

## ARCHITECTURE

# The coastal "miracle" of Tel Aviv

*The head of the successful redevelopment of the coastline in the Mediterranean megalopolis talks to "K" about the project*



The new image of the beach abolished the elevation difference, freeing up the movement of pedestrians. Fot. Mayslits / Kassif

**George Lialios**

24.10.2022 • 07:18



From 7 in the morning, often even earlier, the beach of Tel Aviv begins to have life. Already from so early in the morning the beach volleyball courts are full, men and women jogging next to others who just go to work. The beachfront is arguably the liveliest part of the city, and this is no coincidence. Its design in 2018 by the architectural firm MKR (Mayslits-Kassif-Roytman) Architects has won international awards, managing not only to "break" the wall between sea and city, but something even more important: to create a new urban culture.

The founders of the office are Udi Kashif and his wife Ganit Mayslits (maor Roytman was later added to the group), architects with many important projects in Israel, but also frequent contact with Greece, especially Athens. Our discussion starts with the coastal cities of the Mediterranean. "Until 50 years ago the sea was humanity's 'trash can'," he says. "In the coastal zone the drains ended, from there passed the roads with heavy traffic, there were heavy



industry such as refineries – recently we saw with regret such a one in Agioi Theodoroi of Corinth – and all kinds of unwanted uses. It was only in the last decades that we realized their potential for recreation – that is, as part of the daily lives of the inhabitants – and tourism. And then gradually their pollution stopped and large hotels began to be built. That's how it happened in Tel Aviv. There is a photo from the beginning of the last century, showing people in suits sitting on the shore with their backs turned to the sea. That was the prevailing perception."



After



Before

The first redevelopment (below) greatly improved the image of the beach, but created a "wall" between the city and the sand. Its new image (above) abolished the elevation difference, freeing the movement of pedestrians. Fot. Mayslits / Kassif] Mayslits / Kassif



The first walk was created in the coastal zone of Tel Aviv in the 30s. The first major redevelopment, however, took place many years later, in the 80s. "A large sewer pipe was going to pass along the coast. The architects of the time, therefore, thought that on the occasion of the works they could build a coastal pedestrian street like the Copacabana of Brazil. They built a beautiful route of synthetic stone and beautiful motifs, included six cafes by the sea. At the same time, they placed breakwaters, which helped to reduce the momentum of the sea and more than double the sand. These 2 kilometers of promenade became the image of Tel Aviv in all advertising campaigns of the time. It was something unique to Israel. Around the same time, the first large hotels began to be built. That redevelopment put the Tel Aviv coastal zone in the life of the city for the first time, which until then was centered, inside."

In the northern part of the coast, however, there was a section closed to pedestrians: the port. "It was created in the mid-30s because of the riots that existed in Jaffa between the Jews and the Palestinians. But it was an awful port, which never functioned properly and finally in 1963 it was closed. Gradually the site deteriorated, becoming a center of prostitution and infamous bars. In 2003 the port authorities launched a tender for the redevelopment of the port area, which we won. The site was inaugurated in 2008 and was a great success; it was a real revolution for the "outdoor" life of Tel Aviv. Suddenly a public space was created that was not a park, where you could walk, take your children to play, eat, spend your time pleasantly. It is telling that until recently it had more visitors—about 3 million a year—than the Western Wall, the holiest place in Israel."

The success of the old port paved the way for the redevelopment of the main coastal promenade of Tel Aviv, in which the damage due to time was now serious. "The competition took place in 2008 and the project was gradually delivered by 2018. It was a completely different case. Unlike the port, which was "closed" to society, in the case of the central coast we had to redesign a space that was already part of the city's life. So we had to discuss and defend our every choice. Because we needed all these levels, because we lowered the pedestrian street to the level of the sand", explains Mr. Kassif.



The redevelopment of the beach turned the coast into a living organism almost 24 hours a day. Fot. GUY COHEN

**"We held a referendum on our plans, proving that the citizens liked them. We finally made it."**

"The old pedestrian street was beautiful, but it created a border between the coast and the city, as it was elevated. This border had to be removed. In addition, the space had to be multifunctional, to be at the same time a place of recreation and work, a place for walking and sports, but also entertainment, accessible to all. Construction was delayed quite a bit, mainly due to reactions from the environmental movement, which accused us of commercialising the coast, of destroying the environment. In fact, we lost a year due to litigation. Finally, we made a special ecological assessment to prove that the energy of the waves, when facing a wall, is much stronger, dragging the sand into the sea, contrary to what we proposed, namely the creation of stairs at the level of the sand. We also held a referendum on our plans, proving that the citizens liked them. We finally made it."

I explain to him that the reactions remind me a lot of those in Athens against any major urban intervention, e.g. in the redevelopment of Ermou or Apostolou Pavlou. "During this period we are reconstructing the entire coastline of Eilat (the only city of Israel on the Red Sea). At first everyone was in favor, but when the bulldozers started working, the citizens were afraid that we were destroying the beach. Unfortunately, social media plays a big role in these cases, reactions take on dimensions and evolve... in digital uprisings, often full of fake news. The Ministry of the Environment intervened due to the noise caused and, although it had approved the project, asked us to review it. We finally managed to get the approval of the city council again and we are moving on."



The success of the redevelopment of the central coast of Tel Aviv is enviable. "Millions of people visit it every month, not only, the approximately 3 million people who visit it. residents of Tel Aviv but also visitors inside and outside Israel", points out Mr. Kassif. "But the main thing is that it created a new urban culture, which did not exist before. In this space coexist people in swimsuits and people in costumes, who each enjoy the coast in their own way". What would you do differently today? "I would cast more shadow," he says thoughtlessly.



The head of the architects, Udi Kashif.



## The problem of housing

I ask him about the most burning problem in Tel Aviv, the lack of affordable housing. "It's the hottest issue. Prices in Tel Aviv are Manhattan prices, values in the city center are currently at 120,000 shekels per square meter (p.s. about 34,000 euros). And the problem is going to get worse, as Israel's population is expected to double within the next 20 years," he explains. "We have believed for years in the liberal economy and capitalism, but now we realize that it is taking us in the opposite direction to what we thought. It is our obligation to provide citizens with housing commensurate with their economic abilities. Israel is a rich country. The government should go ahead with a serious housing program to rent or sell homes at affordable prices."



Fot. GUY COHEN





Φωτ. Aviad Bar-Ness



Fot. GUY COHEN

The discussion ends in Athens, which Mr. Kassif often visits. "It has been estimated that investing in public spaces returns ten times the benefit in eight years. Athens is a beautiful city with fantastic scale, heritage, historical monuments: it has it all. What it lacks is enough public spaces with an attractive, modern design that allows you to spend the whole day there, feel safe and welcome. In addition, Athens needs more greenery, more soil, more nature. There is no substitute for large trees and permeable surfaces. Climate change is forcing us to look at these issues seriously again in all Mediterranean cities."