

Talking to the wall

A message: Hope or in memory

Written by Nachman Gilboa - 11.2004

"The 'Togetherness' and the contrast of these trees, citrus and cypresses, are the images I adopted to show my graphic statement about my home and about this communal life."

The artist, Shaul Knaz, from Kibbutz Gan Shmuel, has turned a gray block wall into a local statement.

For many years graphic artist and designer Saul Knaz dreamed about taking the gray block wall surrounding the factory warehouse of the kibbutz, and turning it into a wall with a local message welcoming those entering the kibbutz. The dream was realized last summer when the planning committee decided to renovate the entrance to Kibbutz make it an attractive boardwalk. After formulating his plan, he developed a unique technique for designing the wall, making use of acrylic plaster and special paints that would stand up against the weather. In July 2003 he started working with the help of a professional plasterer, and after half a year the wall was completed.

It is 180 meters long and is divided into 4 main sections reflecting Kibbutz Gan Shmuel. The first section starts on a container of their food factory. On its façade there is a sort of banner advertising the factory with photos of the factory workers and data on the factory's products. It then goes to the wall on which there are reliefs that describe the history of the kibbutz and its produce with an emphasis on agriculture on which the founders based their lives. This section ends with the local celebration of the Shavuot holiday. The second section is dedicated to the social life, culture, education and sports of the kibbutz. Another section has a political tint depicting the encounter between the red flag and the national flag, followed by the word "peace" in 30 languages inscribed into a poured concrete base. The last section is called "Gan Shmuel - a dream" and it expresses the hope for continuity and a bright future. On 250 ceramic tiles the signatures of about 1000 members, residents and children from Gan Shmuel in the early 2004s were inscribed.

Big statement

"I assumed that not all kibbutz members would like this wall," says Knaz. "A large part of them do like it, some are indifferent and apparently there are those who like the work much less. I received many complimentary comments from visitors from outside the kibbutz. This is an enormous work and a meaningful statement and even though I would want the whole world to love it - that's not what happens"

This is very different from the ironic, cynical, sarcastic style we associate with you from your press and independent publications. It reminds me of the socialist realism and of Yohanan Simon who began his career in Gan Shmuel.

"That's one way of seeing things. For me Gan Shmuel is my homeland for better or for worse - a great love and sometimes a disappointing love. This wall is my expression of a human relationship to a place. Most people in the modern world do not live in the place in which they were born and are not the format of their native landscape, as the poet says. I, with myself, by myself – am Gan Shmuel. Gan Shmuel is a landscape, it is society, friends, it is more than sixty years of living and creating in this home. This wall for me is a dedication to the parents' generation, the founders, who fulfilled here an

enormous human dream. But it is also a statement for the continuing generations of this human communal creation who have continued to build here for over eighty years."

"It sounds a little flowery but I feel 'old' enough to be able to see and evaluate the achievement of social - economic - human achievements that were gained here. A relief wall or visual arts in general are not a way to make speeches or explain processes, but I find myself trying to participate in life through artistic means. Through this wall I am trying to say in my own way that there's something in this house that is beyond arguments and discussions and criticisms and committees. Something beyond the disappointments and failures and agreements and insults. "

Isn't it a little dangerous to glorify a society through art?

"No. Throughout all the planning I was very careful to maintain an equilibrium between statements dealing with my commitment to artistic values, and those dealing with the associations related to this place as my home. I do not come out with harsh slogans of 'Long live the togetherness!' or 'The Collective Over the Individual!'. In this wall, in my language, there is extensive use of symbols like the citrus tree, representing the fruit that creates new life, or if you will, woman and the cypress tree associating with an aggressive male image. These are images that come from our local landscape. We are a society born in the landscape of citrus trees. The 'Togetherness' of these trees and the contrasts between them, citrus and cypresses, are the images I have adopted in order to state my message to this my home and to this communal life. Even today, nearly a year after this wall was completed, I still question whether I maintained a balance between the artistic creative statement and the social statement. I know the artistic establishment in this country wants to see a more pure and universal statement. But I took that risk. I could have designed it differently of course but only time will judge if this wall has a right to exist."

Actually you have dealt a lot in journalism, graphics, problems concerning the kibbutz. How does this work with your art?

"The public prefers to tag people and assign them roles according to a profession. Artists deal with art, economics with economy, and consultants – with social matters. I think these divisions are artificial. Human beings are 'this and that', create and work in art and form world and social views, want to take part in life through various expressions and see different realities from different angles. I, like everyone else, find myself in this melting pot of changes, with new inventions, changes and confusion. I, from the perspective of creative art, configure the collective society in general."

"Visual art and art in general has engaged for thousands of years in these same issues. What changed is the 'how' and 'the what'. Art has always dealt with birth and death, landscape, sunrise and sunset, man, with the same truths, with the same passions and fears. What has changed is the style. Each generation is changing its artistic language, every generation says the same truths with new images, in a new way, and all are correct and legitimate. My feeling as a creative person is that our social creativity has not been blessed with a second and third generation who will continue to create new updated management systems so that the tastes of life will remain relevant. They aren't busy enough with the 'how', have given up on the 'what'. to quickly."

"A sense of desperation from the lack of creativity in leaders on the local and broader levels makes the whole experience here a reality of bargaining in a market. In the name of 'the correct economy' the relationship between the individual and society has become a depressing experience of war for survival and charity. The ideas behind this human creation with its lofty dreams of human freedom and personal and social creativity have become a society of beggars, of each to his own, of scorn and anger at ourselves that we dared to dream of a more fair and wonderful world. Happily giving up the "what", and "how", it seems so simple ... how did we not understand three generations ago that life is nothing but a business event? "

Fine words, but it sounds naive in the light of economic reality.

"Yes, being naive is a privilege. It is easier when one lives on a kibbutz that is economically strong, a 'luxury' of creative people. The motivation to create is a lack of satisfaction from the life around you. Yes, as a movement and as a society and as a kibbutz we have lost that naiveté. We gave

up almost without a fight the right to live differently. The unbearable easiness of having the same dream and being like everyone else, is so sad and so dreary. So true, I am naïve. Another reason I made this concrete wall is to tell my friends that things can be different. I try through an artistically designed statement to say to my friends, that in this home there is a real human and naïve message that must be renewed, changed, updated, refreshed."

"Maybe I sound a bit like a prophet of doom, but really, without arrogance, I believe that in times of confusion and crisis, creative people have a role to play. I believe that from the perspective of a creative person, I can see the reality and the future, the 'how', yes the 'how' and not have to give up on naïveté. Creative people must participate in this game.

So the wall is built and makes people react. What do you feel when you pass by it every day?

"I especially like the physical and mental strength I had to have in order to deal with such a challenge that is both physically and technically complicated. The need to develop new materials and the challenges of designing and finding ways of coping. I like that half year in which I had the strength to stand alone, facing the wall and create it. I like the sum total despite the fact that there are many parts and segments I would do differently today. I like the honor that was given to me here in my home to do it, and believe that a kibbutz which still supports such a work ... has a future. And yet, when I pass this wall every day, I debate with myself whether there is a message and a hope for the future, or maybe this is some sort of memorial to this innocent human dream of living together? "