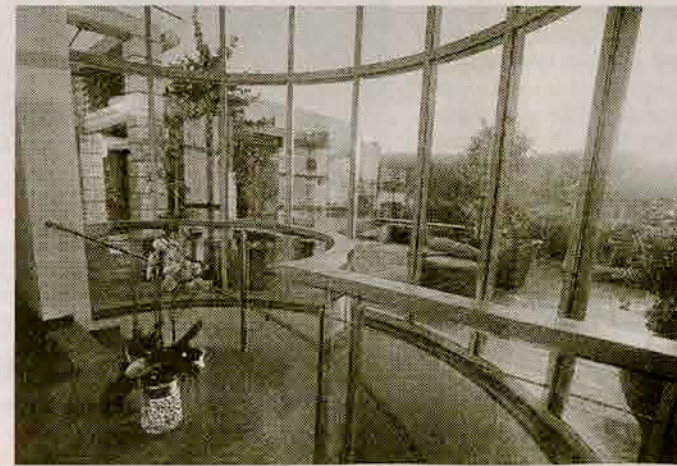


# Posh Israeli suburb grows out of a farming co-op

*Backyards used to be for keeping chickens. Now they're used for pools.*



Courtesy of MSH, above; photographs by Rina Castelnovo for The New York Times, left and below  
The community of Beit Zayit sits on a lake joined with the Jerusalem Metropolitan Park, above. The home of a technology tycoon retains some rustic charm with a wooden bridge, left, and an airy front entrance, below.



By Jessica Steinberg

## BEIT ZAYIT, Israel

When Daniel and Erika Cohen began looking for a house in Israel 20 years ago, they didn't know exactly where they wanted to live.

"We had been here many times, and we knew we liked the climate in Jerusalem, where it's pleasant, as opposed to the humidity of Tel Aviv," said Daniel Cohen, describing the decision to leave their home in Belgium. "We think of Jerusalem as a more interesting and beautiful city, and we still find it that way. We also knew we wanted to be in or near a big city."

After much searching they found Beit Zayit, a moshav, or cooperative agricultural community, nestled in the Judean Hills just outside Jerusalem. At the time, Beit Zayit was transforming itself from a chickens-in-the-backyard neighborhood of simple stucco homes to a suburban enclave of more luxurious, pool-in-the-backyard houses.

Founded in 1949 by a group of immigrants from Egypt and what was then Yugoslavia, Beit Zayit is one of

several hundred settlement communities in Israel. When it was established, it was a strategic location on what was then known as the Jerusalem Corridor, a series of communities placed to protect the route to the city. The first residents dug vineyards and built chicken coops but, by the late 1950s, there already were residents who worked in Jerusalem and commuted home to a more suburban lifestyle.

When families like the Cohens reached Beit Zayit in the 1980s and 1990s, the moshav was a mess, lacking any central control or tax system, said Amnon Silberstein, the moshav's comptroller. He grew up in Beit Zayit and, after working in Israel's high-tech industry for more than 20 years, returned to live in and run his hometown.

"Nothing was planned here at the time," said Silberstein. "The roads were a mess; there was no landscaping; people just did what they wanted."

With the expansion of the moshav in the late 1990s, which included allowing newcomers to buy land and to rebuild houses, even more people saw it as an alternative to living in Jerusalem.

"The real estate boom we've had is

all because of our location," said Silberstein, who bought his home in Beit Zayit 12 years ago. "It was nothing intentional on our part. If people had some money, they bought here; now you actually have to be a little rich."

There are 400 homes along the town's tree-lined, flowering lanes and 1,800 residents, including about 100 families who have been here a long time and have significant properties like orchards, cultivated fields and, in at least one case, a horse ranch. There is also the Beit Zayit lake, a reservoir that has become Jerusalem Metropolitan Park, a public recreation area with paddle boats and walking trails.

Given the real estate changes in the neighborhood, "it's absurd to still call this a moshav," said Ovad Shalibo,

another native-born son who owns Shalibo Realty, which handles many of the real estate deals in Beit Zayit and other similar moshav communities. Still, adds Shalibo, many of the "real money buyers" — Americans, French, Russians and British — only began buying in Beit Zayit recently, building mansion-like homes that they may or may not use as permanent residences. Prices are \$5 million for about 5,500 square meters, or 59,000 square feet.

Shalibo said the global economic downturn had not had an effect on prices in Beit Zayit and, while he has noticed there are fewer requests for properties, he has completed some sales in recent weeks. "We're even working on a deal right now for a property with someone from New

York," he said.

When the Cohens bought 20 years ago, their 3,000-square-meter plot with a "spectacular view" of the surrounding Jerusalem hills was \$400,000. Shalibo says it now would be \$5 million to \$6 million.

The Cohens imported much of the construction materials for their home and hired a dozen artisans from Europe. While it took three years to build the seven-bedroom, nine-bathroom house, "we wanted the house to be modest, nothing Hollywood style, because we are living on a moshav," said Daniel Cohen. "We like quiet elegance."

The house has a large number of bedrooms for an Israeli home and some unusual elements, like the outer halls that separate the parents' and children's wings and the heating and cooling systems. But it is primarily about ease and comfort.

The more visually spectacular aspects come into play in the multilevel garden, which has the space and privacy that the family sought when moving to Beit Zayit. With a spacious pool on the lower level, the garden is anchored by a patio and pond filled with lily pads and has a pergola covered in wisteria. Up above, outside the bedroom wings, is a third level with a wooden gazebo that has a misting system to keep people cool on hot days.

"Buying here was one of the best decisions that we ever made," Cohen said.

