

Restoring the old and beautiful

Although preserving historical structures and neighborhoods is a complex process, it is an important endeavor

By JAMES HARRIS

Restoring ancient buildings is very common in Europe and the US. Many historic buildings have been restored and converted into office buildings or government buildings. Old palaces or mansions in the UK have been converted into luxury apartments, and whole neighborhoods or areas of a certain city have been restored. A case in point is Dockland in London. Once the world's largest and busiest port, today it is a center of entertainment and chic dwellings.

In the 1960s and '70s, most of the shipping companies that used the port of London transferred their business to less expensive ports, and the Dockland area became derelict. But not for long. In the 1980s the old warehouses were converted into luxury apartments, and the whole area, with its docks and canals resembling a northern Venice, was transformed into one of the most bustling and expensive areas of London.

In Israel, awareness of the importance of preserving old buildings has been increasing over the past 15 years, and now preservation and restoration is big business. Michael Schwartz & Associates Architecture Town Planning and Design specializes in restoring and preserving old buildings. But that can be a very complex endeavor. According to company founder and owner Michael Schwartz, "The preservation of a building is a complicated process. It begins when a building is classified as a building to be preserved by the local authority. In the UK and the US, that means a listed building, or a building that cannot be torn down and any reconstruction work must be authorized by the relevant authorities," he explains. "After that," he continues, "the architect entrusted with the work prepares a detailed report that includes a historic description of the structure, its importance, its past function, documentation using old photographs of the building, photographs of its present state, etc. It is the type of research that our office is conducting now at the American Colony Hotel compound in Jerusalem, for example, highlighting the history of the building, as well as documenting the whole historical era in the city," he says.

Planning for posterity

Preserving old buildings may be taking off in Israel but are there that many old buildings that are worthy of being restored or preserved?

Says Schwartz, "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, Ramla and Beersheba. In fact, the old Crusader city of Acre is being reconstructed and preserved as was the old city of Jaffa. Furthermore, during the 1920s and '30s the Central European Bauhaus style flourished in what was then Palestine. Since World War I, most of the Bauhaus buildings left in the world are in Tel Aviv. The part of the city where they are found has been declared a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site," he says.

The criterion for preserving a building in Israel is based on its architectural value - a building that belongs to a specific architectural style, such as Bauhaus, that is representative of that style. The neighborhood is another determining factor. There might be a building that in itself is not worthy of preservation; but if it is located in a neighborhood that is worth preserving, that building will be preserved in the larger context. The Nahlaot neighborhood in Jerusalem is a case in point.

Another criterion for preserving a building is its historical aspect. It may be worth conserving because a historical event took place there or an important personage lived there. An example is the Ben-Gurion residence in Tel Aviv or the old Tel Aviv Museum building in which Ben-Gurion proclaimed the State of Israel.

But why are old buildings restored? Is it to make them functional once again? What about the economic aspects? The reconstruction cost of historic buildings of national importance, such as the Acropolis in Athens or the Tower of London, is borne by the state. But not so with other buildings. In those cases, the private sector - the proprietors - have to finance the preservation of their own listed buildings.



Before restoration



After restoration

"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 depilated state. 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," says Schwartz.

"For example, by 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 preserved historical building, and the price of apartments in preserved buildings is substantially higher as well," he says.

The American Colony and the King David

Schwartz's company is well known for its work in preserving and breathing new life into old buildings. One of the most complicated yet fascinating projects it has undertaken is the American Colony Hotel compound. "We have been the house architects of the hotel for the past 20 years," says Schwartz. "The conservation issues involved in a modern functioning hotel that is in a constant state of development create immense challenges and call 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 of working with the descendants of the original founders of the Colony and with craftsmen whose families have been involved in the craft for generations. Furthermore, our office has been involved in preserving numerous houses in Jerusalem, primarily in Baka, Talbiyah, the German and Greek Colonies, as well as Old Katamon and Ein Kerem. Together with the King David Hotel, the American Colony Hotel is a historical luxury hostelry."

How do the two hotels compare from a preservation perspective?

"There aren't many comparisons," says Schwartz.

"The American Colony started life as the residence of the affluent Husayni family. It was one of the first residences built outside the city walls around the year 1870. In 1896 it was rented and then sold to those who eventually converted it into the American Colony Hotel. Now it is a luxury boutique hotel," he explains.

"The King David, on the other hand, was built in the early 1930s as a very large hotel. Its accommodations have the same mass character

associated with large luxury hotels around the world. It does not have the small family atmosphere of the American Colony Hotel. From an architectural perspective, the two don't have very much in common," says Schwartz. "The American Colony was built as a large villa, while the King David Hotel was designed as a hotel. The house architect of an establishment such as The American Colony Hotel must endeavor at all times to preserve the unique architectural aspects of the building."

One of the most important issues in building preservation is planning the connection between the historical structure and the living urban city. One of the goals of restoration is to bring the preserved buildings back to be part of the active fabric of the city. Giving old buildings new uses creates interesting opportunities and is a normal process in the viability of modern cities.