



‘ I AM VERY,
VERY LAZY ’

At the age of 58, Ron Arad finally completes his first real architectural projects.

— Text **Giovanna Dunmall** —



‘THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE MALL IS AT ODDS WITH THE COMMERCIAL CONSTRAINTS’

— Ron Arad —

Talking to Ron Arad is not a straightforward affair. While he may not actually be arching his eyebrows, most of his responses come with an implied arch. It doesn't help that the interview takes place in one of his latest architectural projects – the Médiacité shopping mall in Liège, Belgium – and has been organized as a group exercise. This means that I am sitting around a table in a vast open conference area with a rather incongruous collection of (mainly local) journalists, architects and PR people, variously fawning over Arad or attempting to throw questions his way.

Arad is one of the most influential designers in the world, working across the disciplines, from architecture to furniture, and designing for many of the major firms. (He is behind some of the most iconic chairs and shelves ever created.) Right now, however, he seems more intent on wolfing down his lunch than engaging with us.

‘Everything influences everything,’ he says rather desultorily at one point. ‘You’re welcome to your interpretation,’ he opines drily at another, or: ‘It’s a long debate, we don’t have time to get into it.’ Lines of discussions are broached and quickly abandoned. After a particularly long silence at one point he looks up and says ‘What else?’ with a faintly amused look in his eye.

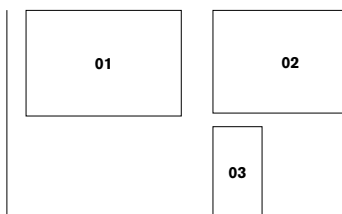
A lot of what he says is drowned out by the preparations for the official opening of the shopping mall later on in the day. Baton-twirling girls are parading down the upper galleries in time to blaring pop music; at one point an airship with a man attached appears mid-air and we all watch him literally flap his wings and make it move. It is a surreal but, ultimately, not entirely unpleasant experience.

We are here for the official opening of a new shopping and entertainment complex (which also

houses Belgian French-speaking television, a multiplex and a skating rink) in the heart of the city of Liège in Belgium. Part existing structure and part new-build, its various elements are brought together by a sinuous red and clear roof (that is, funnily enough, best viewed from above), and book-ended by a public piazza at each end, one of which spills out directly into the city.

‘How do you make a project that is experienced from the inside?’ Arad asks, dressed for the occasion in his trademark black felt hat and some rather baggy, child-like trousers. He eschews all talk of context or history (‘I don’t think the people of Liège are different from people anywhere else’). The free-span roof – made out of the building skin of the moment, ETFE – seems to have been Arad’s answer. (He was invited to create the public spaces when the building work was well underway). ETFE is a transparent material

SHOPPING MALL LIÈGE . BELGIUM 2010



01 PART EXISTING STRUCTURE AND PART NEW-BUILD, THE MALL'S VARIOUS ELEMENTS ARE BROUGHT TOGETHER BY A SINUOUS RED AND CLEAR ROOF, AND BOOK-ENDED BY PUBLIC PIAZZAS.
PHOTO JEAN-LUC DERU

02 THE STEEL ROOF STRUCTURE IS WELDED TOGETHER IN A LATTICED PATTERN THAT ALTERNATES BETWEEN LOOSE AND FREE-FLOWING AND A TIGHTER DIAMOND-LIKE GRID.
PHOTO JEAN-LUC DERU

03 THE FREE-SPAN ROOF IS MADE OF ETFE.
PHOTO JEAN-LUC DERU

known for being thin, lightweight and resilient, as well as having various environmental attributes such as being anti-reflective and insulating.

Here it swoops up and down over a steel structure that is welded together (there is not a cable in sight) in a latticed pattern that alternates between loose and free-flowing and a tighter diamond-like grid. Underneath it, the 450-m-long shopping space is likened by Arad alternately to a river (possibly in reference to the Meuse river, the symbol of the city which the complex overlooks), a Turkish souk and a snake. The mall spills out into the city centre (the steel structure juts out over the edge) without overwhelming it. The complex developers are clearly impressed with Arad's contribution, saying that it fits into the urban fabric without a hint of arrogance.

What was it like coming in at such a late stage, I ask. ‘Normally we would not accept this

project’ says Arad, later adding how everyone was surprised that he and his team accepted the commission. So why did they? ‘Because I saw 0.5 km that we can do something with,’ he says. Later, he is more frank: ‘With buildings like this, the main motivation is commercial. There are a lot of compromises, a lot of negotiations. Sometimes the architecture is at odds with the commercial constraints.’

When it came to being commissioned to do the Design Museum in Holon, Israel, (due to open in January 2010) Arad seems to have been, despite its vicinity to his home-town of Tel Aviv, initially reticent. Hold on, he told the city authorities; this is a public building so you have to do a competition. ‘And if you do a competition I will read the brief, see who the jury is and then decide,’ he recounts. But the authorities insisted, because ‘I’m from there and I’m doing well »



and I have a name,' he says matter-of-factly. He was asked to create a building that the city would be proud to put on a postage stamp. 'By the way, they do have a postage stamp of it now,' he interrupts himself, giggling.

He starts enthusing about an 'amazing' polystyrene ceiling in one section of the museum, but is being drowned out by the ongoing rehearsals around us. When I ask for more details he tells me to write to Asa. (Asa Bruno is one of the two directors of Ron Arad Architects, a division officially set up in 2008). In essence the Design Museum at Holon is a series of rectangular boxes wrapped in sculptural swathes of copper-coloured Cor-Ten steel. Arad's team worked with a Milan-based university to devise an innovative technique that allowed each strip to be halted at different stages of corrosion.

The Holon museum and Médiacité are the first real architectural projects Arad has done since he did the Tel Aviv opera foyer in 1994. The long gap is not of his choosing. 'My problem with architecture,' he says, 'is that you have to get commissions from other people.' And, as he points out, most architectural projects never happen, 'for all sorts of reasons'. He seems genuinely distressed by this. His headquarters for design mega-brand Magis is not going ahead for instance (budget issues mainly, and 'maybe the owner was not in the same mood as when he started the project'), and the Swarovski hotel in Austria, too, is 'not happening'.

When he does get commissions, however, how does Arad switch between design and architecture? 'I just can do both, effortlessly,' he smiles, without a trace of self-deprecation. He adds,

'for me it's downstairs and upstairs,' referring to his studio in North London, where the product designers work upstairs and the architects on the ground floor. 'I have very good people developing something like this [he points to the complex we are in] and good people developing something like this [he points to the 'Ripple' chair he is sitting on, one of his own designs].

One of the other journalists at the table asks Arad about the importance of sustainability in his work (Médiacité has earned BREEAM environmental accreditation for features such as a green roof, rainwater collection, condensing gas boilers and roofing material that reduces heat gain). Arad is clearly underwhelmed with the topic. 'I have to find ways of making things more environmentally-friendly up to a point.' The journalist doesn't give up so Arad snaps back with: 'Look,

DESIGN MUSEUM HOLON . ISRAEL 2010



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01 THE MUSEUM IS A SERIES OF RECTANGULAR BOXES WRAPPED IN SCULPTURAL SWATHES OF COPPER-COLOURED COR-TEN STEEL.
PHOTO ASA BRUNO

02 ARAD'S TEAM WORKED WITH A MILAN-BASED UNIVERSITY TO DEVISE AN INNOVATIVE TECHNIQUE THAT ALLOWED EACH STRIP TO BE HALTED AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF CORROSION.
PHOTO ASA BRUNO

03 THE DESIGN MUSEUM AT HOLON WILL OPEN AT THE END OF JANUARY 2010.
PHOTO JACKIE EVEN

'WE'RE FINISHED, NO?'

— Ron Arad —

it's a lot greener to drive an old car than to get rid of it and buy an environmentally-friendly car. You know that?' Doggedly the journalist pursues the point. 'Sustainability is one of the questions that contemporary architects should deal with,' he says calmly. Arad looks at him and says: 'You can write a manifesto about that but I won't read it, I promise.' Then he says: 'Sometimes we do things that have an environmental price. If we're going to take a lump of marble and carve something out of it, someone thinks it's worthwhile to do it. And when I criticize it, it won't be the only direction of the criticism.' He warms to his theme: 'Talk to me about Primark, [who have a shop in the mall] they haven't got a good record when it comes to employing people. That bothers me more.' He looks around. 'What else?'

Arad has famously always hated labels and

when asked if he is conceptual in his work he answers: 'I am very, very lazy.' When I ask what he is like as a teacher (he taught for 12 years at the RCA) he says: 'I'm a pluralist and I don't subscribe to any religion. I never use the word truth in teaching.' He feels lucky that he was able to teach postgraduates and therefore that he didn't have the responsibility of giving them the 'tools and the skills'. 'I wanted to believe that students are grown-ups, I wanted them to see for themselves what they are about, what their contribution to the world will be.'

It suddenly occurs to me that despite his tricky interview style, Arad is actually a curious man and interested in people. Throughout the interview session Arad asks us several questions. He wants to know if we are architects, where we live, if we know certain people (artists and

architects mainly) or if we've been to Tel Aviv. He may be self-centred but he is not closed off, not in the slightest; in fact he seems to have a child-like zest for new information and experiences. He asks us at one point if we have heard of Frederick Kiesler, one of his 'favourite architects'. Kiesler was actually an architect, sculptor, painter, designer and art historian, who attempted to create a radical new concept of interior space. He also designed the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem in 1965. 'He didn't do much,' says Arad, 'but he left an amazing amount of drawings.' Look him up, he tells us.

With that, he stands up. 'We're finished, no?' Yes Professor Arad, we're finished. <

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