

First but not last
(Or: To touch the soul)

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A conversation with Yoel Yoshpa, Architect

**About the totality of the love of a person and a path,
About the joy accompanying it when it is right,
About the need to do everything, to be everything
And more and more and more
To be the most
Like a father**

**And of the house in the Sharon, close to the earth,
Sliding into the scenery, sensing and exciting**

There were many “off the record” moments throughout this interview, alongside many more moments of quoting others that influenced the much different path of this man, as well as moments of internal quotes, of processes and organized life insights, such as the very long lists written in red pen that he pulled out of the heavy brown bag, that he wished was lighter, less strenuous, and that it will hold only what is needed and not what he might need only if.

I meet him during a day in disguise. One of those end of summer days, where alongside the heavy heat wave a very light and barely noticeable wind is blowing, and the skies allowing the occasional grey cloud, to cover the sun. He is standing with me, all excited in the bright kitchen of his office, making green tea in a cup for me, asking me to promise him I will use words carefully, wants me to love him as he is, and all the people that come to him in order for him to design for them, and they become so meaningful for him.

“A brain cell. Every time I work with someone, there is a cell in my brain that is his. When the work is done, it is emptied”, he tries to demonstrate to me the hardship that lives alongside his creations. “For me the human being is the most important part, I am sensitive to its pleasures, its sensations, and the quality of life I want to produce for him. I acquire its confidence, because he knows that he is important to me and truly interests me. I do not hold in my pocket homes that I find people who will provide me with the opportunity to fulfill them; I have in my heart people that I love to toy with the differences between them, to use different materials and methods for them, to influence them. If they are not happy, I have failed”.

“I never tell my customers ‘you do not know, and I know best’. **From my perspective – they know everything.** I am always attentive and appreciate what they say. If I believe they are wrong, I lead them through something they wanted to see, to the other, better, option in order so they would choose it. If, for example, a customer asks me for a certain type of house, I tell him ‘Great’, show him that house, but along with that house I will show him a different kind of house, the one that I believe is more suitable for him, and usually he will choose the different house”.

“And the price?” I ask, thinking to myself that I can not restrain myself from saying what I believe is right.

“An even longer journey. I really truly make an effort at my work. The energy of thought and burden is tremendous. I will never let him think that he does not know. I will never be satisfied with one color sample if it is not precise enough, I will ask for another sample, and another sample, until I find the one that is the correct one. And this is just one sample. I run and run from site to site, that I hardly see **the home**”.

- And the pleasure?

“What I do is like my toys. I wake up every morning to my toys”, he smiles like a child who is happy he got caught.

And toys are in every corner of the room. “They are all gifts”, he explains how an Egyptian pyramid (“from Adriana, a charming south American architect who declared she does not want to see me and she sees me all the time since”), a green antic car (“from Itzik, my buddy for coffee, discussions, and work”) and a Buddha statue (“because I recommend practicing Yoga to the entire world”) can coexist alongside each other.

It is hard to believe that this fast pacing man is finishing third year in yoga masters course. “Hatha Yoga. The most basic. The most correct” as well as “reflexology – 3 years of school with a diploma. Love the touch. Practicing only on someone who is close. And doing the best that can ever be”.

- You do everything the best?

“It comes from within me. It is not necessarily a question of education”. He answers, and after a slight wrinkling of the forehead he adds: “I am willing to lose a tennis match”.

“With architecture, it is something you have. When I interview for a job I am interested by the infrastructure, the home in which that person grew up in, his hobbies. As with me, all I have is from the home. My notebooks from the 7th and 8th grade are filled with drawings of buildings, cubes going one into the other, balconies of apartments. I was born in the home of a carpentry shop owner, I lived in the shop, I loved it very much, to this day I understand carpenters and the type of problems they have. I wanted to continue in that business, but my father, may he rest in peace, said that if I want to be a carpenter I must first be an architect and only then a carpenter”.

“When he past away, he left behind four **volumes**, in which he wrote that he is the last of the carpenters in the family. He was the son of a carpenter, and after him there will be no more. In the last ten years of his life he walked around the carpentry shop wearing a suite and a tie. It bothered him that his brothers went into engineering and he was the one that his father decided would help him in the shop in Poland. Every day after work he used to sit and read books about history and philosophy, remembering everything and discussing what he read. My father never talked about carpentry but of historic processes and was exceptionally sensitive to human beings. Towards the final days of his life I asked him to leave me a message for life, and he said “always have a clear conscious and remember that the person sitting facing you is a human being just like you”.

- And when he past away, was he still working?

“No. in his final years he sat in the shop, which he could not leave, and wrote. He was a working man. One of the things that frightened me was that he would be found dead at the shop, that he will disappear on me without me having the opportunity to say goodbye. At the age of 82 he had a stroke, and then over a period of a year and a half we said our farewell in a wonderful way. After all those years that he gave to us, for a year and a half he just received and received more from us, love and total togetherness. Heart to heart talks and cleanliness. I was able to thank him for the confidence in life that he bestowed on me.

- And with your own kids, do you have these talks?

“My kids are totally connected to me. My daughter is an architect. She is not my employee but worked a lot with me, and with my help she is charting her own path. The son is a construction manager, along with my son in law. I have 18 phone calls a day from the son, 15 from my daughter and 12 from my son in law. I just open my eyes in the morning and they are on me, asking questions.

- And you are OK with that?

“It is 85% Ok and 15% unease. If a construction supervisor calls, I can choose not to answer him immediately and get back to him when it suites me. When my kids call, I can not help but answer immediately. And also, they allow themselves to tell me things that no one else would. ‘Daddy, when will you start making plans the way they are supposed to be?’. What is great about it is that after getting angry, there is an SMS of appeasement and patience and understanding of the world and the real life”.

“Sometimes I want to be free of them, free in general. Last Sunday, I returned from Vienna, where I was with Shmulik, my friend who is also a painter, at a Peter Gric painting exhibition. In 1991 I painted for a couple of month at the academy in Vienna, and he was one of the painters I befriended. I lived there in a small hotel room, every morning I used a large key to open a massive metal door to the academy, 6 meters in height, and run to work on my drawings”.

He shows me a drawing book in bold red earth colors, hairs weaving one into the others around a perfect body, buildings and walls decaying and falling and closing and bursting out. Sand covers it all, like in a dark future that is especially empty. He points towards a painting of a woman’s back side, red light is flooding all around her and inside her, revealing the outline of her bones, her long hair like wings threatening to drop you to the ground and fly her up to the sky at the same time. ‘Metamorphosis (angel) II’.

“This painting I saw a year ago on the internet. I told him I wanted it, and what size. He started painting it and showed me how he progressed, consulted with me about quantities the red paint and the orange, listened to me. The painting was completed. A huge painting the size of an actual human being. After the exhibit we disassembled all the pins, rolled it, and it made it home”.

- His paintings are very architectural, kind of reminding of yours. At least the early ones. Did you go through a Metamorphosis as well?

“Yes. Painting has gone through an interesting path with me. In the period after the army, and school, paintings reflected desires, wishes for the future, for plentiful. A man dreaming about a home. Large lucky cubes standing one on top of the other and above them a man holding a chair, in the sense that he reached a high position. I always loved chairs, because there is no chair without someone, a chair can not reach an open space without a human being. In general, a chair has something very human about it, the legs, the back, like a person carrying the world on his shoulders, with all the commitment and hardship. Later on, I painted scenes from the present, memories, things that happened to me that I wanted to perpetuate through subtle hints in a painting, I met my wife and she inspired me to paint round objects and three dimensional objects. Now, I go for a much larger abstraction, atmosphere, and quiet, and meditation, things without a beginning or end”.

- You started with the material and reached the spiritual. Is it the age? The Yoga?

“Both. In recent years I practice the correct way of life. The simplicity, the modesty, the cancellation of the ego and not the race after the ‘more’, the ambitiousness. I do not see the need to paint precise and realistically objects that will draw attention to their precision, I want to immortalize less and create more of a feeling of weather, foliage”.

- Is it possible you will draw without planning?

“I am not there yet. My drawings are planned, I think a lot. But the techniques are new, the hand movements are soft and wide, I learn to enjoy what the brush did to me, of something unplanned, and not from the tiniest perfection”.

- And how is that expresses in the architecture?

“There as well, I can let my client continue by themselves from a certain point. I do not have to go with them 100% of the way. I bring them to 85% and let them continue on. I tell them, from here what you take is good, and I connect them to it”.

- The process you went through is also expressed in the transition from dealing with large scale public projects to modest private residences?

“I always loved and always did private homes. At the beginning it did not satisfy me, and led me to think that if I dealt with private homes, it will cause me insecurity for the rest of my life. Just as if I would paint a few large and impressive drawings, it would help me sell charming little drawings. Now, I hold inside of me large scale projects of tens of thousands of square meters that fill me with pride and thanks to them I can do what I love best – **to touch the soul**, to listen to people, to hear what they do not say out loud and to create the bubble in which they live their lives. This is the essence of my being”.

“What people do not know is that right after finishing school I started designing for Yaakov Richter, may he rest in peace, who served as my instructor during my final project, and even when I left his practice and opened my own independent practice, in large projects I was in charge of a team of employees, I observed and I provided feedback, and the private homes I did on my own. One on one”.

- Tell me about the house in the Sharon, the clients, the process, the joy, the experience.

“The clients, a couple, are wonderful people. Even during the first meeting I felt I wanted to design for them, there was chemistry and positive energy during the planning. We felt right for each other. When they spoke about how they want to feel in the home, I felt as if we speak the same language. When I suggested stuff that is unusual, that very few people would be willing to choose, they flowed with me, sometimes not unanimously, here typically the husband was wonderful and went with my choices with great courage, and the wife went through a process which at its end she loved them”.

- For example?

“The flooring is a type of travertine. It has shades of grey and black and beige, and when you hold it – it looks bad. When they paved the floor, the wife told me “What did you do to me; I have a road running through my home”. She asked that we take it apart, and I knew that when the process is completed and they put the filling and the coating, it will look amazing. Today she is thrilled with it. It provides a sense of something raw. An earth like flooring. I can not lay down shining white flooring; it is not right, especially not in a home where you go out of to the grass, the garden. I want earth, stone, I have no problem if it has cracks and fragments, and there is no such thing as a stone that is not beautiful or not good”.

“I examine a home by whether those who come to it want to stay in it and want to come back to it. Not if we stand and say “Wow” about a particular aspect of it. That thing will cause unrest or nervousness after a while. I want the house to create a sensory experience, everywhere in it, engulf, and provide strength. This problem does not exist with a painting, you can choose not to look at it, and set it aside”.

“The home in the **Sharon** has grounds that allowed for a great swimming pool, that penetrated the home in a way that when you are in the living room and the dining room, you feel as if you are wading in water. The pool stretches a long arm towards the scenery. At the end of the pool the water disappears into the view in a sliding pool and the ground is bordering a pecan **grove**”.

- In what else is the home uniqueness expressed?

“The topography in the back yard tilted downward. I did not want to lower the house. In a different and unique way, when you exit the house you exit to a raised platform area, bordered by a white wooden railing that created enlargement for the interior space of the house. The wife asked to raise the backyard and exit directly to the garden. And I insisted. The bordering creates a perspective for the backyard. A sort of veranda, to exit into the large garden you must walk outside, turn a corner and walk down a set of stairs. Today they thank me that I did not give up”.

“The pergola columns are very unique, covered with bricks, and the pergola is constructed with white wood, with natural bamboo. They sit there all the time, watching films on a two and a half meter wide screen, where the sound is coming from within the vegetation, an audio and video system that allow them to hear different music in various areas of the home and experience an hypnotic sensory experience. Suddenly he returns early from work and does not want to go out. Why would he want to go out, he has everything, a gym, home theatre room, a wine room that is all bricks where you can sit and taste wines and cheeses. From any place you

can go out to the garden and walk up to the pool. In each area you can think that you are in a different house”.

- And your home, does it make you feel good?

“I live in a home that is like a tent within a jungle. The ceiling is made of wood, I wake up early in the morning when the dawn is fading, and the green gets the first rays of daylight, I feel how the outside is being lit”.

“Did you think of writing?” I like the poetry.

“No”, he says in a decisive tone and then remembers how when he was a child (“Very mischievous, my mother set up tent in my classroom”) he wrote descriptive essays that you could live within them, a writer of paintings. “I read slowly, but if I like it, I will not let it out of my hand”. He gets up and comes back with “The power of now” by Eckhart Tolle. “This is for you, a book that is a gift for life, do not read it chronologically, just the parts where you feel like it, read for example how the thought is something you create and that you can control, and then you will have a much better life”.

I ask, and he dedicates the spiritual guide for enlightenment. In the meantime, I imagine his father, the one in the brown picture on the shelf, reading books to the light of the oil lamp and his eyes sparkle, how he could be filled with pride of the factory he managed in Siberia during world war II, 800 men labor on wooden skis that will move between the trees in the forests, from his time serving as the spokesperson for the local Jewish community, from managing a superb carpentry shop, from the fact that in depression periods he would go to the big city to buy porcelain service and jewelry for the wife, that he has a son like Yoel. He could have, and he felt missed. The last carpenter in the family turned on the light and paved the road to the first of the architects. The first, not the last.