ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE OF FINE INTERIOR DESIGN

FEBRUARY 1995 $5.00

For Ilan Pivko, whose conversion of a faceless stone structure in the ancient Israeli port of Jaffa is a model of urban rehabilitation, the opposing forces of construction and destruction have a shared quality. "The building process and the decaying process each have the breath of life in them," he says. "I'm an architect, not a restorer, and as such I'm concerned with living matter."

Pivko's building, where he lives with his wife, Aviva, also holds his architectural office and four apartments for tenants. Standing on a hilltop above the Mediterranean in the Ajami quarter of Jaffa, it overlooks the harbor: in the Bible, the point from which Jonah set off before encountering the whale; in Greek mythology, where Andromeda was chained to jagged ocean rocks. A mosque atop limestone hills is directly south, the streets of old Jaffa lie to the north and east, and Tel Aviv is one mile up the coast.

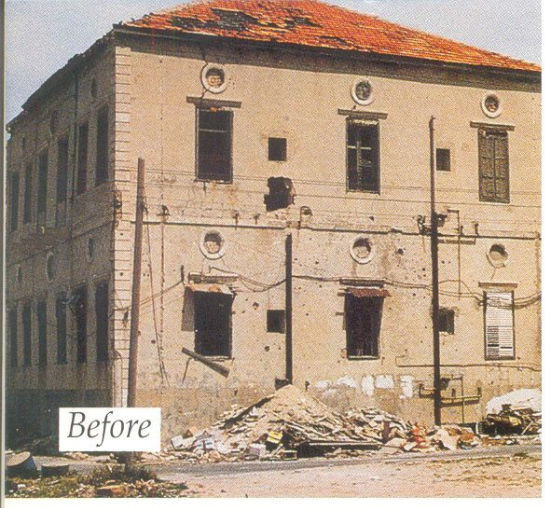
The building is one of several houses constructed in the late nineteenth century for prosperous Jaffa citizens who wished to leave the crumbling, Casbah-like confines of the walled city. The new, spacious residences in Ajami, whose network of planned streets and houses was inspired by modern European cities, had a particularly strong Italian flavor. Everything was predetermined: the square footage, the division of space, the one-by-two vertical openings, the blank stone façades and the tile roofs.

Although restrictive, the Western architectural style suited Pivko's natural inclinations better than the strident modernism of Israel's early

MODERN RELIC IN ISRAEL

SALVAGING THE PAST WITH A CONTEMPORARY SPIRIT IN THE ANCIENT PORT OF JAFFA

ARCHITECTURE BY ILAN PIVKO
TEXT BY TSOFIA DEKEL



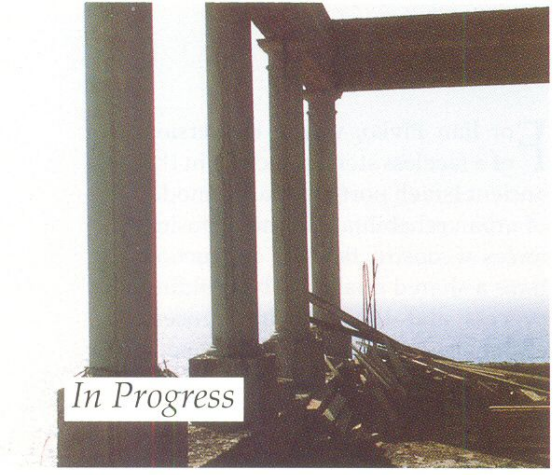
PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY ILAN PIVKO

ABOVE: "There was no former splendor to preserve," Pivko says of the original building. "With its tile roof, plastered stone walls and small, uniform openings, it resembled an undistinguished Italian country house."

ABOVE: Municipal requirements prevented the architect from increasing the building's volume. By removing the roof and enlarging and varying the fenestration, he gave the structure a sense of spaciousness.

"While I respected the urban tissue, I connected more with the *dreams* the planners had for this part of Jaffa," says Israeli architect Ilan Pivko of his redesign of a late-19th-century apartment house. "They desired something other than the vernacular—something European in feeling. I put some life, a little slang, into their architectural language." LEFT: Two stories became three with the addition of a loggia and a living/dining area. ABOVE: Pivko sandblasted the façade ("The plaster seems to have peeled off, leaving the *qurqar* stone to be reshaped by the wind"). The front elevation, at left, and the street elevation look to the Mediterranean.

It looks like a structure
fixed in the process of its formation.



ABOVE: Stone columns and beams combine to form a south- and west-facing loggia. The exposed space, which extends from Pivko's living/dining area, is the element that most orients the building to the sea.

construction. Born in Paris, he was a small child when his family immigrated to Tel Aviv in the wake of World War II. As an architecture student he was schooled in the glories of the International Style: "When I was studying there was only one truth," he says. "After things became more pluralistic in the eighties, I felt a sense of freedom that I hadn't felt before. I realized I could bring something of myself to my architecture—my background and my loves."

The eclecticism of the house invites its classification as a Postmodern building. Old architectural quotations have undergone a personal adaptation, tak-

OPPOSITE: "Many of the solutions were born on the job," says Pivko, left, who surveys the demolition with a worker. The architect erected a new concrete shell that "clutched to the remains of the old one" so that he could "rebuild from the inside out."

"A column can become a sculptural presence if the proper environment is created for it," notes Pivko. ABOVE: For the loggia, Pivko made a table out of layered Jerusalem stone that he chiseled to look naturally broken. The chairs were constructed of palm-leaf spines by Bedouins in the Sinai Desert; the clay water jars are Palestinian.

The loggia, with its columned arcade, overlooks old Jaffa and its harbor, the locus of biblical and mythological events. Unlike other buildings in the region, "my house had no architectural or historical worth that would have justified a painstaking restoration," Pivko says.

date period, particularly the work of German architect Erich Mendelsohn. Mendelsohn practiced in Palestine in the thirties, remaining faithful to his European heritage. He zealously retained the qualities he brought with him from home, adapting them to local conditions: climate, light, available materials and color. Mendelsohn's buildings had a European hauteur about them that was attained not by flattery to local style but by a blending of the two. Covered balconies, straight columns for support, dominant natural lighting and a use of stone and space that was generous and flowing were Mendelsohn trademarks that Pivko adopted. Both architects use the continuity of many windows or columns to add rhythm to a building, and their primary material is sand-colored plaster.

The absence of unity in the façade of Pivko's building makes it look like a structure fixed in the process of its formation. It reminds one of Monet's paintings of Rouen Cathedral, in which he captures the changing effects of light on the building at different moments.

The old materials of the house did not undergo a renovation; neither have the new ones been brought to a complete finish. The traces of the actual process are evident in them: Crumbled plaster has been deliberately exposed, and the concrete that serves as a structural support and blends freely and asymmetrically with the stone has, according to Pivko, moderated the "pretentiousness of the original stone facing."

A narrow vertical section of the white stone wall along the southwestern corner of the building was left as it was. The terraced stone walls, serving as partitions between the balconies of the various apartments, were constructed of limestone from the existing structure.

"I made no attempt to give the house a face-lift," says Pivko. "There's an expressive beauty in the peeling outer shell of the building." His choices of which details to leave and which to provide with a new use are telling: The entrance floor is made of Carrara marble from the old living room; against the inner wall of the residential floor is a bookcase fabricated from the wood beams that propped up the dismantled tile roof. The four consoles on the ocean façade that used to hold the balconies and now have no function are "there because they're part of the house and because they link it to its memories," he says.

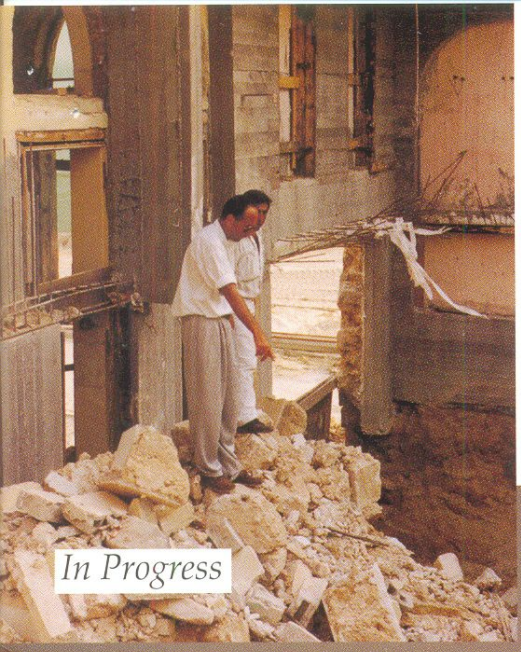
The house is separated into five apartments, each of which enjoys a view of the sea. The residents of three of them share the roof, with its small swimming pool and open wood deck; the residents of the other two divide the rear garden between them. The street entrance was designed as a public area, and holds parking spaces, an elevator, and steps to Pivko's basement office and to his apartment.

Pivko's apartment is composed of three floors. On the first is the entrance; bedrooms and baths are on the second. The high-ceilinged living/dining area, which is walled in glass, is on the third floor. The space flows freely into the compact kitchen on one side and the loggia on the other. From the loggia one can look out onto the sea through a row of classical columns faced with plaster that has been mixed with colored sand from the Ramon Crater in the Negev desert.

The dominant color of the house, besides the shades of sand and limestone, is the Arabic sky blue that frames and divides the windows and covers the roof railing and the lace-like wood partition. "A neutral palette was important for the feeling I wanted in the house," Pivko says. "And the blue is part of our culture."

Pivko has for some time crafted his own furniture (a one-man exhibition of his work was held at Jerusalem's Israel Museum three years ago), and his preferred materials are iron and wood. He made the dining table on the balcony, a simple stone slab resting on two piles of crudely chiseled local stone, and the rounded table in the living area is a piece he created from wood that once held telephone cable.

"For me, nothing is ever finished, ever what it has to be for all time," Pivko explains. "I like to work with the living, evolving quality in things." □



ing into account the spirit of the time and place. Elements are borrowed from the Romanesque and the Gothic: Columns are in the classical style, and straight window ledges sit under rounded and pointed arches. The decorative iron window frames and handles are reminiscent of Art Déco.

Pivko was also influenced by the architectural style of the British man-

BELOW: "You don't really know if you're in an enclosed outdoor space or an open indoor one," observes Pivko of the main public room, "which makes for an interesting tension." He avoided rigid spatial divisions: The living and dining areas, whose defining feature is the iron-framed glazing, are separated only by a kilim. Pivko's furniture designs include the pine sofas, which he painted to resist sun and saltwater weathering.

Pivko's choices of which details to leave and which to provide with a new use are telling.

"There's an expressive beauty in the peeling outer shell of the building."

ABOVE: Pivko retained the high, narrow windows ("I could hardly abandon them") of the old entrance court. Traditional in Islamic architecture, they assume a Gothic character with the building's new design.

ABOVE RIGHT: When the scaffolding was taken down, Pivko found unexpected surface detail from the penetration of the inner-shell cement to the outer walls. He enhanced the effect with sandstone-colored plaster.

"I've hastened the building's status of 'romantic ruin,' " says Pivko. "But my brief involvement will be just one part of its memory." BELOW: Under his restructuring, the original entrance is an "archaeological dimension."