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# LIVING THE HIGH LIFE

*Ilan Pivko*

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*One of Israel's most acclaimed architects has had a direct hand in the regeneration of Tel Aviv since the 1980s, but he's far from done.*

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It is 10pm on a Tuesday evening, the streets have cooled down a few degrees making the 20-minute walk south from Rothschild Boulevard to Florentin bearable. I follow my new acquaintance, Elad Mintzer, who has taken it upon himself to show me around, through an innocuous industrial building into a large courtyard, buzzing with atmosphere. Bearded, casually-dressed waiters, indiscernible from the bearded, casually-dressed punters, swish around tables taking orders. I feel like I've somehow sidestepped 2,000 miles to Berlin.

As we take our seats, Elad makes a call and seems to be giving instructions in Hebrew. A few minutes later, we are joined by a well built, tanned, elegant man wearing an immaculate, fitted, white t-shirt and despite the late hour, a pair of designer sunglasses, like a combination of a 50-something gym-honed Giorgio Armani and a mature rock and roll singer.

"This is Ilan," introduces Elad. I stand and take the man's open hand, his broad smile revealing a set of perfect white teeth. We exchange the usual pleasantries as we're joined by two more equally handsome, younger men. The conversation flows around the table in the way that I've been accustomed to since my arrival - switching confusingly between English and Hebrew. It transpires that my present company is a mix of some of Tel Aviv's key players. The Marketing Director of the country's leading gay website and app Atraf, the founder of the networking platform Gay Tech, the Editor of the country's top Technology magazine and one of the country's pre-eminent architects, Ilan Pivko.

After a few drinks, we are at that point in the evening where you either move on to another bar or club or make your way home. Being in Tel Aviv we, of course, choose the former. Finally, around 1am I make my excuses, but not before accepting various invitations from the group, including one from Ilan to visit him at his home the old town of Jaffa the following evening.

The doors of Ilan's private lift open to reveal an airy, open-plan, split-level space. The entire end wall is glass, framing an expansive balcony and the jaw-dropping view of the Mediterranean beyond. It's a little theatrical moment, intended to impress. I try to keep my cool but fail miserably, gushing praise and one too many "wows". If Tom Ford had a cave it would look like this. The place is both modern and primal, achingly cool with the vibe of a Bond villain's luxury hideaway. The sea wafts through the massive open doors. A striking, ten-foot long table made entirely of layered, raw-edged, slate grey marble dominates the balcony. The sitting room is dressed with designer furniture, pieces of art and stacks of heavy coffee table books. Thankfully my host is no Goldfinger; he's more interested in keeping my wine glass topped up and entertaining me with stories than cutting me in half with a laser. Although I doubt his muscle-bound Brazilian companion - who is unsubtly making his presence felt - would have much trouble holding me down if he did.

"It was a ruin," Pivko says of the building, whilst pushing his sunglasses back onto the bridge of his nose. "I had one floor and some old rooms back here. I took it and I made six apartments. We have relics from a Byzantine port, parts of the old walls of Jaffa. There's a sign that says it was donated to the Armenian Church in 1556." Creating the place was a labour of love, a process made slower by the need to respect the history of the raw materials they were working



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with and the location. But it was undeniably worth the wait. "The sensation of living with such old walls, new and old together, is so exciting. This is the closest place to live by the sea in Israel. Plus it's a port, so boats are coming in and out. You're part of the action."

Jaffa is one of my favourite parts of the city with its old market atmosphere and air of crumbling, Arabic and Ottoman majesty. By night it's full of party mad, beautiful revellers wearing very little. It's enough to cause whiplash.

"I have a vacation every weekend here," Ilan says with a grin. "It's a 24-hour party city, but small enough to walk. It's very safe."

This wasn't always the case; he points out. He paints a vivid picture of Tel Aviv in the eighties. Fun but run-down. Bombarded and falling apart.

The eighties was also when Tel Aviv took on the moniker 'The White City' after a retrospective exhibition framed it as a bastion of Modernism, with the highest concentration of buildings in the 'International Style', on the planet. 'The White City' became shorthand for the image that Tel Aviv presented to the outside world: progressive, secular, egalitarian and liberal; a narrative reiterated to me a few days earlier at the city's Bauhaus centre.



Before setting out into the searing midday heat armed with headsets and a map of key Modernist buildings, our small group of enthusiastic architecture fans huddled around a TV in the basement of the centre watching a short film. The narration played over archive footage detailing a brief story of how Jewish émigrés left the overcrowded Jaffa in the early 20th century and created a shiny new neighbourhood called Tel Aviv (The New Spring) a mile or so further up the coast. The Scottish engineer Sir Patrick Geddes was charged with planning the infrastructure of the garden suburb but didn't specify any particular style to the architects. Tel Aviv's first buildings were unremarkable, Neo-Classical buildings reflecting an aspirational, middle-class, European sensibility.

Following the rise of the Nazi party, a large number of Jewish intellectuals including young architects, schooled in Bauhaus theory, left Germany to find a new home in Tel Aviv. It was a clean slate both culturally and architecturally; and they set to work applying their beloved Modernist principles. The two things, the narration implied, were made for one another; a modern architecture for a brand new city, free from the constraints of historical meaning, and a design aesthetic which championed simplicity and looked for ways to economically make use of readily available, low-cost materials. They adapted everything they knew to the Middle-Eastern climate, in the days before air-conditioning; large balconies, west-facing living rooms and east-facing bedrooms meant the occupants could avoid the heat of the sun as it moved across the sky. The buildings were painted white to reflect as much of the sun's heat as possible.

"In the hands of the city's founding fathers, 4,000 gleaming white modern buildings fit for the 20th century arose from the barren sands of the desert."

By the time the eighties rolled around, the city had developed and changed beyond recognition; and the original generation who built the city were gone.

"Everyone from the centre of Tel Aviv died, pretty much at the same time," Pivko tells me while pouring us both another glass of chilled Chardonnay that he'd just pulled from his large designer fridge. He tops them up with a generous drop of Campari. "They had come here a hundred years ago in their twenties and then died. The city was left empty. So then it became really cheap. This encouraged young people to move back and they started having fun, creating clubs."

This new blood – Pivko's and his peers – were young Post-modernists unbound by the strict rules of the past. With a lust for life and an anything-goes attitude, they turned the area around Shenkin Street into a world-famous, 24-hour party hotspot akin to London's Soho, except with al-fresco weather.

"Gay culture for me is the reason for Post-modern



philosophy. Because we play with the false. Modernism was 'this is the truth'. Post-modernism was 'it's all relative'. I think we had a huge part in creating that kind of thinking here."

We talk about the Freudian origins of gay taste. The controversial book *The Velvet Rage* argued that the gay sensibility for style and design comes from the need to prove oneself valuable to society and has its roots in the denial of fatherly love.

"When those closest to you reject the real you, you have to lie," Ilan concurs. "So you adapt, you change who you are. But you never get there, so we keep changing and we over-achieve. Gay men are very nostalgic; we connect more with nostalgia because it's a fairytale world, a false world. We are longing for something that never existed."

This is interesting to hear coming from a man who so openly embraces the present and who is, in a real sense, shaping the future. He opened his practice in 1981 and has worked across the gamut of architectural projects from urban planning and residential towers, to hotels, public buildings, offices, and private houses. In addition to architecture, the firm is also engaged in interior and even furniture design. One of Ilan's iconic curvaceous yellow perspex bookshelves stands resplendent in his apartment. It's reminiscent of Florentin Tower, a Pivko-designed development that forms part of the next wave of Tel Aviv's evolution, prompted by completion of the citywide light-rail network connecting Tel Aviv's city centre to neighbouring areas. It's a great time to be an architect in Tel Aviv. The cost of land here is already the highest in the Middle East, and the new light railway is projected to increase demand and value.

In addition to designing large-scale developments, Pivko is the choice 'du jour' for Israel's elite who commission him to design bespoke houses. But for those less well-off he also offers an innovative solution: off-the-peg 'Pivko houses' designed to meet the need for new homes across the country. In Israel, it's normal practice to build your own house on a plot of land purchased from the government. Once you have it, Pivko will recommend a few models of two-storey homes that he deems suitable. He and his team will then oversee the construction and outfitting, including the floor, bathroom and kitchen. The average cost for build-it-yourself homes is \$1,200 per square metre, a Pivko house comes in at around \$1,000 per square metre, and with the added benefit of precise, design and quality-controlled construction, making it a very attractive prospect.

"When I build a home for millionaires, I often use special materials that require specially trained craftsmen who are experts in each field. Pivko Houses will be of a very high standard, will look good and will





**"You should never be attached to anything. I truly believe that is the only way to create."**

be built of quality materials, but are designed so that any good craftsman will be able to build them, without any specialist knowledge."

It's an example of typical Israeli ingenuity and willingness to adapt and develop new ideas. The idea came to Pivko after observing the way the way that the fashion industry has evolved.

"Up until 30 years ago, to have a suit made for you, you had to go to a tailor who would take your measurements and then invest considerable effort in every detail, including the lining, the fabric and the stitching. In today's world of big fashion brands, it's a very different story. Much less work is invested in the suit itself, but rather in its design. So you don't go to a tailor, but rather to a store, where you choose Versace, Armani or Dolce & Gabbana, and buy a luxury product off the peg and on the spot."

The plots available to purchase for houses are almost identical in their size and shape - rectangles covering half a dunam (1/8 acre) - which Pivko houses are designed to fit. Thus, they have the potential to be built all over the country.

As we wait for a car to the restaurant, we walk to the balcony and take in the sea and the warm night air. I ask if he would ever relocate.

"Why would I? I'm King of my town, but I mean,

who knows? We live in a hectic world. I have a friend who keeps a thousand dollars in a hole somewhere just in case. And besides, 'Would you ever leave?' is a bad question to ask a Jew," he laughs.

We are silent for a bit, just listening to the sound of the sea. Then he takes up a different conversational strand entirely, concerning Mossad, the Israeli security service.

"Once, Mossad came to me and asked me to give a lecture to some of the big shots. They have lectures from people from creative disciplines. It's because they feel that what they do is creative too. So I told them that when I'm working on something, I look at it as if I have never seen it before. I look at it with fresh eyes and sometimes when I've done that, I tear it up and scrap the whole thing. They were fascinated. And I said, in your case, it's extremely important to be flexible. I'm really not in love with my work. I do it, then look at it as if it's not mine. It's the only way to analyse neatly. I told them to detach themselves because if you fall in love with a plan, you don't want to change it. You should never be attached to anything. I truly believe that is the only way to create."

And with that endorsement of the stoic philosophy of non-attachment, we head down to the waiting car and head off to a posh dinner and to experience the fabulous Tel Aviv nightlife, Pivko style.

A few days later Ilan invited me back over as he was having a few friends round for drinks. To my surprise, it transpires that it is, in fact, his 70th birthday party and I'm welcomed into his inner circle for the evening. I arrive just before sunset to find the place already buzzing with activity. The crowd ranged from people in their mid-20s to Ilan's peers. I get talking to his PA who has been with him for decades and holds him in high regard; she enthused about his thirst for knowledge, curiosity and creativity.

"He's full of surprises and has opened my eyes to things I would never have dreamt of," she tells me.

I also meet his business mentor who talks about Ilan's drive and focus. The evening rolls along until a break for some informal speeches. Unfortunately, most are in Hebrew, and I only catch the odd abridged translation, but it's clear there's a lot of love in the room. His Personal Trainer speaks about Ilan's dedication and transformation, the evidence of which is clear to anyone. But looks aside, at 70 it's evident that it is Ilan's attitude that makes him youthful. He surrounds himself with interesting people, he has his finger on the pulse of the city and still parties like a 30-year-old.

It's my last day in Tel Aviv, I'm at a vast outdoor, Offer Nissim gay dance event. So many people had told me I needed to be here that I extended my stay just to attend. At the height of the DJ's euphoric set, I'm stood near the stage in front of a sea of tanned, shirtless Israeli Adonises, all dancing in unison. At the top of the hill overlooking this bacchanalian milieu, a white t-shirt catches my eye, it's Ilan, the setting sun glinting off his trademark blue-tinted sunglasses. On his face, the contented smile of a man at the top of his game, living life to the full, personally invested in the city he calls home. A second later, bodies close in around him. As I turn back to the DJ, I realise that I have never seen his eyes. I guess that when your star shines this brightly, you've just got to wear shades. ●

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