



# Calming home

Charged with creating a family villa in Tel Aviv, Ulrik Plesner conjured up an Eastern-inspired oasis of greenery, light and tranquillity  
**Writer David Kaufman. Photographer Tzachi Ostrovsky**

When Danish architect Ulrik Plesner arrived in Israel 30 years ago it was just the start of another chapter in an aesthetically nomadic career that had already seen him embrace everything from Scandinavian formality to the baroque opulence of post-colonial Sri Lanka.

Over the next three decades, a series of weighty public and private commissions – including a period as the chief architect of Jerusalem – helped to establish the Dane as one of Israel's most important design minds.

Plesner's Euro-Asian-Levantine eye created a distinct style that graced many important Israeli edifices, including the Beit Gabriel centre on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Yet for 30 years he didn't tackle a single private home. Spoiled by the size of the Sri Lankan villas he had designed with his partner Geoffrey Bawa, Plesner had found Israel's tight lots too small to accommodate the organic elements he felt were essential in a private home.

So when the opportunity arose to design a large villa in the affluent Tel Aviv suburb of Savyon, he quickly signed on. The result is a continual meeting of light, water and gardens, all anchored by a central hallway, which »



**DEEP THOUGHT**  
 Above, the swimming pool's dark tiles add weight and serenity to the patio area off the living room  
 Left, limited space meant sacrificing bedroom size to allow for this lofty living room, which doubles as a music room for the family-oriented clients

## IN RESIDENCE 3



**LIGHT RELIEF**  
Above, the shady kitchen patio, made from pale local stone  
Left, the reflecting pool forms one of Plesner's framed 'picture moments'

'floats' from the entrance to the exit on a single visual plane. Only its front door is slightly off-place, Asian-style, to deny evil spirits direct access to the heart of the home.

Plesner – working with his daughter Daniela and associate Ruthy Packer – embraced the elements early on, deploying a reflecting pool just off the main entrance. This serves as a calm, ornamental escape for the owners, a businesswoman and her academic husband, and their two children. Just 20cm deep, the pool creates tranquillity without wasting water in this drought-prone region.

The public spaces – the kitchen, study and dining room – are on one side of the house, while bedrooms for family and staff are on the other. And running along both borders are the

Zen-like gardens, which Plesner insists must accent any fully realised home. They provide additional refuges, as well as shade. The bedrooms are restrained. 'Israel is still new to this kind of living,' Plesner says, 'so clients still speak in terms of utility, without pretension.'

As befits a home – and culture – defined by the family, Plesner reserved the most space for the living room. Set at the building's base, the room increases in depth and volume as the site slopes to its resting point. Used by a family of classical-music fans and performers, the room is intended as a small chamber music hall. Its size amplifies sound and contrasts with the modesty of the villa's bedrooms.

Although boasting an unmistakably Eastern vernacular, the project was rendered mostly

in local materials. The walls, as in most Israeli residences, are built from simple plaster – easy, efficient and offering protection from the strong humidity of coastal summers. The floors, meanwhile, are set with tiles sourced from various parts of Israel. Dark oak is used for the door frames and pine forms an elegant, lattice-like appliqué on the underside of the pool-front pergola. Wood also provides the material for the small tables and accessories, which were designed by Plesner associate Roni Al-Roy and built in Sri Lanka.

Stretching for 15m and clad in midnight-blue tiles, the swimming pool is designed to be used. But with its garden setting of olives, frangipani and bougainvillea, and its Buddhist temple from Thailand, it also manifests Plesner's love of organic elements. The gardens lead the eye to the estate's final frame, perched at the property's edge: the verdant orchards, so few of which remain in post-industrial Israel.

Viewed from the street outside, the home's straight-roofed façade betrays little of the aesthetic intrigue inside. Plesner says the home was like a puzzle to him. 'Bigger houses are always easier, because you just add things on if needed; while in smaller homes, you have to push harder to make things work.'

Plesner is already busy working on more private residences and says, regardless of size, 'The home has to feel effortless, like a natural organism. Nothing can seem forced; nothing should be a struggle to comprehend.' ✱  
*Plesner Architects, Tel Aviv, tel: 972.3 522 4022, e-mail: info@plesnerarchitects.com*