

WONDER WOMEN

As Israel turns 70, the EMET Prize celebrates
exceptional Israeli women



Nitza Metzger-Szmuk's discovery of The White City in Tel Aviv-Jaffa

How an EMET Prize winner put the city on the international map

•By Maayan Hoffman

Nitza Metzger-Szmuk is described by friends and colleagues as a strong and powerful person, with an eye for detail and a warm heart.

It's no wonder. The 2006 Emet Prize laureate for Culture and Art in the field of architecture single-handedly raised awareness of the importance and value of the architectural heritage of Tel Aviv and promoted Israel's status and prestige worldwide.

In 1991, Szmuk set up a conservation team at the Tel Aviv-Jaffa municipality, which she led until 2002. During that time, Tel Aviv became a paragon of conservation in Israel, thanks to her efforts.

In 2001, she initiated, wrote, and edited the candidacy report of "The White City" for UNESCO, and following the report, Tel Aviv was proclaimed a World Cultural Heritage Site in 2003. "The White City" refers to a collection of more than 4,000 buildings built in a unique form of the Bauhaus or International Style in Tel Aviv from the 1930s by European Jewish architects who immigrated to the British Mandate of Palestine before and after the rise of the Nazis. Szmuk helped identify those buildings.

Architectural conservation was never part of the Tel Aviv native's plans.

When Szmuk was 21 she left



Nitza Metzger-Szmuk
(Courtesy)

Israel for Florence, Italy, where she studied architecture.

"The studies were on a very high level, and it turned out I was very good at it," said Szmuk. She stayed in Florence for 23 years, working in architectural conservation. It wasn't a field she deliberately chose, she told *The Jerusalem Report*, but "just where life brought me."

When Szmuk returned to Israel in 1989, she planned to go into building and maybe design something new. But her friend and colleague, Israeli sculptor Danni Karavan, who was aware of Szmuk's

work in Florence, asked her to conduct a survey on the White City.

"Danni knew what I did in Florence and asked me to do a survey of the International Style buildings in the White City on behalf of the Tel Aviv Development Foundation," she said.

That survey ultimately served as the basis for the city's conservation plan and for her first book, "Dwelling on the Dunes."

"There are things that come from above, and you have no choice about them," she said matter-of-factly.

Karavan laughed, thinking about those early years.

"I never would have thought she would have been so engaged in the fight for conservation," Karavan told *The Report*. "Sometimes, I was afraid someone would lash out at her for her zeal. She would go and shout about what the city was doing wrong and how they should be conserving buildings to do it right."

"One time, she called me at 3 a.m. – I was in Japan – to tell me about a decision she thought was going to hurt her plans."

Szmuk remembers those years as a time of discovery and emotion.

"When I went to Florence at age 21, I knew nothing about architecture, and I certainly didn't know about Tel Aviv's architecture or that it was valuable in any way," she said. "When I was asked to do



A building in Tel Aviv designed by Szmuk. (Mikaela Burstow)

the survey of Tel Aviv, I discovered the city."

She said she was in shock.

"I went from house to house – all of them the houses of my childhood, houses in which I never saw any real value – and after I finished the survey, and with the information and knowledge I brought with me from Italy, I understood what this city really has and what it is," she said.

For Szmuk, it was not the discovery of someone who was born in Tel Aviv, but the discovery of someone who was away for 23 years and discovered the city anew.

Szmuk said she brought what she learned in Italy to her role at the municipality, trailblazing a new focus on architectural conservation. The department she founded still stands, and the municipality continues to follow her plans. In

large cities like Jerusalem and Haifa, there are also conservation teams now. But she said no one has a conservation plan like Tel Aviv's.

Since 2003, Szmuk has owned an independent architectural office specializing in the conservation of buildings and sites. Her former employee, Noa Sofer, described Szmuk as the kind of employer who is both warm and professional. She said her employer taught her about the need to pay attention to both the aesthetics and technology of a building.

"She taught me that for a building to go up, you need to connect with all the professionals involved in its making, including the handyman that will put the handle on the outer gate," said Sofer. "You need to ensure that every detail is done at the highest level. You cannot just rely on the construction workers to do what you want."

"She taught me to pay attention to detail. It can look good, but will it maintain the correct temperature in the room, and will the acoustics be right?"

For Szmuk, winning the Emet Prize had a lot of personal impact. She described it as "an amazing feeling."

Professionally, she has a few lessons she likes to share. The first is respect for a place – the street, the house, and the environment at large.

The second is to strive for excellence.

"I always try to teach my employees to do things the very best way the first time," she said.

And finally, as an architectural conservationist, she cautions not to be quick to undo the past.

"You should assume the people before us knew more than we do now," she said. ♦



EMET PRIZE

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