



Technically Tel Aviv

As computer programmers in the high-tech haven of California's Silicon Valley, Ayelet and Yoram Arnon were used to working remotely. But when the couple decided to move their family back to Israel, they took that technology to another level altogether.

First, Ayelet chose her architect, Irit Axelrod, while on a weeklong business trip to Tel Aviv. Then throughout the design process, Axelrod faxed plans to her California clients and communicated regularly via email. Axelrod, who has a distinctly modern style, guided her clients—self-described modernism neophytes—through every design choice down to the furnishings.

Trained at Technion Israeli Institute of Technology in Haifa, Israel, the architect's minimalist design sensibilities are natural for a city where modernism is an essential part of its identity. After Germany's Bauhaus was closed by the Nazis in 1933, over a dozen of its students came to Tel Aviv, in part to create urban housing for the influx of immigrants. Tel Aviv got 4,000 International Style buildings made of reinforced concrete and painted

beige or white, earning it the nickname the "White City." (Upkeep of these buildings has been spotty, but ever since UNESCO recognized the White City as a World Heritage Site in 2003, Tel Avivians have put more effort into restoring their vintage Bauhaus treasures.)

"We grew up on the International Style, and people are very aware of the modern movement here," says Axelrod, a native of Tel Aviv. "I like the massive geometrical look, the clean lines, the emphasis on functionality."

The International Style certainly informed Axelrod's thinking for the Arnon residence—as the white, sharply angular building, full of windows and natural light, will attest—and her long-distance work with them informed the future of her practice. She integrated the bicontinental nature of the relationship into her practice permanently: Axelrod lives in San Francisco, but works on projects in both locales.

On a recent visit to Israel, Dwell talked to Ayelet Arnon about her family's new house in Bnei Zion, a suburb of Tel Aviv. ▶

The stark geometric Arnon residence cues from the Bauhaus style, but the lush garden and view-framing windows are the family's recent California touch.

Did the political situation in Israel affect where you decided to live?

Not really. We had no intention to live in or near the occupied lands, of course, but mostly our decision was influenced by the wish to stay close to Tel Aviv.

We used to live near downtown in a very small, two-bedroom flat. When we moved to California, we rented a very nice house with a backyard, and got used to it. After living in Sunnyvale [a Silicon Valley suburb], it didn't seem right to go back to Tel Aviv. It's noisy, dirty, traffic is bad, there's no parking—there are lots of cons to living in the city with kids. Bnei Zion is mostly farmland. And there are lots of high-tech companies in the area, which is also important for us.

How is living in Israel different from living in the U.S.?

I think the biggest difference is the stress. It's more crowded here, and people work longer hours and are always in a hurry. You can tell people are stressed by the way they drive and how they rush to get their shopping done. The weekend is shorter. In the United States you have both Saturday and Sunday, but here most stores are closed on Saturday for Shabbat, so we have to finish all business by 2 or 3 on Friday afternoon. Everything is a little busier.

How did you find your architect?

We heard about Irit Axelrod from the person we bought the lot from. We met with her, and somehow it was all very easy. We saw some of the office interiors she had designed, and we liked her choice of colors and furniture, and the way she used space. It was very quick, but we were in this state of mind where we weren't even sure if we were coming back here to live or not. We didn't take it so seriously.

Did you know what to look for when you started out?

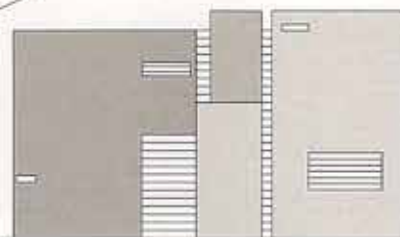
There are people who know exactly what they want, but that was not us. We are computer people—we know how to design programs—but we are not design people. I think I was aware at some level that I wanted modern and minimalist, but I didn't know how to express these ideas.

What was it like to go through the design process?

A lot of things about the house were a big change for us. We needed to get used to modern design. I had to get used to the idea that the floor can be gray and everything can be white, and it will still be nice to live in. I learned that I don't have to have warm colors. After a while I started expressing an opinion.

Are there any parts that you would change?

We have a marble floor, and it's lovely, but I think I would consider concrete. Irit suggested concrete, but we said, "No way"—it was too strange to us then. Since then I've seen it in other houses. I think to myself, Well, okay, you cannot be the first one in everything! ▶



Double-height windows and skylight create dramatic light effects in the living, dining, kitchen areas on the ground floor. "There's a point on the stairs where you can see a strip of light from one end to the other," explains Ayelet. "I think it's the nicest spot in the house."