HOW

FINDING INSPIRATION IN ISRAEL'S DESIGN SCENE

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WORDS
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Finding Inspiration in Israel

Most people don't think of the Middle East as a creative wonderland, but they should. Find out how designers thrive along the Mediterranean.

It seems surreal. As if it isn't a real place but just the stuff postcards are made of: Beaches and coral reefs bask beneath the Mediterranean sun. Ruins crumble with the rich history of lives lived in centuries past. Bazaars come alive with hustle and bustle. Shepherds care for sheep in lush green hills and pastures. Tribal herdsmen lead camels through the rough, rocky desert sands. Tourists swim in the same seaside waters that Jesus is said to have walked on.

This is the land of Israel, a relatively tiny country—slightly smaller than New Jersey—in the Middle East. In spite of its modest stature, the beauty that exists here is big, breathtaking and bold. It should come as no surprise, then, that all of this splendor has given rise to a thriving creative spirit and industry. Designers from all over the world are coming to Israel's shores to experience this insurgence for themselves and breathe new life into their creativity.

THE DESIGN SCENE

In 1906, artist Boris Schatz founded the Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts in Jerusalem. Over the next century, the school blossomed along with the country's burgeoning design scene, and today, the school known as Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design is recognized as one of the world's most prestigious art schools.

It wasn't until the 1930s, however, that the current design scene really started to evolve. Artists, craftsmen and designers from all over the world immigrated to Israel, mostly to escape persecution in the years leading up to World War II. During this decade, there was enough need that they established The Association of Jewish Commercial Artists in Palestine along with other professional artists groups.

Now, one of the hubs of the country's talent is in Tel Aviv, the second most populous city and the largest metropolitan area in Israel. In fact, it got its start during the 1930s when German Jewish architects who had immigrated to the area began erecting thousands of buildings in the iconic Bauhaus style. These days, there are more than 4,000 such buildings throughout the city, earning it the nickname "The White City" and a designation as the largest concentration of Bauhaus buildings in the world.

Tel Aviv–based creative Jonathan Saragossi, who is also the founder of IM Creator, a free online website builder, notes that "Israel doesn't have a strong design history like Germany or Switzerland do." But that isn't a bad thing. "I believe that lacking historical roots in design actually helps us take more risk and be more extreme, as we're not beholden to any aesthetic past," he says.

Since those early years, the design scene has continued to flourish into a small but mighty force, particularly thanks to the public's appreciation of and demand for quality design. "As with any other modern country, we consume the same sources of inspiration," Saragossi says. "Visual globalization has made geographic differences irrelevant."

Businesses are listening and responding to the increased demand for design, too. "It's a crucial concern among the leadership," Saragossi adds. Kim Mayroze, a designer in Jerusalem and the owner of KimmDesign Studio, agrees, pointing to the fact that many tech and biotech companies are springing up throughout Israel. "This creative vibrancy allows for tremendous flexibility in thinking about art, design and technology," she says, particularly when it affords designers great opportunities to collaborate. Mayroze has worked with various startup tech companies, which she says have provided her with rare glimpses into branding from the ground up.

As the field continues to grow, another benefit of the design scene in Israel is that it's made networking here easier than it might be elsewhere, like in New York City or Los Angeles. Alisa Rank, a freelance graphic designer and professional photographer in Pikesville, MD, found that to be the case when she interned for six months at McCann Erickson in Tel Aviv. She was able to work directly under the tutelage of Elizier "Azee" Azazar, who has created notable ads for Nike and the European World Cup. "It was so rewarding being able to work with someone as sought after as him," she says. "It gives me great pride when I can say that I worked for McCann Erickson, and I watch jaws drop."

THE WORKPLACE

Another thing Rank found rewarding while working at McCann Erickson was the culture of the Israeli workplace. "Every day when I would arrive to work, co-workers would embrace one another with a hug or high-five," she recalls. "It was like one giant family." To an American who is used to brief communications over coffee, the difference was striking.

And that familial bond is a strong one. Cynthia Fish, a designer from Montreal who interned at the internet startup Video Chat Rounds in Tel Aviv, agrees, saying, "The social aspect of working there was unlike anything I had previously experienced. Every Thursday, the bosses bought a different lunch for the whole office to eat together. Every Tuesday was salad day with both full-time employees and interns working together to peel, chop and slice a giant vegetarian feast. We had company bar nights. No birthday went uncelebrated. It was truly a special place to work."

Designers who have worked in Israel and abroad also noted that in the Israeli culture, people are more direct when interacting with one another. "They don't hesitate to speak their mind, even if it means disagreeing with their boss," Rank says. "But the most unbelievable part is that an employee in Israel won't lose

"There is no place like Israel," says designer Cynthia Fish. "It is a country with deep soul. The people, the scenery, the smells, the architecture, the unique character—all previously foreign to me—all contributed to the most incredible experience of my life thus far."

her job over it, whereas in America it's frowned upon and could potentially cost someone a job."

That predilection for open communication also helped both designers feel connected. "One of my favorite aspects of life there was that even though I was there by myself, I never felt alone," Fish recalls. "I found people to be much less inhibited in Israel, and I had numerous meaningful conversations with complete strangers."

Liora Yuklea, a graphic designer from Israel who is currently getting her master's degree in New York City, noticed the reverse consequences of this when she came to the U.S. "In the States, there seems to be a more formal attitude toward certain rituals of conduct than in Israel, a less formal society where people are much more direct," she says, providing an anecdote: "When I first arrived in New York City, I had an internship interview set up. I asked my sister, who has lived and worked here for years, if there was anything I should know about job interviews here. She asked me, 'You have a suit, right?' And I balked; I've never had a suit in my life. Workwear in Israel is jeans and T-shirts, very informal. This was completely new to me."

Possibly due to this candid culture, another element of the Israeli design workplace that Rank and Fish both commented on was how they felt like real co-workers instead of interns. "The amount of responsibility I was given really made me feel like an appreciated and trusted member of the team," Fish says. She wasn't relegated to running errands or organizing files—but to actual work, including online banner ads for the company. "They gave me the freedom to create any designs I wanted," she says. "A few days later, a fellow intern showed me the statistics indicating my creations were being clicked and bringing visitors to our site. What a sense of achievement!"

THE HISTORY

Beyond the office itself, another benefit of working and designing in Israel is that inspiration is around every corner. "I found it impossible to be bored," Fish says. "My apartment was a two-minute walk from the Mediterranean Sea, providing gorgeous scenery with which I could clear my head and be inspired. My artistic ideas were being triggered not only by the beautiful views, but also by the country's rich history."

Though the country itself is young—it was established primarily as a safe haven for Jews in 1948 at the wake of the Holocaust—its roots date back millennia. History is a daily part of life for Israelis, as some of the roads they walk have been walked for thousands of years. The mountains they climb and the rivers they cross aren't just ordinary geographical features, but ones that play significantly into some of the world's major religions.

Every major empire from the Near East has fought on Israel's soil, each leaving its mark, as well. There are ruins visible from the days when Romans ruled the realm, and vestiges of the Crusaders (including excavated knights' halls) still survive. It's a veritable time warp that jumps through eras and empires as you traverse the ancient countryside.

That's one of the elements that makes life in Israel so inspiring—the past isn't relegated to museum walls but is vividly alive around every corner, beneath every step you take.

THE DIVERSITY

All those layers of history have made for more than just sights and scenery. People have come with them, hailing from all walks of life, all corners of the globe. According to the official tourism website for Israel, there are currently some 7.4 million residents in the country, and immigrants have relocated here from more than 130 countries since the state was established. Much of that immigration can be attributed to Israel's significance in three of the world's major religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism), which has made it a destination for foreign worshippers.

"You walk down a street and see men pulling oversize crosses," says Carrie Devorah, an American creative in Washington, DC, who has familial ties to Israel and is the founder of The Center for Copyright Integrity. "Turn a corner, and you hear Arab women trilling. Turn another corner, and you see religious Jews in traditional garb. All these sects are intermingling with other cultures and faiths from around the world."

The array of faiths mixing together, side by side, can be attributed to the fact that within Israel's borders are some of the most important holy sites for the Jewish, Muslim and Christian faiths. In particular, all three of these religions converge in the city of Jerusalem, which is considered one of the oldest cities in the world and is known as the Holy Land. For the Jews, it's the place where King Solomon built the original temple for the Jewish faith (which has since been all

but destroyed). For the Muslims, the Dome of the Rock mosque is the faith's third most holy site for the devout. For the Christians, it's where Jesus spent his last days and was resurrected.

"Jerusalem is where faiths come together," Devorah says. Within Israel, about 75% of the populace affiliate with the Jewish faith, making it the country with the largest concentration of Jews in the world. Beyond Judaism, 17% of Israelis consider themselves Muslim, and 2% identify as Christian. But within each of those faiths are great variety, from more conservative sects that wear garb with fashions that date back centuries to secular ones. For instance, within the Jewish population, 43% of people are considered secular, 35% are traditional, 12% are considered ultra-orthodox and 10% are religious.

But Israel's mere location has also contributed to this influx, as it's wedged at the crossroads between Europe, Asia and Africa, where East meets West and makes for an easy conduit in between. All those components have come together to create striking cultural diversity in the country, where myriad languages, ethnicities and customs abound as a notable source of inspiration for designers.

That blending of backgrounds has not only made Israel more diverse but also more tolerant. "The country is a melting pot of people from almost every country and religion in the world, so there's a sense of enormous open-mindeness, cross-fertilization and dynamism," says Mayroze, an English-born designer who has made Israel her home for the past 30 years.

Raviv Mordoch, an art director at Purple Interactive in Herzliya Pituach, Israel, adds, "Since it's so diverse and different, I think that Israel has quite a challenge, design-wise. You have to do your homework and determine who is your end-client and how you will design for him." It's a challenge that many say helps keep their creative skills sharp.

THE CONFLICT

In spite of the country's tolerance for different backgrounds and faiths, there's obviously a fair amount of political turmoil that embroils Israel. Much of the conflict can be traced back to when Israel was first established. The issue is that it wasn't empty land when this happened; there were already Palestinian Arabs (the majority of whom were Muslim) who called the very same land home and were consequently displaced. Ever since, the two groups have been in disagreements

over who has the rightful claim to the land. Israel has also found itself at odds with other countries as well, who are sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. One of those countries is Iran.

Those disagreements have given way to great and grave violence. Wars have been waged, rockets launched, bombs detonated, missiles aimed, acts of terrorism committed, innocent civilians killed in the crossfire. Violence—and the threat of violence—is a reality here. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, more than 10,000 Israelis and Palestinians have died during the conflict between the years of 1948 and 1997.

Unfortunately, the violence is not limited to battlegrounds, as Devorah knows firsthand. "My story is a bit unique. My brother was murdered by terrorists," she says. Yet in the very next breath she continues, "That said, the country is glorious. One would think Israel is a place to run from. Not at all."

Her story is just one of many that illustrate how intimately the political conflict impacts everyday, ordinary life for Israelis, including their design and work lives. One of the noticeable consequences is the age difference of Israeli designers.

In many countries, students go from high school to college, earn their degrees, and then enter the workforce. But Israel has a mandatory military conscription at age 18, which often results in a delay in earning degrees and entering the workplace. Baltimore designer Marisa Obuchowski, who interned in Israel, noticed this in her office. "When I started working, it shocked my colleagues to know that at 22 years old, I already had my BFA degree," she says. "Here we're at seemingly similar stages in our lives, and we're eight years apart."

And yet, their experiences in the army also open Israelis' eyes to what is going on in their country. "My days in the army made me go as far as possible from politics and find my freedom in art and design," Saragossi says. "I believe aesthetics can be a future tool for getting us and our neighbors into a dialogue—more of a cultural or educational discussion than a military one."

That's a sentiment many designers share. "Israeli society has become reawakened to social impact as a whole. It's a slow process, but it's happening," Yuklea says. "The field of design—being at the end of the day a very human-centered field—has naturally responded and reflected that shift. When I went to undergrad, the work that you saw from students wasn't as politically and socially loaded in messaging as you see now. The recent graduation exhibitions showcased many works that tried to provide solutions to various socially oriented problems, and this is a blessed development that indicates the growing connection designers feel to the role of change agents."

That belief in the power of graphic design to effect these very real, very big problems even encouraged Yuklea in her choice to travel to the U.S. for her master's degree, which focuses on design for social innovation. She says her studies in the States "allow me to

apply my profession and skills to the agendas I feel strongly about. [I can] make a difference and also make a career of all that. I hope I will have a good opportunity to do that in Israel, as much of my motivation to take my career in this direction is based on the experiences I had with social problems in Israel."

THE FUTURE

While there's no easy solution to the conflict and violence in Israel, many designers are right in step with Yuklea and are taking up the challenge to use their creative skills to cultivate peace. One of the most notable pioneers in this effort is Ronny Edry, a designer based in Tel Aviv who also founded and teaches at Pushpin School of Design TLV.

One day in early 2012, Edry was at the grocery store and heard some people casually commenting about war between Israel and Iran. "This is where we are now in Israel," Edry said during a talk he gave at TEDxJaffa. Tensions between the two countries had been mounting to where war seemed inevitable. It was practically normal to think like this. As he considered the situation, though, he realized that he didn't feel that way. He didn't hate the Iranians; in fact, he didn't even know an Iranian. He certainly didn't want to go to war with them.

So, as a graphic designer, he took those sentiments and channeled them into a poster, one of him holding his daughter and an Israeli flag, with a banner that read: "Iranians, we will never bomb your country. We [heart] you." He posted the image on Facebook, and before he knew it, the poster had gone viral. Fellow Israelis wanted their own posters, depicting themselves telling the Iranians that they didn't hate them. Soon, they were also hearing from Iranians who felt the same. For many, these were the first times the two cultures had interacted with one another.

"We have become kind of ambassadors for our own countries," Edry says. "In Israel, you have a generation that has never even met a Palestinian. So designers have a real job to do here, to show the 'other' reality—the 99%. This is really the power of communication design: Simple posters have changed the way people perceive the 'enemy.' When you give a face to the enemy, you make the enemy a person. You're rehumanizing the conflict. That's all you need to open your eyes to the possibility that the knowledge you have of your enemy may be partial, if not wrong."

They're doing what political figures only talk about: They're touching the lives of their neighbors and actually making a difference—through design. This is what Edry continues to do, having founded The Peace Factory,

which he describes as being "an advertising company that works to promote one product only: peace in the Middle East."

In this way, design in Israel has come full circle. As much as the country itself—from its culture to the sights and sounds—influences its industry professionals, designers are influencing the country, too. With the sparkling Mediterranean Sea in the distance and sun shining overhead, it's enough to make you feel like you're in a creative paradise. A sentiment with which many designers agree. HOW

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EXPERIENCE ISRAEL FOR YOURSELF

Thanks to the unique aspects of life and work in Israel, many designers are eager to cull their creative spirits here. Masa Israel Journey is one program that helps make that desire a reality for budding designers. Each year, more than 10,000 adults (ages 18 to 30) take part in the program, which connects them with five- to 10-month-long programs and internships in Israel.

"Many aspiring designers and artists come to us looking for career development experiences, and our program coordinators set them up with renowned artists and international agencies where they gain professional experience while developing their portfolios," says Lara Robinson, marketing and communications coordinator for the program.

Masa Israel Journey was conceived by former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2004 and is a joint project between the government of Israel and the Jewish Agency for Israel. The intent of the program is to provide a means for adults (primarily of Jewish faith or descent) to experience Israel for themselves. During their stay, participants will also study Hebrew and go on trips to explore the country.

"I know that my experience abroad contributed immeasurably to my development and my skills," says Cynthia Fish, a designer from Montreal who interned in Tel Aviv through Masa Israel Journey. "It truly was the adventure of a lifetime."

For more about Masa Israel Journey, visit www.masaisrael.org.