

Rooted in the Past, Residing in the Present

A Pitsou Palace in Old Jaffa.

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Photos by Amit Geron



Few names have built such a reputation in the Israeli architectural world as Pitsou Kedem Architects. Established in 1998, the firm is most associated with the awe-inspiring and picturesque contemporary villas designed for the country's upper echelons. While the firm's portfolio is filled with new builds, sleek glass exteriors and lap pools, its most unique achievements can be found within the refurbishment of the country's historical dwellings and spaces. The firm's Jaffa Apartment is a true gem, combining 3,000 square-feet of centuries old structures into a family home. Incorporating hidden smart-home tech into the original elements, the home reinvigorates a mode of living long associated with the seaside and Mediterranean culture of Jaffa.

Israel is a world of parallel realms and narratives, shifting between the modern and the ancient, the religious and the secular, and the layers of history created, buried, and uncovered by empires and war. In such a complex and fascinating land, it is an architect's mission to uncover the layers of history, come to terms with the past and build for the future. Scratch the surface of any structure and you'll find the complicated

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and intertwined histories and stories of the people who reside within this land or who once did. Unlike northern Tel Aviv's landscape which is defined by decaying 20th century eclectic and international style buildings and the 21st century skyscrapers of the first Hebrew city, its southern Jaffa neighborhood is a stone-cled port originally inhabited more than three millennia ago.

Since the dawn of monotheism, Jaffa has served as the entryway into the Holy Land and route to Jerusalem, drawing religious pilgrims to its Mediterranean shores and witnessing the evolution of history into the modern era. In Old Jaffa today, one is struck by the architecture and urban realm of a fortress city largely rebuilt by the Ottoman Empire in the late 18th century. Following the siege of Jaffa by Napoleon's army in 1799, many key elements of the Old City were destroyed and later rebuilt by Ahmed al-Jezzar, the Ottoman governor of Acre.

The winding alleyways of Old Jaffa twist and turn, to reveal an inner world of cobblestoned homes, art galleries and shops. The Tel Aviv-Jaffa municipality took over the area in the 1970s and established the Old Jaffa Development Authority to transform the enclave into a commercial, tourist and artist colony, to varying degrees of success. The Development Authority along with various churches and mosques own and lease

the land following a strict vetting process. Today the area lives in the in-between of various future plans to once again infuse it with cutting-edge culture and commerce. It also remains one of the most desirable real estate neighborhoods for luxury homes overlooking the sea and the quiet magic constructed in past eras.

The Jaffa Apartment sits on the edge of a hill, overlooking the ancient port. It is a collection of various spaces leased from the Development Authority and transformed into a palatial home centered around a central inner patio, a common typology of Muslim urban architecture and Ottoman construction of the late 18th to mid-19th centuries. Built with materials native to the area, kurkar sandstone is the dominant material, which creates a monolithic landscape, accentuated by metallic elements. Prior to its current incarnation, it was a separate home and studio of Israeli architect, Uri Abramson.

With its previous history lost to centuries of conflict, the current homeowners studied maps and aerial photography from archives in London and Istanbul to delve into the home's biography and uncover insights that only its walls could reveal if they spoke. The building's upper floor "Captain Structure" no longer exists (likely destroyed in 1936), but its base and inner courtyard can be seen in photographs from

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1875, and maps of the area indicate that it was built prior to 1842, with some spaces likely built before the 1799 destruction. In 1936, then under the Jurisdiction of the British Mandate of Palestine, Old Jaffa sustained significant damage during Operation Anchor, a military conquest in which the British Army used explosives to carve out boulevards within the then Arab enclave.

The refurbishment project was led by lead architect Avital Shenhav-Shani of Pitsou Kedem Architects, under the supervision of Eran Eldor-Bar Engineering and contractor, Arco. The ethos of the design tastefully melds Ottoman architecture with the contemporary style of the studio and enhances ancient building traditions with innovative technologies to reinforce the structure and accentuate its unique mold and contours. The original structural techniques are typical of the Ottoman period of rule over Jaffa, with thematic walls, cross vaults and barrel vaults, with no use of wooden ceilings. Gleazed arches frame the home, while current engineering efforts connect formerly disjointed spaces into a central axis and interior atmosphere. The original kurkar sandstone was intentionally uncovered, treated and exposed, while dark bronze frames and glass elements highlight the vaulted interior doorways, plastered ceilings and sea-views.

A smoothed concrete flooring unites the indoor and outdoor spaces, while an intricate white metal-rod scheme travels along the stone walls, illuminating every archway and path with lighting design by Orly Avron Alkabes. The electrical, pipes, air conditioning system and niche storage units are hidden behind thin computer-cut aluminum surfaces attached to the walls. At various intersections in the home, joinery elements connect the clad walls at doorways. The master



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bedroom and bronze staircase railings were adapted to withstand the seaside climate, while the 3-foot thick stone walls keep the home insulated during cold winters and cool throughout humid summers.

Free of clutter, the at once contemporary and ancient living space is accentuated by minimalist designer furniture from the likes of VITRA to Living Divani, and a centerpiece kitchen from Bulthaup, with state-of-the-art Miele appliances. Functioning almost as a museum, custom carpentry creates standalone walls that partition subspaces within the arched open interior layout, strategic mirroring widens the sense of atmosphere and allows for the interiors to become the art. Inside, the architecture serves as the art collection. The main duplex space includes the sea-facing living room and

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outdoor terrace, master bedroom, kitchen and dining area, while the enclosed interior courtyard and patio offers al-fresco dining and connects to a separate two bedroom and bathroom guest apartment. In a city that experiences 300 days of sunshine per year, the home centers around the outdoor space, and an outdoor shower, bringing to life the quintessential fantasy of Mediterranean living.

Fitsou Kedem, himself a 7th generation Jerusalemite, sees modern Israel as a mixture of peoples, cultures and historical roots, all of which should be expressed within architecture in one way or another. "I see all different layers of the building as integral, as they affect how we make decisions pertaining to design, construction, and how we preserve the spirit of the place while respecting its history and using local material." The strict preservation elements in Old Jaffe allow the future to continue moving forward, while safeguarding the legacy of this land, and preventing the erasure of historical building typologies and along with it, the human stories of those who came before.

