



## Building up Zionism

03/18/2011 By YONI COHEN

**Her grandmother's hotel in Safed and a meeting with the Dalai Lama were the two inspirations for the work of architect Nili Portugali.**



A Residential building in Tel-Aviv's Nahlat Binyamin neighborhood (left)  
The Felicja Blumental Music Center in Tel-Aviv  
(Photo by: Courtesy)

Coming from a long line of Zionists, architect Nili Portugali is a firm believer in using her cultural heritage in her work. Winning international awards for her architecture and writing, Portugali has never forgotten her roots. Proud to come from a family that has lived in Israel for seven generations, she has broken down international barriers and overcome academic boycotts.

Even though Portugali has traveled the world and studied in some of the

finest educational establishments in her field, she says it is her grandmother, who lived in the ancient city of Safed, who influenced her work the most. More specifically, it was the small hotel her grandmother founded in the city 60 years ago that gave her the inspiration to become an architect.

With a mother who was an artist and a father who was a civil engineer, it seemed as if architecture was the perfect choice, combining these two influences in her life. Her time spent in Safed in the quaint hotel that she holds so dear only added to her passion for the study of why and how people live where they do.

Once it was time to go to university, Portugali travelled further afield to broaden her knowledge of architecture; this included learning from some of the masters of the trade in both London and California.

Although she learned so much from being surrounded by some of the best thinkers and theorists in the field, Portugali says she always felt that she would eventually return home to Israel, where she knew she belonged.

SPENDING TIME back in Israel did indeed bring her back to her roots – but it was a visit to the Dalai Lama that really allowed Portugali to connect to her past.

During the 1980s she got into Buddhism.

“Not the spiritual side,” she explains, “but the logic and the texts” which make the religion so fascinating.

“Taking seminars during the trip enhanced my holistic point of view” that has inspired so much of her recent work .

“During the visit, going up the hill to see him, I was already on the path,” she explains. “It was like being back in Safed. It gave me answers to all the questions I had.”

It was this holistic approach that inspired Portugali to write her award-winning book *The Act of Creation and the Spirit of a Place – A Holistic-Phenomenological Approach to Architecture*, which deals with 24 different projects, all based in Israel, including the Felicja Blumental Music Center in Tel Aviv’s Kikar Bialik.

Portugali showcases the interpretation of some well known Israeli

buildings for the general public, including some 700 color pictures, because she wanted the subject to be accessible.

“The medium is the message,” she says. “You don’t even have to read the book. You can just look at the pictures and you will obtain a good understanding.”

Although the book was written with the general public in mind, it received great academic acclaim, being among the 24 books selected by the Royal Institute of British Architects International Book Award for 2007.

Even though this is enough of an accolade for any writer, Portugali notes that her recognition is even more important amid the growing academic boycotts against Israelis.

Portugali has never hidden the fact that she is Israeli.

“One of the ways to overcome conflict is to take a holistic approach,” she says, explaining the significance of her award. In describing the power of her message, she says: “This book is Zionism.”

In the book, Portugali portrays an Israeli reality which reflects a unique interface between the Orient and the West, which she personally represents. Architecture, she says, is unique to each country and culture. She illustrates this with a story about when she was in China and met a publisher looking for a way to translate her book into Chinese. Ultimately, he decided not to go through with the project because the Chinese would not be able to copy from it.

PORTUGALI SAYS she has been writing essays for years, with one foot in academia and the other in the studio. In general, she says, in architecture there is a separation between research and practice.

“I am one of the only ones combining the two,” she says.

“When you have a worldview, it is important to show how it can be implemented.”

Portugali describes some of the problems with modern architecture.

“You cannot really define what is what these days,” she says.

“We have a problem with contemporary architecture. It does not obey any codes to do with culture. Contemporary architecture ignores tradition and identity.”

Referring to Israel, Portugali says that the most successful styles of architecture came here in the 1920s and 1930s, brought over by European immigrants. They can be seen on the everpopular, now very trendy Sderot Rothschild and around Kikar Bialik, both in Tel Aviv.

These immigrants were looking for a way to create dialogue, Portugali says, and the style they brought with them was very successful.

Portugali says it was last unique Israeli architecture.

Surprisingly, she is not referring to the Bauhaus style, so synonymous with successful Israeli architecture. Bauhaus had nothing to do with the country, she explains. “You can find Bauhaus all over the world, and it is not so unique.”

So many of the buildings seen around Israel these days can be seen everywhere, she says.

What about the Bridge of Strings at the entrance to Jerusalem? It has no relevance to the place where it is located, says Portugali.

“It is iconic architecture.”

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