'A grand intellectual vision' The massive renewal project of the Israel Museum, which just celebrated its 45th birthday, has created a 'new platform from which to carry on exploring the ways cultures communicate,' savs director James Snyder By Avital Burg and Ellie Armon Azoulay he director of the Israel Museum, James Snyder, has a construction worker's helmet on his desk. He wears it whenever touring the building site the museum has occupied for the past three years. Snyder sets off on these tours dressed in an elegant suit, and when he talks about the "campus renewal" project (it's not a "refurbishment," he is careful to correct), he makes frequent use of words like "revelatory," "amazing" and "thrilling" – for even though he has lived in Israel for 13 years, he speaks relatively little Hebrew Snyder, who has devoted all

Snyder. "Good art is something that moves you, because it has a beauty that takes your breath away. Similarly, a good museum is a place that moves you and takes your breath away."

incredible landscape that embraces the museum, and the cultural experience is from the outside in."

his efforts in recent years to

this 30-month renewal project,

is filled with excitement as the

work nears completion and the

museum prepares for its for-

mal public opening on July 26.

daunting to see things com-

ing out the way you visualized

them," he admits, "and to re-

alize that the scale and pro-

portions are coming out just

Instead of constructing

mammoth new wings or razing

and rebuilding structures - ap-

proaches that have practically

of this sort around the country

-the Israel Museum decided to

stay within its existing struc-

tural "envelope." One of the

reasons for this is its commitment to preserving the archi-

tectural history of the complex

of museum buildings, planned

by architect Al Mansfeld and

you need to build on its qual-

ity," Snyder says, "and we are

fortunate that this was so in our

case. It meant we could focus

on a grand intellectual vision,

Snyder explains that the

ramework of the under-

taking adapted itself to the

contents – not the other way around. "The first priority

for the renewal project is to

reinstall the collections to

show the continuous timeline

of material culture, from one

million years ago until today.

The whole idea is that the

buildings become a modern-

ist envelope that can serve as

a backdrop to this narrative."

'A rare museum

person'

James Snyder, 57, was born

in Belle Vernon, a small town

in southwestern Pennsylvania He received a bachelor's

degree in English literature

and art history from Harvard

University, and was immedi-

ately accepted to a year-long

internship at the Museum of Modern Art in New York,

where he remained for 22

years. Among other proj-

ects he worked on at MoMA,

where his positions included

deputy director, he was re-

sponsible for producing ma-

jor Matisse and Picasso exhi-

bitions. In 1996, when Martin

Weyl - then the Israel Muse-

um's director - announced

his retirement, Snyder was

offered the job. He fell in love

with the museum very quick-

ly, he says, and recognized

its potential. After making a

brief visit with his wife and

children, Snyder decided to

museum person, because I become very identified with

opposite: To a certain extent,

you are enveloped by this

"It could be that I'm a rare

move to Jerusalem.

but with material modesty."

interior designer Dora Gad. "If what you have is good,

become standard for projects

the way you had hoped."

'The truth is that it's a little

The Israel Museum stands out when it comes to financial support and budgets. Most similar facilities around the country rely on hefty support from municipal authorities, whereas this museum receives a very small percentage of its budget from City Hall. On the other hand, it gets a relatively large chunk of the Ministry of Culture's budget. Like other museums, the Israel Museum also has to raise a lot of funds on its own, from private donors and friends-of-the-museum associations around the

"We are privileged to be in the group of the most active museums in the world," Snyder says. "There are around 60 museums throughout the world, perhaps half of them in the United States and half in the rest of the world, whose directors meet twice a year. We have a very special position within this group – our collections cover a lot more territory than nearly any other museum in the world, and we work with a smaller staff and budget. Even this project – doing it for iust \$100 million is chutzpah."

Known for his fundraising abilities, Snyder managed to raise NIS 342 million for the renewal project, which was augmented by another NIS 70 million from the state coffers. He maintains close ties

friends of the museum – a fact that is reflected, for example, in the decision to publicize major contributions to the museum abroad first, and letting the museum's International Council get a sneak peek at the renewal work a few weeks ago, more than two months before it reopens to the public. "We were celebrating the museum's 45th birthday, and the council is like family," the director explains. "It was a private celebration for the close family."

Cultural continuity

When he became director, Snyder decided it would make sense to raise funds collectively for all the exhibitions launched by the museum in a given year, rather than for each one separately. This method makes it easier to allocate resources for less popular exhibits, but also demands Snyder's hands-on involvement. For example, when the young as-Anish Kapoor arrive Snyder expresses interest in and understanding of the work they are doing: polishing a five-meter-tall stainless-steel sculpture that was commissioned by the museum and is being installed for the reopening outdoors, on the highest

In fact, Snyder insists that his "greatest pleasure is that I can be involved in the

point in the compound.

with foreign contributors and curatorial enterprise. How else can you hope to take so many curatorial perspectives and synthesize them into a single display of cultural continuity? It comes through a process of collegial interaction, and I get

to shepherd this initiative." Snyder prefers to remain vague about his future at the museum. Instead, he returns to the subject of the possibilities he saw when accepting his job, and declares: "The goal now will be to realize fully the potential of the changes we are making. Up until five years ago, we were busy realizing the potential of the museum's original envelope, and we then decided to begin moving onto a new stage. I hope now that we have created a new and renewed platform that will remain valid for a long time."

What is the next goal? Snyder: "This is an exciting moment because we have built a new framework [that can be used] to understand the potential of our premise that everything connects besistants of Indian-born artist tween eras and among cultures. In 2005 when the museum turned 40, we produced an entire year of exhibitions on the subjects of beauty and sanctity, and that was the beginning of our focus on connecting different aspects of material culture from the perspective of our place in the world, in Jerusalem, at the center of the universe.

"Once all of our collections are reinstalled, we will have a completely new platform from which to carry on this exploration of the ways in which cultures communicate and connect. And, in the same way that our architecture now echoes the connections between old and new, it gives us a basis for connecting cultures and cutting across the timeline of history to make use of the collections in new ways."

Doesn't the romantic view of the place, along with the long-term plan, prevent the museum from responding to what is happening in the contemporary arena?

"Our job is to have a broad perspective. And also to be responsive by collecting actively in contemporary art, and this is why we host contemporary exhibitions at Mani House in Tel Aviv and at Ticho House [a branch of the museum in central Jerusalem]. But our real role is to take a broad view, so we do have to restrain ourselves a bit from responding with the blink of an eye we have to see how things develop and how they connect in the bigger picture. The exhibition 'Real Time: Art in Israel 1998-2008,' for example, demonstrated the concept to which we are committed better than, say, a single exhibition of photography from the past year." And what about addressing

politics? "We have a certain distance from contemporary politics, and I think it's important that we have this distance, because our role is to take a broader view. We do not respond spontaneously. For example, during the second intifada we

were a place of beauty and

calm, a place that drew more than 300,000 local visitors each year. This is our job, to create context with a broad view."

Asked whether he encountered particular difficulties the world. and obstacles in the course of his directorship, Snyder replies: "I am a pathologically positive person, so that terms like 'difficulties' and 'obstacles' are not in my vocabulary. Instead my vocabulary uses wordslike'challenges'and'opportunities.' Honestly, when I got here everyone said, 'How can you come here - you don't know what it's like here.' And I said, here is an amazing place

with spectacular modernist and of course it proved to be architecture that overlooks very much worth the effort." an unbelievable landscape, with the power to attract gifts Israel and in Jerusalem? Do to the collections from all over you feel like you belong after 13 years?

"For example, the two exhibitions we did two years ago of works that were lost during World War II [for which Snyder was recently made a Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Ambassador to Israel] – there were so many obstacles to realizing them, and even though people said it wasn't worth the effort, I insisted because of the importance of the subject,

city's fresh food market] or the shuk in the Old City, where people shop for everything from jewelry to fish and meat to shoes, you think: Here's a

"First of all I have to say

that a large part of my life is

the museum, and that was also

the case when I was at MoMA.

We are not Israelis, but it is a

privilege to live here not as an

Israeli, because you have the

opportunity to understand the

country in a way that others do

not, from a deep and different

perspective. Jerusalem to me

is very special. Maybe people

who say that Tel Aviv is the

city that has functioned continuously for over 3,000 years, with Muslims, Christians and Jews. You don't find this kind of complexity anywhere else. For me it represents an How do you see life in invigorating privilege."

center of Israel are right, but Jerusalem is the center of the

world. It was and is a type of bridge, connecting Europe,

Africa and Asia - the center point of these tremendous con-

tinental forces, and I feel the

controversial changes the city

"My focus is not political.

and when you remove that layer you see the intercultural richness underneath. When

> 'Our collections cover a lot more

territory than nearly

any other museum

in the world, and we

work with a smaller

staff and budget.

Even this project –

doing it for just \$100

million is chutzpah.'

you go to Mahane Yehuda [the

power of this intersection." And what about the

is undergoing?

What is good art in your opinion?

"Good art is something that moves you, because it has a beauty that takes your breath away. Similarly, a good museum is a place that moves you and takes your breath away, even if you don't know anything about art. If you are in a place that is preoccupied with culture, and if it moves you and diverts your attention from everything outside – then this is a good place, and I hope that our museum is just like this."



Rendering of the new entrance to the Israel Museum.

A 12-year gestation

Plans for expanding the museum were presented 12 years ago by the late American architect James Ingo Freed. They included moving the parking area from the museum entrance to below ground, building a new fourstory entrance pavilion topped with cupolas, and expansion of original buildings. That plan did not come to fruition – despite the fact that the museum secured \$42 million in funding from the Gruss family – among other reasons, because of opposition from Al Mansfeld, who designed the original building and even won the Israel Prize in architecture for it. The Israel architects association joined Mansfeld's fight, bolstered by professional rules of ethics, which demand that permission be given by the original architect of a structure for any changes made to it. The donor family retracted its gift.

wherever I am; it becomes The new plan for the museum's renewal was a joint a part of me," he explains.
"That's how I was at MoMA, initiative of the Israeli firm Efrat-Kowalsky Architects and the American designer James Carpenter. New buildand that's how I am here, too. ings have been built for visitor services, with a covered You really start to feel a part passage linking these facilities to a new, main entrance of a place if you are a big behall, and the Bronfman Archaeology Wing has been exliever in its power. MoMA is panded. In addition, the permanent collections have a powerful place, which presbeen redesigned and reorganized in the Edmond and Lily ents the crystalline march Safra Fine Arts Wing, and the Jack, Joseph, and Morton through modernism, and the Mandel Wing for Jewish Art and Life. The museum's garden at the heart of the muinfrastructure has also undergone improvements, with seum is somehow the fountotal gallery space now covering around 25,000 square meters, as opposed to 10,000 square meters before. tain from which its modernist spirit flows. Here it's the (Ellie Armon Azoulay)



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