi Hirsch Ginsberg, a Hebrew essayist, and one of the foremost pre-state Zionist thinkers).

The final and most important stage, which is now being dedicated, is opening the facades: The opaque stone walls that faced the main thoroughfare, Shaul Hamelech Boulevard, were demolished – which enabled the creation of a pleasant inner courtyard.

A second façade that was opened is the one facing the plaza (the internal one which also faces the Tel Aviv Museum). Later on a café will be added there. The building was also upgraded with large paintings by street artist Pilpeled and Shiff Prize winner Yisrael Dror Hemed.



There are other spaces and rooms in the building, such as a comics library and an events hall. All of them will be open to the public. Giora Yahalom, head of the municipality's Culture Department, explains that there is a total of 20 areas in the library that can be used by the public. "We're going to present a new model for consuming culture in the city. The library is undergoing a transformation and will become a cultural center, a place that welcomes the residents.

"Let's say that you're a resident who wants to plan a cultural activity – you can get a place for holding it. The library will be open seven days a week and will be a place in which to spend time and to consume culture free of charge, because I don't think people will have a lot of money for culture. People have a very specific image of Beit Ariela, of a stodgy, unfriendly place, where you can get lost. That's going to change."

Unexploited plazas

Mayslits Kassif Roytman is known mainly for its public projects, such as the Tel Aviv Port, the upgrading of the Tel Aviv promenade and an artificial lake in Petah Tikva. Recently they won a competition for planning the Academy of the Hebrew Language in Jerusalem.



Work on the existing building required a lot of humility on your part.

Ganit Mayslits-Kassif: “Yes, and respect for what was done before us. One of the most important qualities in our profession is the ability to do the minimum and achieve the maximum. There were those who told us that the building shouldn’t be touched at all. We researched the building, we prepared a type of preservation and documentation file, and made decisions out of in-depth knowledge. Lufenfeld [the designer] and my father were friends, and I grew up on this architecture and have been familiar with these concrete buildings from day one.”

As opposed to preservation projects in the city center, such as boutique hotels that seem to have been preserved in formaldehyde, here you had more freedom.

“In a way we were pleased that it wasn’t for preservation, because then there would have been a lot of arbitrary restrictions. In its renovation this building reflects freedom of thought and a balanced approach, which preserves the characteristics of the original structure, exposes its qualities – and adapts it to contemporary needs. Public buildings have to develop and change over time and when there’s a foundation of good architecture – that’s the most interesting.”



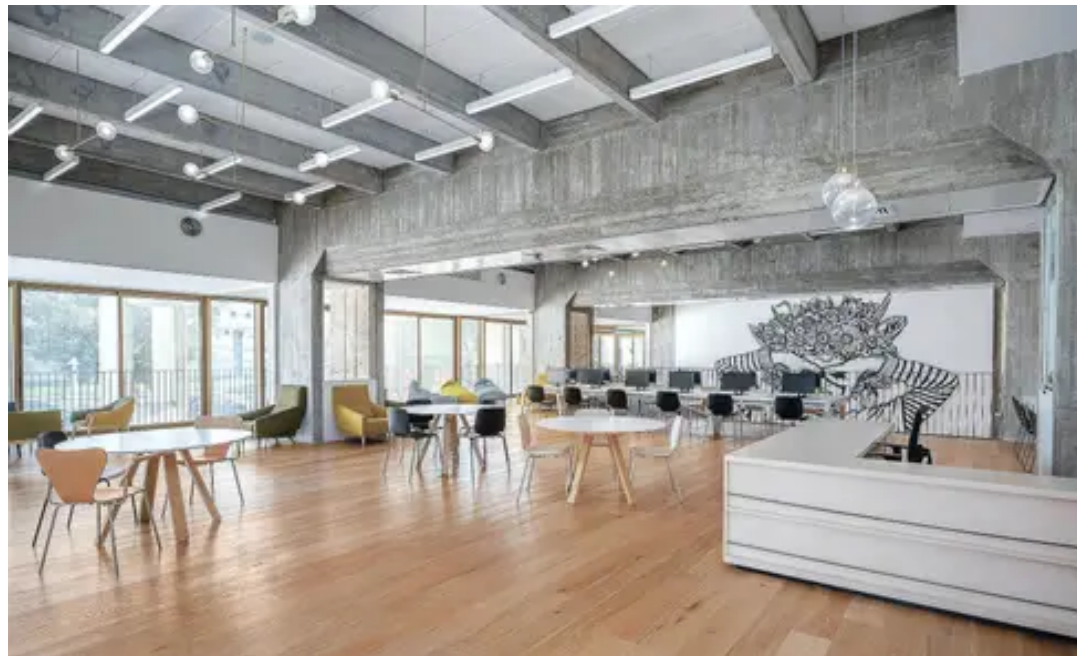
The Beit Ariela public library following renovation. About 30,000 books of the 500,000 items in the library were moved into warehouses to make the area more spacious. Credit: Amnon Horesh

Were there things you wanted to do in the building that didn't work out?

“The auditorium remains unrenovated. There are other elements that could have upgraded the building's connection to the surroundings: One is a connection from Shaul Hamelech to the Municipal Salon [for example, with stairs – N.R], but that requires another security guard and is problematic to operate. Another element is opening the façade facing the Tel Aviv Museum. The façade of the children's library could open onto the public space and the museum's sculpture garden, the way we opened the façade to Shaul Hamelech. I hope that it will eventually happen.”

The first objective of the project a decade ago was to revive the public section of the entire area. The implementation is still only beginning.

“We think that the plaza between the library and the museum could become a public space, with options that are not available anywhere else in the city. We have to continue the concept of the openness between the buildings and the surrounding area and to enable culture and art to move outdoors and to be released from the museum and the library and the theater [the adjacent Cameri]. As opposed to the culture indoors, outdoors you can create an open platform for activity and creativity and an informal community encounter.”



An open seating area at Beit Ariela. Part of the concept of the renovation was to make the complex a more inviting place for visitors to linger. Credit: Amnon Horesh

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