

Where do you buy a plant that goes with the couch?

The Design Center mall was planned to be in the vanguard of design in Israel. Seven years after it opened, why is it such a marginal player?

By Efrat Shalom

When the Design Center mall opened in Ramat Gan seven years ago, it held out a very large promise: 60 stores specializing in home design under one roof, a central location in the Tel Aviv metropolitan area, and a declaration of intent to lead the design field in Israel and reflect design trends from around the world.

But the situation today is different, and quite dreary: A visit to the mall this week revealed deserted corridors, even though Design Center says that the mall caters to 5,000-6,000 shoppers daily. CEO Liliana Mor notes an increase in sales of 26 percent in 2003 over the previous year's figures, and a long waiting list of companies wishing to open shops in the mall. Yet the sense is that, as opposed to bustling shopping centers like Ikea and southern Tel Aviv, Design Center has not proved to be an anchor of any substance in the local design market.

The mall's managers are apparently aware of this. In the past three years, the center has launched promotions that seem to be an attempt to infuse new life into the mall. The first step was changing the name of the mall from Dan Design Center, to prevent any association with the Ikea-sounding ID Design chain, which created confusion among customers.

The mall has also held exhibitions of works by design students and an exhibition of chairs by local designers. To mark the launch of the 2004 collection in the mall's shops, carpets of flowers were laid throughout the three-story building, and flower arrangement workshops were offered to visitors. Nonetheless, all of the effort seems to fall short of bringing Design Center in from the margins of the Israeli design map.

You could get lost

Last year, the designer Arik Ben Simhon was considering opening a store in Design Center, in addition to his store in southern Tel Aviv. He says that he weighed the advantages of the mall – accessibility, convenient parking, and the concentration of stores in a single building. “Design Center is a terrific idea, but I realized that a lot of substantial changes had to be made in it in order for it to work,” says Ben Simhon, who eventually gave up on the idea. “Right now, it does not have any definable identity, and lacks character and uniqueness.”

Ben Simhon cites the problematic planning and design of the internal spaces of the mall. “The design is old-fashioned. It is a design mall that lacks design,” Ben Simhon, like many other designers interviewed for this article, is referring to the low ceilings in the shops, the floor that is sheathed in ceramic tiles whose time has passed, the green railings and the facade's old-fashioned ironwork. “It has no design chic,” is how one designer described it. “It looks like a shopping mall in the periphery.”

Interior designer Yaron Tal says that the mall's large floor space – 35,000 square meters – works against it. “It isn't fun to shop there, and you can get lost inside. Had they designed it differently, maybe it would have been easier to get one's bearings.”

Tal proposes a mall that is divided up by category-areas devoted to lighting, flooring, furnishings, etc., and offers as an example the Florentine neighborhood of south Tel Aviv, where you can find a cluster of furniture stores on Herzl Street and a cluster of lighting stores on Wolfson Street.

Where are the name brands?

There are several big factors that prevent Design Center from realizing its intrinsic potential. No doubt, the main problem has to do with the mall's mistaken selection of stores. “All it has is a mass of stores, each one of which sells something else,” says Eyal Slouk, the manager of Ikea. He feels that this type of mall, which appeals to a middle-class and higher target audience, should have assembled the leading lights of the design community. “Although some of the stores represent brand names, it's still a mall of stores that sell furniture, and not a place that

enables the customer to see the new trends from the leading design companies.”

Undeniably, aside from a few noteworthy stores, such as Habitat and Hezi Bank (for bathroom fixtures), the mall lacks name-brand firms and designers that would serve as a magnet for the public. Hollandia, Archipenko and Casbah Maroc, which have shops at Design Center, are companies that cannot be compared, in terms of prestige, to the offerings available in south Tel Aviv – designers like Ben Simhon, Kastiel and Haim Caranadji; it would also be a stretch to compare them to the Herzliya Pituah industrial zone, which offers prestigious design brands such as Tollman's and Pitaro Hecht.

The Design Center, says Ben Simhon, lacks an adequate assortment of shops to enable a proper round of shopping. “A mall should offer an entire world, with all the trimmings, from big to small. Design Center has no such thing. For instance, there is no candle shop, flower shop or stores with designed accessories and objects that would complement the shopping expedition.”

Furniture buying, says Ben Simhon, is supposed to provide an entertainment experience – with proper lighting, successful interior design, appropriate background music and a nice coffee shop where one can relax from the tiring work of shopping. “You can't find any of this at Design Center.”

Yehoshua Kastiel, whose store sprawls over a five-story building in south Tel Aviv, offers as an example Ikea, which since the opening of its branch in Israel in 2001, has become the anchor of a zone adjacent to the Poleg Interchange south of Netanya. The area offers a total shopping experience, in which customers can

Aviv port has a high concentration of varied lighting and furniture stores; Moshav Rishpon has commercial-type stores and more artistic ones; and the Herzliya Pituah industrial zone has a high concentration of prestigious name brands.

Design Center, many interior designers admit, does not meet all their needs. In south Tel Aviv, conversely, there is a high concentration of design shops as well as a very broad selection. Herzl Street is a veteran establishment in the mass-produced furniture field and offers low prices, and shoppers can find prestige design items in the streets around it.

This polarity has spawned a knockoff industry in south Tel Aviv: Upholsterers and small manufacturers copy designs of the well-known companies and designers, and offer them at much lower prices. Next to a couch priced at NIS 40,000, you can find others at NIS 2,000.

Kastiel maintains that the Florentine quarter represents the young, independent, most avant-garde design niche. “Florentine's transformation over the past decade into a bustling neighborhood, with good rental conditions, enabled younger designers to open shops there.” Nevertheless, the recession in Israel has had its effect, and many shops have closed.

Kastiel believes that prestigious design brands that want to preserve their unique identity will never rent space in malls. “It's the same all over the world. Most of the highly regarded companies, those that do not offer mass-produced design, are not located in design malls. Many shopping centers make tempting offers, with low rents, to entice us into opening a store, but we're not interested. It would not be easy for me to detach myself from the neighborhood ambience, for the synthetic spirit of the malls,” says Kastiel.

Perhaps the problem lies in the very concept of a roofed-over design center. Kastiel is convinced that the formula simply does not work, anywhere in the world. He talks about a visit he made to a design center in the American Midwest, which had “gloomy furnishings and appalling wall coverings.”

Ben Simhon feels the same way. When he visited these sorts of designers in New York, he was shocked. “There is an horrible atmosphere: the building is enormous, and the shops are small. I felt they were the saddest stores in the world. At the time, I was considering the possibility of moving to Design Center, and the truth is that I asked myself if I felt like being

standing these claims of the w standing in the Israeli design .iliana Mor, the CEO of Design reports that five new stores have in the past two months, and other have expanded, including Cactus, a, Decor Kitchens and Do It ens.

or adds that the mall is now at full pancy, aside from one store on ground floor, and that another or was added to the mall a few nths ago, which specializes in hroom fixtures and flooring. Only

occupied. Mor rebuffs the claim that the mall is trying to “re- place” itself through activities that attract large shopping audiences. “Since we first opened, we have held a variety of events. But in the past few years, we realized that as a force that dictates design trends, we have to step up the scope of the initiatives that disseminate design.” And so, a design competition for students is going to be held in mid-April, which will be devoted to the question of what constitutes Israeli- ness. The exhibition will also feature a tribute to Is- raeli designers who have achieved world-wide suc- cess, including Ron Arad. A design library is scheduled to open this June, at which time a lecture hall devoted to matters of design (for the population at large) will also open. An exhibition hall opens in July, which will feature young designers.

As for the mall's external facade, the CEO reports that interior designer Pini Weinberg is now at work on what she calls “cosmetic changes,” including painting, installation of new lighting and repair of the facade. “Even though in my opinion Design Center is the most beautiful center in Israel, it has neverthe- less been seven years since it opened, and as a design center we want to be up-to-date in design.”



A shot from “Misafa Lesafa,” which won best film in the Israeli competition.

DocAviv prize goes to film about struggling with Hebrew

By Goel Pinto

“Misafa Lesafa (From Language to Language),” directed by Nurit Aviv, won the best film prize in Is- raeli competition in the DocAviv documentary film festival now underway at the Tel Aviv Cinematheque. Aviv, whose film was supported by television's Channel 8 and the New Israeli Foundation for Cinema and Television, won a NIS 50,000 prize.

Aviv's film presents a mosaic of nine inter- view subjects who speak about the gap between their mother tongue and Hebrew. In explaining its award, the jury called the film “a whole com- position with a clear, close-fitting structure and impressive cinematic qualities. Between the language of pictures and the language of words, a statement is made that is simultaneously uni- versal and Israeli. The power of the film partly stems from the meticulous selection of figures and places, cultural sensitivity and aesthetic discipline.”

The jury awarded prizes to several other films. A NIS 20,000 grant was bestowed by the New Israeli Foundation for Cinema and Televi- sion to encourage the premiere work by Ilii Alexander, the director of “Keep Not Silent,” which concerns ultra-Orthodox lesbians. “This is an original and bold premiere work, which is likely to provoke debate, and perhaps also to in- fluence and to change,” wrote the judges.

Acting on behalf of the Makor Foundation for

Israel Film, the jury awarded a NIS 10,000 prize for photography to Yoav Shamir, the director of “Checkpoint.” “The cinematography imparts a stylistic uniformity and quality to the film, which was shot at different times and places,” the judges wrote.

On behalf of Tel Aviv Studios, the jury awarded the prize for best editing (and NIS 20,000) to the director David Noy and the editor Eyal Tsarfati, for “Family Matters.” The judges said: “In a dynamic style and multiple turns and twists, the editing weaves a fluent and human plot.”

Ruth Diskin Films, Ltd., granted a prize of NIS 10,000 to “Mashallah,” directed by Eytan Harris, for promotion and distribution of the film in Israel and abroad. “An atypical film shot by an artist,” wrote the judges.

Two “special recognition” awards were granted to the films “Blood Engagement,” di- rected by Ada Ushpiz and Shlomi Shir's “Mr. Cortisone Happy Days.”

The Slovakian film “66 Seasons,” directed by Peter Kerekes, won the international competi- tion, and collected a NIS 12,000 prize. Awards of special recognition were given to two foreign films: “Surplus – Terrorized into Being Con- sumers,” directed by Eric Gandini, and “Sand and Water,” directed by Shaheen Dill-Riaz.

The prizes were awarded last night at a cere- mony held at the Cinematheque. All of the win- ning films will be screened this Saturday at the Cinematheque, from 10:00 to 12:00.

Livnat folds, Tumarkin wins by the rules

By Dana Gilerman

“I have no choice but to respect the decision of the prize commit- tee and grant the Israel Prize to [Iga]l Tumarkin,” Educa- tion and Culture Minister Limor Livnat wrote to the High Court of Justice yester- day.

The declaration was written after the High Court of Justice yesterday postponed by two weeks the hearing on petitions that contest the award of the Israel Prize to the artist. The court requested that the minis- ter submit her detailed stand on the issue, in writing.

The declaration makes it clear that Livnat is uncomfortable with granting the prize to Tumarkin, but is forced to af- firm the choice of the Israel Prize committee, which twice reconfirmed its decision to grant the prize.

“The regulations of the Is- rael Prize bylaws state that the repeat decision of the committee is final,” writes Livnat. “In light of this, and in consideration of what has been the customary practice since the establishment of the Israel Prize in 1953, according to which ministers of educa- tion have over the years re- spected the final decision of the prize committee, any decision to avoid awarding the Is- rael Prize to Tumarkin would not stand the test of reason- ability. I have therefore reached the decision that I have no choice but to respect the final decision of the prize committee and to grant Tu- markin the Israel Prize for sculpture.”

The Ministry of Education issued a press release stating that Livnat intends to amend the prize bylaws to incorpo- rate the directives of the state

prosecutor that all of a prize candidate's public activities be taken into consideration. Were this to be the case, then Tumarkin could have been denied the prize. He has been controversial for comments about Haredim and Sephardim.

This is the second time in a row that a decision to grant the Israel Prize in art has been reviewed by the High Court of Justice. Last year, Moshe Gershuni asked the court to ap- prove his receiving the Israel Prize without his being pre- sent at the ceremony. The court turned down the request as contravening the prize by- laws. These controversies are seemingly the product of the situation in which a right-wing government grants prizes to artists who identify with the left and oppose government ideology and actions in the territories.



find, among other things, shops of the Arcafe chain of coffee houses, fashion and housewares chain Golf and Co., and Jumbo, the retail food chain.

Unlike Ikea and Herzl Street in south Tel Aviv, Design Center does not offer any advantage of low prices, either. Ben Simhon notes that what makes Ikea unique is the varied selection of furniture and designer housewares at low prices. “The nature of the transaction is known to both sides, and you receive suitable value for your money. I shop at Ikea, too, mainly accessories. It is an essential stop on the design trail.”

The most notable advantage of Design Center, as a building that houses dozens of design shops, seems to have been lost, primarily after other shopping centers have sprouted up in recent years in which you can find a high concentration of design shops. In the inexpensive furniture field, the list includes the industrial areas of Rishon Letzion; the Gaash and Bilu shopping centers appeal to the middle-class; the Tel

Dining Out / Daniel Rogov

Cal-Mex in Tel Aviv

The trick in eating this is to grasp the package in the fingers and then to peel back just enough of the paper to make the ingredients easily available. By any standard, the dish I had was a pleasure, augmented by a small plate of rice and black pinto beans.

I accompanied my meal with a frozen strawberry margarita. What pleased was that instead of coming out of a large electric blending machine that holds pre-made cocktails as in so many restau- rants, this one was made by first crush- ing the ice by hand and then it

was put into a blender together with tequila and triple sec and a lemon, lime and sugar mixture. Because I had come for lunch, I held myself to a single mar- garita. It was tasty enough, however, that had I come for dinner I would prob- ably have consumed two or three.

For dessert I could not resist trying the purely North American hot fudge sundae of vanilla ice cream, sliced bananas, hot fudge and whipped cream.

The main item of decor in the restau- rant, a large photograph of a Mexican couple, both barefoot and dressed in fes- tive garb seems intentionally postcard style, a reminder that just as Tex-Mex or Cal-Mex food is not quite real, neither is that couple. Nor is there any real con- nection between the music of Leonard Cohen or Achinoam Nini and real Mexi- can food. All of which makes no differ- ence whatever, for the bright red, yel- low and orange colors on the bar, walls and tables, the friendly service and the food all come together for casual meals.

Including the margarita my bill came to NIS 89. An especially good deal for is the fixed-price meal (nachos, two mar-

garitas, burritos, salad, rice and dessert) offered at NIS 129 for two. Great fun and worth a visit.

Burritos: 14 Yad Harutzim. Open Sunday-Thursday 12:00-23:00 and on Friday and Saturday until 01:00. (03) 687-3699.

Quick and good

The menu lists a few first courses, mostly salads that have been prepared in advance, and features a large collection of shrimp and calamari dishes, each in a different sauce and all of which can be cooked in a wok-like implement in a matter of seconds. ShrimpSea is not so much a fast-food restaurant as it is a restaurant designed to serve meals that can be served and eaten quickly.

My meal opened with two salads, a Ro- manian country-style eggplant salad with generous garlic and a second in which cooked and then chilled North Sea Pollack had been shredded and mixed with finely chopped, hard-boiled eggs and mayon- naise. The first was simple but pleasant, but the second was too dry and neutral in

flavor and under-seasoned. What was very good was the hot, flavorful, freshly baked bread, somewhere in style between focca- cia and a Moroccan flat bread. It served with herbed butter.

Also pleasant was the main course I tried, a dish in which shrimps and calamari rings had been tossed together in oil and sauteed over a high flame. A few seconds before the cook decided that the seafood was ready, he made the sauce by adding sweet cream, Pernod and spices to the skillet. The generous portion of shrimps (crisp and flavorful) and calamari (just soft enough) and the sauce, although simple and without pretensions, was tasty enough to finish off with bread.

Including a Hoegarten draft beer and a closing espresso my bill came to NIS 66. The restaurant has a somewhat commer- cial appearance and lacks real atmosphere but considering the friendly service and the pleasant shrimp and calamari dishes, it is perhaps worth an occasional visit for those who work in the area.

ShrimpSea: 8 Hamanofim, Herzliya Pituah. Open daily 12:00-24:00. Tel. (09) 972-5680.

The cooking style known as “Tex- Mex” originated in the late 19th century and for many years was restricted primarily to the states of Texas, Oklahoma and Arizona. Even though many Tex-Mex offerings relied on tortillas and hot peppers, they were far from being loyal to their Mexican roots. Despite this, these dishes proved much to the taste of North Americans, and by the 1980s Tex-Mex dishes such as chili con carne, fajitas and burritos had become so popular throughout the United States that fast-food places such as Taco-Bell had become serious competi- tors to McDonald's and Pizza Hut.

What most Americans do not know even today is that the best adaptations of Mexican cuisine are not served in fast- food joints, and that the very best are from California, and not Texas; Californians have remained far more faithful to the original cuisine of northern Mexico. In fact, while most Mexicans and Mexi- can-Americans tend to laugh at Tex-Mex foods, they have great respect for Cal- Mex dishes.

Much in the Californian tradition, Tel Aviv's newly opened Burritos offers dishes that have a genuinely Mexican flavor. My meal opened with nachos and salsa. Nachos may be nothing more than corn tortillas that have been deep fried but when they are crisp, greasless and full of flavor such as were the ones I re- ceived, they are simple delights, espe- cially when dipped into a lightly chunky tomato salsa like the one I was served.

I was also pleased that a well-made hot chili pepper sauce was served in a small separate container, giving each diner the choice to add as much or as lit- tle heat as desired to the salsa.

I continued with the burritos supreme. Burritos, which are made by wrapping tortillas around a variety of fillings, are popular fare both north and south of the Rio Grande. The one I re- ceived consisted of a just firm and thick enough tortilla that had been wrapped about cheese, guacamole, lettuce, pinto beans and ground beef – with sour cream and onions added. As it should have been, the burrito was wrapped in