



Transparent Classrooms and Flexible Planning: the Hebrew-Arabic School in Jaffa Is One of the Most Sophisticated in the City

The school's transparent classrooms. A distraction? Not necessarily. Photo by: Moti Milord

The new bilingual school is an unusual building designed to fit a sloping plot. The principal, Sharon Malki, explains how the transparent walls contribute to learning and to removing barriers, and how Independence Day and Land Day are jointly commemorated.

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By **Naama Riba**

The new building of the bilingual—Hebrew and Arabic—school, “Kulna Yahad,” on Jaffa’s Shivtei Yisrael Street, is one of the most unique and sophisticated in the city, though it seems always to have been part of the tapestry of Jaffa. The street-facing façade looks like a single story, thanks to the sloping plot, which allows the three floors of the building to be concealed below street level. Alongside the façade stands a magnificent old tree, a remnant of the grove that had been on the plot before it was built up. The 900 square meter building (which is integrated into the old Kiryat Hinuch Ironi Zayin school in the parallel street, Tzahalon), currently has nine classes and will have 12 in the future.

The building’s architect, Lior Tsionov, says the unusual topography of the plot led them to come up with to unique solutions.

“Instead of a standard multi-story school surrounding a yard, we designed a structure with versatile spaces, some of which also have two-story spaces that allow informal connections.”

“Right at the entrance to the school, we created an event,” adds Tsionov, meaning that there is a descent from the street level entrance via a monumental staircase roofed with beams that offer a shady place to rest during recess. From the ground floor, one can either enter the classroom floor or go to the library.

Alongside the regular classrooms, each classroom has two spaces that serve as special learning areas. According to the principal, Sharon Malki, there is a comprehensive network operating in situ of some ten therapists in movement, music, art and more, suitable for the school’s complex population.

On the slope below the stairs are rooms for the management team and the teachers' room, and Tsionov explains that these spaces, which seem to have been dug into the ground, have been designed with roof windows overlooking English courtyards.

The overall appearance is a pleasant, rather than a busy, architectural display. At the end of the stairs is the school's main courtyard with several trees. When one descends into the lower courtyard, the southern façade, covered with slats (horizontal steel beams) in three shades of turquoise, reveals itself.



The entrance to the school, with a sign in both Hebrew and Arabic.
Photo by: Moti Milord

Accompanying all this is new and fascinating aspect of the link between architecture and education: transparent classrooms. In fact, these already exist in all the city's new schools, but here they are given a particular expression: classroom walls facing into the school are transparent, so that students can watch people in the halls and in the common areas. And the reverse is also true—a teacher or principal walking in the halls or the yard can also observe the students.

“These walls invite easier observation from the other side,” says Malki. “I look at him, and he looks at me. There are no concrete walls between us, and the inner spaces don't encourage separation—like in hospitals and prisons—but rather a connection between people.”



“Transparent classrooms have a supervisory effect, because you can see what's happening inside, but it also has an effect of transparency and trustworthiness”

Sharon Malki, the school principal

TWO TEACHERS IN EVERY CLASSROOM

he story of the Kulna school's founding is similarly exceptional. Over the past decade, a community of families with an interest in bilingual education has developed in Jaffa. “At first, the children of this community studied at the Weizmann school, which was bilingual,” Malki says.

“But 85 percent of the children were Arabs, and a few were Jews, and in spite of that, the regular Ministry of Education curriculum was taught.” Malki is referring to content that was mostly Jewish. “Even though there was a certain expression of multiculturalism,” she adds. “It was not substantial enough. Also, the physical condition of the place deteriorated, which eventually resulted in it being closed four years ago.”



A classroom at the Kulna school. Photo by: Moti Milord

The closure led to protests from parents, who refused to compromise with other schools and demanded that a new building be constructed. However, the Tel Aviv municipality does not permit the establishment of new private schools requiring entrance examinations and additional payments, and a creative solution was needed.

Assaf Zamir, the Tel Aviv deputy mayor who also handles the education portfolio, explains the issue: “Arab children in Jaffa still have three options: study at a private school, a public Arabic school, or a public Jewish school. There is no integrated framework. But while we want to create such integration, we are not prepared to have separate frameworks that cost parents more money. I also don’t agree with spending more money on one school at the expense of another.”

Gilya Breger Kolitz, the director of Tel Aviv municipality’s building planning department, adds that “the municipality wants there to be a shared identity among the schools in the north and those in the south, even though each principal brings their own agenda. We decided that this school would be a local school and not a regional school: parents who did not live in Jaffa couldn’t send their children there. On the other hand, the school would accommodate the two communities, Arabs and Jews.”

The problem of funding remained: despite all the desire for equality, the needs of a bilingual school are different as each class requires two teachers—a Hebrew speaker and an Arabic speaker. The funding model for Hand in Hand schools has three components—the Education Ministry, philanthropy, and parental payments of 500 NIS a month. The Tel Aviv municipality did not agree to the parental payments component, and the Hand in Hand Organization filled the financial gap with philanthropic contributions.

Hand in Hand first emerged in 1998, when the two first integrated schools were established in Jerusalem and the Galilee. Today, it operates schools and kindergartens in five places: Jerusalem, Haifa, Jaffa, Beit Berl, and Kfar Kara. The latter is the only place in Israel where Jewish children go to school every morning in an Arab village.

The Kulna school has complex and flexible spaces. Photo by: Moti Milord



Mohamad Marzouk, Director of Hand in Hand's Community Department, explains that in bilingual schools there is a greater need for spaces suitable for splitting into groups and for language studies. For the most part, he says, the organization obtains buildings from the Ministry of Education. "So far, every school has solved this issue differently. For example, in Jerusalem, we use the second floor of the library for studying in small groups. Now we're planning a new high school building in Jerusalem that will be built to meet our needs."

ENCOUNTERS CREATE TOLERANCE

The topography of the plot on which the Jaffa bilingual school is built has also helped to create a school with diverse spaces for living and learning. "The various spaces let us divide up and switch classrooms," says Malki. "Some lessons are taught in each student's first language, and some are taught together. The young children for the most part manage to learn the second language within three months." The educational programs, she says, relate to both nations. "When we talk about Independence Day, we talk about the concept of independence in general terms. On Land Day, we talk about the concept of land as something that is valuable and important. Even Holocaust studies are made more accessible for the children, and unlike in my generation, aren't taught using frightening images." The programs too, she notes, are developed together with Hand in Hand.

WHAT ARE ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN JEWISH AND ARAB CHILDREN LIKE IN PRACTICE?

"The daily encounters create tolerance. Arab and Jewish children, rich and poor, come together to shoot marbles in the yard, study math and science, and just spend time together, as part of the children's daily routine. The segregation that we as adults create around nation, money, or language, doesn't exist when you understand that children all care about the same thing: to go out at recess and play soccer together."

The school building. Extreme topography and unique solutions. Photo by: Moti Milord



HOW DO THE TRANSPARENT CLASSROOMS CONTRIBUTE TO INTERACTION?

“There’s a supervisory effect, because you can see what’s going on inside the classroom, but it also grows the feeling of transparency and trust. The children and the teachers don’t need to hide, because they aren’t doing anything wrong. Transparent walls create a certain kind of pedagogical space, and contribute to how we look at mistakes. I expect everyone to make mistakes, because this is how we learn, and mistakes shouldn’t be concealed. Quite the opposite.”

Dr Reut Gordon, who studies the history of the establishment of schools in Israel, says that transparent walls allow for increased space. But do transparent walls also increase distractions? “In traditional classrooms too,” she replies, “if you hang construction paper and decorations on all the windows and walls all year round, it’s distracting.”

According to Gordon, the next level of school design should make interior spaces more varied. “If children don’t move around, it’s not good for them. It’s important for classroom furniture to be varied, for example chairs at different heights and Pilates balls. It’s not expensive, it’s just a matter of thought. Children are expected to be glued to chairs from the age of seven and it’s not healthy. We need to think about creating learning spaces that allow for movement. The transparency is connected to this.”

The municipality’s Breger Kolitz has this to say on the matter: “We’re working toward this, and right now we’re working on a new design for interior spaces in tens of schools in the city. It’s not just a budgetary issue. The process of replacing standard furniture with more diverse furniture requires working with safety advisors, maintenance people, and educators. It’s a long process.”

The school façade. Photo by: Moti Milord



Regarding the transparent windows, Breger Kolitz notes that the Yehuda Maccabi school was the first in the city to use them, in 2014. A year later, they were installed in the Kochav Hatzafon elementary school in north Tel Aviv, and to date more than ten similar schools are being built or planned. In the short term, this is a financial investment, she says. “But in the long term, transparent walls turn a school space into a community place.” The trend, by the way, is starting to spread slowly to other places in Israel.

In the bilingual school in Jaffa, at any rate, the transparent walls are just one expression of an attempt to achieve something broader: to create a space that fosters transparency among children from different faiths, and among their parents too. ■



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