



THIS RENOVATED home in Jerusalem's Baka neighborhood was recently sold for about \$6 million. (Courtesy)

Restoring the old and beautiful

REAL ESTATE

• By JOHN BENZAQUEN

Restoring ancient buildings is a common practice in Europe and the US, where many historic buildings have been refurbished and converted to office buildings or government headquarters.

In Israel, too, preserving and restoring old buildings is now big business.

Michael Schwartz is a well-known Jerusalem architect, the proprietor and founder of Michael Schwartz & Associates Architecture Town Planning and Design, which specializes in, among other things, restoring old buildings.

But this can be a complex process, Schwartz recently told *The Jerusalem Post*.

"It begins when a building is classified as 'a building to be preserved' by the local authority," he says. "In the UK and the USA this is a listed building, which means the building cannot be torn down and any reconstruction work must be authorized by the relevant authorities.

"After that, the architect entrusted with the work prepares a detailed file that includes a description of the structure, its importance, its past function, documentation using old photographs of the building, photographs of its present state, etc.

"[This] type of research, such as the one our office is conducting at the American Colony Hotel compound in

Jerusalem, highlights the history of the building, as well as documenting a whole historical era in the city."

Regarding whether there is a significant number of ancient buildings in Israel worthy of restoration, Schwartz says: "It is true that Israel as a state is pretty young, but the land of Israel has been populated for thousands of years. There have always been urban settlements in Israel.

"You can find houses and neighborhoods worthy of preservation in Safed, Acre, Jerusalem, Ramle, Beersheba, as well as in cities in the Palestinian Authority, such as Jericho, Ramallah, Bethlehem and so on. Indeed, the old Crusader city of Acre has been reconstructed and preserved, as has the old city of Jaffa.

"Furthermore, during the '20s and '30s the Central European Bauhaus style flourished in what was then Palestine. And since the RAF and USAF flattened most of German and Austrian cities, Bauhaus buildings are mostly found in Tel Aviv. That part of Tel Aviv, in which Bauhaus buildings profligate, was declared a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site."

The criteria for preserving a building here is based on its architectural value, such as a building that belongs to a specific architectural style and is a worthy representative of that style.

Also taken into account is "the neighborhood fabric - we

might find a building not in itself worthy of preservation, but located in a neighborhood that is worthy of preservation. Such a building will be preserved in the context of the larger whole.

"The Nahlaot quarter in Jerusalem and the 'white city' Bauhaus area of Tel Aviv are a case in point."

Another criterion for preserving a building is its historical context; it is worth conserving because an important historical figure lived there, like the residence of prime minister David Ben-Gurion in Tel Aviv or the old Tel Aviv Museum building in which Ben-Gurion proclaimed the State of Israel.

But what about the economic aspects? The cost of restoring old historic buildings such as the Acropolis in Athens or the Tower of London is borne by the state, but not so with buildings in the private sector, where the proprietors have to finance the preservation of their own listed buildings.

"It is very important to evaluate the economics of preservation, because if there are no economic benefits, a building can be listed for preservation a hundred times and it will remain in its delapidated state," Schwartz says. "Preservation is an expensive process that can cost more than double the cost of a new building.

"There is great historical importance in preserving certain buildings as a national

heritage, but ways must be found to make it pay. For example, enhancing the tourist element - when Tel Aviv's 'White City' was declared a UNESCO Cultural Heritage Site, tourism increased substantially.

"Preserved, reconstructed buildings also fetch prime prices. Businesses are willing to pay extra rent for space in historic, preserved buildings and the price of apartments in preserved buildings is substantially higher."

One of the most complicated projects that Schwartz's company has undertaken is the American Colony Hotel compound.

"We have been the house architects of the hotel for the past 20 years," he says. "The conservation issues involved in a modern, functioning hotel that is in a constant state of development creates immense challenges and calls for very innovative solutions.

"The whole compound is saturated with history, and it plays a prominent part in the history of Jerusalem. We had the privilege to work with the descendants of the original founders of the colony, and with craftsmen whose families have been involved in their craft for generations."

Schwartz's office has also been involved in preserving numerous residential houses in Jerusalem, primarily in Baka, Talbiyeh, the German and Greek colonies, as well as old Katamon and Ein Kerem.