

Moshe Safdie: Sephardic Visionary

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Moshe Safdie is a Sephardi with a mission: he seeks to combine beauty and functionality in every building he creates. "It is inconceivable that something which is not functional should be beautiful," he explains.

Safdie derives at least a part of his philosophy from his Sephardi Israeli heritage. Growing up as a *sabra* (native born Israeli) and a Sephardi, Safdie lived between two worlds: he was the child of a Sephardi merchant family, while he was immersed in the largely Ashkenazi socialist milieu of the fledgling state of Israel. Years later Teddy Kollek, the longtime mayor of Jerusalem noted, "He is everywhere a little bit the outsider -- and everywhere the insider."

Safdie is part of a Sephardic tradition that stretches through Syria back to Spain. He himself was born in Haifa, Israel in 1938. His mother, born and raised in Manchester, England, came from a family of Jews from Aleppo, Syria. The Esses family arrived in England along with other textile merchants at the turn of the 20th century. They held strongly to a tradition that placed them in Spain at the time of the Inquisition.

His father's family may have originated in the Middle East, in the town of Safed located in the mountains of the Galilee in Israel. At some point during the past couple of hundred years, they moved to Aleppo. However an alternate family tradition traces their Sephardic roots to Spain. The family does not speak Ladino, but this was not necessarily unusual among some descendants of the Spanish Jews. On the other hand, they have preserved the custom of lighting an extra candle each night of Hanukah, a custom that is unique among the Syrian Jews of Judeo-Spanish origin. Some explain this custom as the result of the difficulties these Jews encountered after they were expelled from Spain. Their journey was quite arduous, as they wandered from port to port until they found a country willing to shelter them. When they finally found a haven in Syria they determined that they would kindle an additional candle in thanksgiving.

Safdie's father arrived in Haifa in 1935. Like many of his fellow Aleppians, he was involved in the textile trade, importing materials from around the world. This ended abruptly in 1953, when Israel established a ban on imports. The elder Safdie, unable to legally conduct his business felt obliged to gather up his family and emigrate to Canada.

There were few Sephardim in Haifa where Safdie spent his childhood. He was one of only two Sephardic students in a class of 30 at his Reali School. He assures us that he encountered no prejudice from his classmates, although his parents reported that they had found it a bit difficult to enroll him in the school in

the first place. There were times during these years that he became particularly aware of the cultural and political divisions in Israel. In the first election after the State of Israel came into being Safdie's father supported the Sephardic party led by Sheerit, while the 12 year old Moshe strongly supported the Zionist socialist youth groups of the Ashkenazi world from which his father felt alienated.

Like the others of his generation, Safdie dreamed of growing up and founding his own Kibbutz in the socialistic environment of Israel in the 1940's. This interest in people and the desire to erect "functional, economical, buildings that solved social problems" served as the inspiration for his first and best known masterpiece: Habitat '67 at the Montreal Expo. Habitat '67 was a prefabricated concrete housing complex comprising three clusters of individual apartment units arranged like irregularly stacked blocks along a zigzagged framework. The project was bold and widely acclaimed by critics and laymen alike, and proposals for similar projects were drawn up for various sites around the world. In the end however, few places were able to commit to such massive building campaigns that would make the system of prefabrication used in building the "Habitats" cost-effective.

When he and his family moved to Montreal, Canada at the age of 15, Moshe encountered a very different attitude toward Sephardic culture. Here the Sephardim were treated as royalty, while they had been treated as second-class citizens in Israel. And even though they were not actively involved in the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of Montreal, the Safdies were able to practice their Sephardic traditions along with other like minded Egyptian and Syrian families.

When Safdie returned to Israel 15 years later, things had changed significantly. The Sephardim now represented the majority of the Jewish population in Israel, and they began to assert themselves in the world. One of Safdie's first opportunities to give expression to his Sephardic tastes was in the design and construction of the restored Yeshivat Porat Yosef. He noted that he and his family had personal connections with the Yeshiva (his uncle was an active member of the Synagogue administration and his cousin was married to one of the two rabbis in charge), but he also noted that he had the distinction of being an Aleppo Jew and "every Aleppo Jew assumes that every other Jew from Aleppo is a blood relative in one way or another." Safdie's goal in building this new complex was to create something that appeared as if it had always been there. Thus, although this 80 year old Yeshiva had been destroyed during the Arab occupation of the Old City of Jerusalem, Safdie tried to restore it to its past brilliance. When asked whether he would build a traditional building or a modern one, he responded, "If I succeed you won't be able to answer this question." He went on to place his signature on the re-building of the Old City and on development of the new center. Safdie maintains an office in Jerusalem and among his achievements are the Jerusalem campus of Hebrew Union College (1989), and the Yad Vashem Children's Holocaust Memorial (1987).

Safdie's architectural commissions extend to all corners of the globe. They range from educational and cultural institutions such as the Khalsa Heritage Memorial Complex in the Punjab in India to airport projects like the new Ben Gurion Airport at Lod, Israel (1994). The new Yad Vashem Historic Museum (2005), which opens this month, was designed by Safdie; and he has been commissioned to design the U.S. Institute of Peace Headquarters in Washington D.C. Unquestionably, Moshe Safdie's life and work balance different elements of experience - functionality with aesthetic sense, human dimension with grandeur, and a traditional Sephardic heritage with Israeli pragmatism.

This article is based on information from the following sources:
Moshe Safdie's books: *Beyond Habitat* and *Jerusalem the Future of the Past* ;
Phillip Goodman's book *The Hanukkah Anthology*; the article "Truth in Architecture" by Larissa MacFarquhar in the *New Yorker*, January 20, 2003 and the oral history of Mr. Safdie located in the Dorot Jewish Division of the New York Public Library.