



The Garden Library

For Migrant Communities in Tel Aviv

The Garden Library for Refugees and Migrant Workers

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The Garden Library for Refugees and Migrant Workers

“When a man’s world fills with darkness, he reads a book and sees another world.”

- S. Y. Agnon, Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature, 1966

The Garden Library for Refugees and Migrant Workers was founded in 2009 as a social-artistic urban community project by ARTEAM, an interdisciplinary art collective.

The library is located in the Lewinski Park, by the Tel Aviv central bus station. It has no walls or door. It is comprised of two bookcases, which are supported by the walls of a public shelter located in the heart of the park. The taller structure contains books for the adult readers. It is transparent and illuminated from within so that, at night, the books glow in the park. Across from it is a shorter – children’s height – cabinet. The doors to the small cabinet swing down to form a parquet floor for the children to sit on and review the books.



The Library books are illuminated after dark

A high, permanent canopy stretches above the two structures, which provides shelter from the sun and rain, protects the books and the visitors, and establishes a space for browsing, reading and social meetings.

Why a library?

Because we see the right to a book as a fundamental human right.

Because, as alluded to in the opening quote by S.Y. Agnon, a book provides both escape and shelter, a home, an identity, and a mother tongue.

Why in Lewinski Park?

Because this is the place migrant workers congregate on weekends. It was important for us that the library come to the people, that those who maintain illegal immigrant status will come without fear, that the library would not have a closed door or a guard at the entrance who would check and ask questions.



The Garden Library - architectural rendering

The Books

The library contains approximately 3,500 books in Mandarin Chinese, Amharic, Thai, Tagalog, Arabic, French, Spanish, Nepalese, Bengali, Hindi, Turkish, Romanian, Sinhala, Tigrinya, and English. The children's cabinet also holds books in Hebrew.



Book sorting at Mesila, the Aid and Information Center for the Foreign Worker and Refugee Community of Tel-Aviv

The book lists were compiled after consulting with native speakers of each represented language. The selection appeals to a wide range of tastes and includes classics and master works of literature, in addition to bestsellers, suspense, romantic and graphic novels.



Sorting by Emotions

We decided from the outset not to take any element of the library as a given. This decision was realized in the choice of location and structure as well as in the sorting system applied to the books.

We determined to replace conventional sorting systems with a unique system that would embody the spirit of the library: In addition to a color sticker marking each book's language and listing its catalogue number, a second, 5cm-high, sticker at the bottom of each spine denotes the feelings the book aroused in the readers. The books are not catalogued according to conventions of genre or author name, but according to the feeling they arouse.

How does this work?

Within the inner binding of each book is a sticker asking (in the language of the book): "How would you describe the book?" Alongside it are seven words describing emotions the book may evoke: amusing, boring, bizarre, depressing, exciting, inspiring, sentimental.



Emotional categories stickers (English, Nepalese, Mandarin, Thai)

Each emotion is color-coded. A reader returning a book is asked to choose the word which best describes his or her feelings. If the first reader, for example, thought that the book was amusing, the book will be marked by a wide purple color strip and will be placed in the Amusing section. If the second reader will agree with the first, the purple sticker will be divided in two (to indicate the number of readers) and will be returned to the Amusing section. If, however, the third reader will determine that the book is boring, the next sticker will be divided into three: two-third purple and the upper third blue, and the book will move to the Boring section. No matter how many readers thought the book was amusing, it is that last reader that decides how the book will be categorized.

The library is a small and parallel world: the books wander between the shelves as their readers have wandered/are wandering the world. They carry with them their emotional history.

The feeling sticker proposes an opening for conversation about the book, an initial stimulus for live discussion between the readers.

Mostly, we sought to create a system that anyone could impact, in which every participant counts. For this very reason the placement of the book is not decided by popular vote, but by the last reader. Even if ten readers thought a book was amusing and the eleventh thought it was dull, the book will move to the Boring shelf – at least until the next reader weighs in.

The library website

The library website is an independent project intended to engage viewers who are not primarily the patrons of the library. The site will offer visitors the possibility of sorting and ordering the books upon the virtual shelves in a number of ways, according to the emotional categories, the various languages, the relative popularity of a particular category, etc.

The visual mapping will familiarize site visitors with the library's reader communities, their opinions and preferences. The history of the emotional judgments will permit dynamic illustration of "wandering maps," displaying the relative placements of the books at any point in time and the dynamic changes along the axis of time.

At the moment, the library catalogue contains limited information about a significant part of the current inventory. The database entry for these books contains only a catalogue number and scans of the front and back of the book. The site will host a wiki feature that will appeal to visitors from around the world to complete the information about each and every book in the book's native tongue. Internet surfers in China, for example, will be able to type, in Mandarin, the Mandarin books' pertinent information.

Routine

The library is open from Fridays to Sundays in the afternoon hours. It is operated by a group of about seventy volunteers, and managed by a paid manager who works a quarter-time position. Four volunteers man each shift, two of which work with the children.

The Children of the Library

The children of the foreign workers who had previously lacked any organized activity at the park were immediately drawn to the library. Many of these children are now “the library kids.” They arrive on a weekly basis and some stay throughout operating hours.

We soon discovered that one of the most important and unplanned functions of the library is to provide these children with a fun, supervised environment away from the addicts, alcoholics and sex workers who regularly congregate in the park, and to provide their parents with the peace of mind to relax and socialize with their friends.



The librarians read to the children and help them with reading and writing—all in Hebrew, the language of their primary school education and the primary language in which they speak to each other. Some of the volunteers run workshops and carry out various activities. About once a month we bring over a theatre show, a professional story hour, or a puppet

theatre. All activities are provided free of charge by volunteers.



And the future?

Maintaining the library, even in its current configuration, is not an easy task. Securing the necessary funding for ongoing maintenance and administration is our main concern.

With the limited funds available to us, we are beginning to work on a book fair and a series of arts and cultural events. In June, for example, we presented the “Lewinski Park Ballet” on the lawn next to the library. The evening consisted of traditional dance and music from Sudan, China, India, Ecuador and Ethiopia. The highlight of the show was an original library production with participators from Israel, Sudan and India.

Ultimately, we hope the library will become the basis for a larger multicultural community center that will reflect the great cultural diversity of the foreign communities that gather weekly in Tel Aviv.



Cast of *Ballet in Lewinsky Garden* - an original Garden Library production



Ballet Night at Lewinsky Park - a salute to the foreign worker communities in Tel Aviv
Produced by the Garden Library, the Mesila Center and Artis, a multidisciplinary group.



The garden Library on opening night (Sept. 26, 2009)

Support the Garden Library

If you would like to donate (and no amount is too small), you may contribute through [PayPal](#), or deposit directly into ARTEAM's bank account through First International Bank's main Jerusalem branch (branch #012) in the name of ARTEAM, account #409-196967.

If you donate this way, please send details of your contribution to gardenlib@googlegroups.com and to ophrat@gmail.com so we can send you a receipt. Phone number: 972 54 471-7100

ARTEAM – Interdisciplinary Arts Team is a registered Israeli NGO, # 580496198.

Founders and supporters

ARTEAM, Interdisciplinary Art Team is a not-for-profit art organization. ARTEAM initiated and produced the library.

ARTEAM members are: Hadas Ophrat – interdisciplinary artist and art entrepreneur, Romy Achituv – artist, Marit Benisrael - interdisciplinary artist and writer, Tali Tamir – curator, Nimrod Ram – artist, Yoav Meiri – architect. Yoav Meiri designed the library in collaboration with the ARTEAM group members.

ARTEAM was founded in 2008. The Garden Library is its first project.

Lior Waterman – artist, and The Garden Library’s manager

Mesila center was founded by the Tel-Aviv municipality to assist and support foreign workers and refugees in the city. Mesila has become a full partner in the project.

A special thanks to the following institutes for their funding support:

Tel Aviv Municipality and the Tel Aviv Yafo Centennial Committee

Pais – The Israeli Lottery Organization

The Israeli Center for Libraries

A special thanks to the following for book contribution and assistance in importing books from around the globe:

Rania Ho, Beijing, China

Ami Zarchi and Ido Berger, Bangkok, Thailand

The Israeli Embassies in the Philippines, Thailand and China

The Israel Foreign Office

Book Publishers and private people who contributed books to the library

Appendix:

Surroundings / [A library is the best welcome](#) *Haaretz*. July 30, 2009.

By Esther Zandberg

At the height of the Immigration Authority's hunting season, a multicultural public library for foreign workers is being established in Levinsky Park in Tel Aviv's Neve Sha'anani neighborhood. It opens in September and hopes to serve a population that Israeli society does not usually beckon, let alone open its gates for, and which no doubt feels persecuted. People may not think of this population in terms of reading books, another stereotype the library's founders wish to refute.

The library is the initiative of the nonprofit Artim, an interdisciplinary group promoting volunteer art, education and community projects. Its membership includes artists Hadas Ophrat, Romy Achituv and Marit Ben Israel, curator Tali Tamir and the architect Yoav Meiri, who planned and designed the library.

Among the institutional partners to the project (for whom the word optimistic is too narrow for their wealth of good intentions) are the municipal aid organization Mesilla, the Tel Aviv centennial administration and the Mifal Hapais national lottery.

Meiri, an architect and social activist, welcomed the institutional involvement, including that of the Tel Aviv municipality, "which is really helping us a lot."

This kind of action does not have to be conducted underground, Meiri says, "but rather may exist in the open and be recognized."

The idea touched many in the Israeli mainstream who are not usually involved in volunteer activity. Various professionals helping to build the library have lowered their rates. Foreign Ministry staffers have helped in obtaining books from abroad. More than anything else the library idea neutralizes aggression.

Meiri says he may be naive but he believes "that when people come to exchange books at the library, they won't be persecuted. I have become acquainted with many police in the neighborhood, just as I know many of those whom they hunt. I know that no one is born a monster."

The Levinsky library is not exactly a building but rather a structure that has been planned

with great simplicity and great care. Its two recently-completed wooden and metal bookcases, one for adults and one for children, will be installed on the outer walls of the public shelter adjacent to the park, on either side of a paved outdoor space, which is to serve as an "open study hall." You need to see it to be convinced these are not empty words.

"Our public space includes the entire park," Meiri says with unsuppressed optimism, enough to imagine an adult reading club and a children's story hour, because "when we offer books, we offer society a world."

Meiri and his wife, architect Tali Hatuka, have lived in Neve Sha'anan for years. "I don't feel I live in some heart of darkness," he says. He is involved in community projects with neighborhood residents, many of them "at various stages of citizenship" - immigrant workers, temporary residents dependent on work permits, illegals, refugees.

Meiri realizes there was no public library in the neighborhood because on an official level "there is no public in Neve Sha'anan," as a one city librarian told him.

"We view the right of anyone at all to a book as a basic human right," he says. And clearly there had to be books in the residents' mother tongues - "a primary element of identity," he says.

A list of book preferences was drawn up with local cooperation. South Americans, for example, asked for nonfiction books about Israel to learn about the place where they lived.

The library collection numbers 2,500 books in Nepalese, Thai, Hindi, Mandarin Chinese, Tagalog, Arabic, French, Romanian, Spanish and Hebrew. They were collected or donated from many sources. An Israeli who owns a factory in Thailand sent books. The owner of a Spanish-language bookstore in Tel Aviv contacted customers to contribute books. Various embassy employees helped by bringing books from overseas via incoming foreign workers.

The library will be computerized and catalogued by the standard methods and by readers' response about interest, excitement and level of sadness - with color-coding indicating response. A Web site will be launched with the library opening.

That the library would be in south Tel Aviv was taken for granted, as most foreign worker communities are concentrated there. "It was important to us that the library come to the people, and not that they would have to come to it in a different place," says Meiri.

While several existing buildings were offered, the library founders preferred the open

Levinsky Park, which is the social heart of Neve Sha'anani and of immigrant workers in Israel. Its open space, where people already congregate, grants the library an unconcealed presence and provides unmediated access. It was important, says Meiri there would be no door and no guard, no one examining anyone at the entrance and no one asking questions. "Enough doors are shut to them," he says. "It is important there be at least a sense that here there is no supervision, and they are free."

Cards will be issued cards for a deposit. Book wear and tear is expected to be greater than in "regular" libraries, but this is seen as a worthwhile risk. Members of Artim and other volunteers will run things at first but the goal is to have another organization take over. Some that agreed to take part begged off in the current financial climate.

Two-thirds of the 400,000 foreigners who live here are believed to be illegal immigrant workers. Levinisky Park is pleasant, spacious and well-maintained. A quick visit allows the momentary illusion of the world as a good place. Can one small, lovely library and the attempt to save architecture from itself save the world? Meiri says that until a perfect world is achieved, the ethical obligation is to accomplish what can be accomplished, "to live the situation and not to live with it."