





Meeting... Baranowitz + Kronenberg

Having designed for a wide range of hospitality settings over the past two decades, Tel Aviv-based architects Alon Baranowitz and Irene Kronenberg reveal how storytelling and a focus on people have been key to their success.

Words: Guy Dittrich • Portrait Photography: © Sharon Derhy

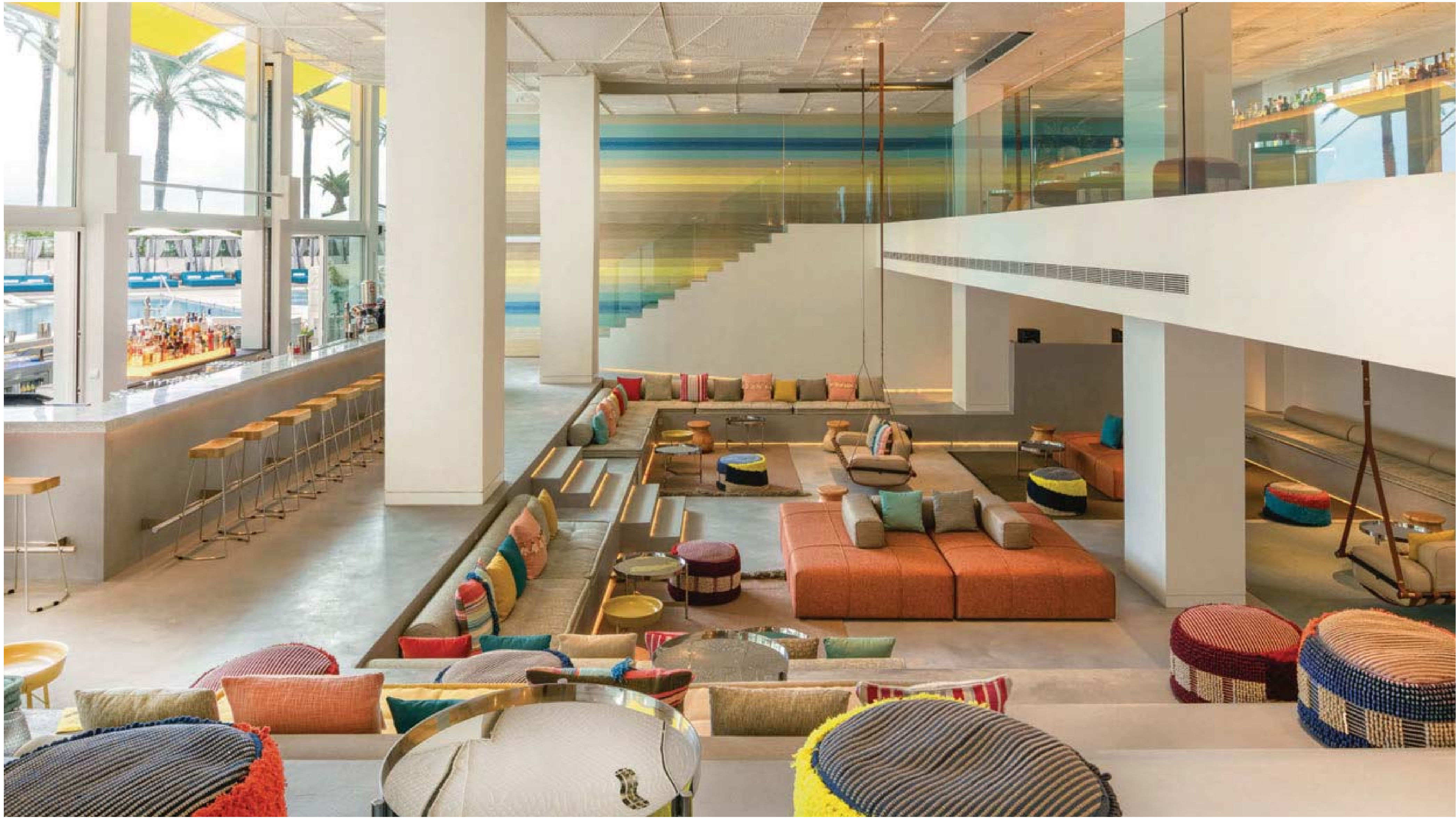
It's difficult to categorise the work of Alon Baranowitz and Irene Kronenberg. Over the several times we have met, the duo describe themselves not as architects, but as storytellers. Anthropologists is another of their preferred identifiers, as is agents of change. Whatever the terminology, they are talented hospitality designers. Partners in business and life, they are intelligent and erudite, engaging and thoughtful. At Sleeper Sessions in Mykonos, they were both delighted with the serendipitous meetings with like-minded souls. Seeing them in their matching Birkenstocks was as endearing as hearing them finish each other's sentences.

The partnership was established with the founding of Baranowitz + Kronenberg in Tel Aviv in 1999. Prior to that, they had both been working in their own practices, with Kronenberg graduating from the Technion School of Interior Design in 1981 and Baranowitz from the Pratt Institute of New York in 1990. Together, their portfolio includes work in the realms of workspace and product design, from chairs to a new form of basin. There is also output in the

retail and cultural sectors, restaurants and bars plus, of course, hotels.

"We know it's a cliché, but we are storytellers," said the pair when we first met in 2019. And stories they duly told to the audience at Sleepover Ibiza, Sleeper's event for hotel innovators. Stories of their work on the island for Sir Hotels and W. Sir Joan is just one of the properties they have completed for Sir Hotels, whose interiors major on stories of personal connection. Yet the storytelling idea began long before this in 1999 with Zozobra, a Far Eastern restaurant in Herzliya, an industrial area about a 15-minute drive from Tel Aviv. Here, Baranowitz and Kronenberg began the transformation from a purely functional approach of fulfilling a brief towards developing a conversation. "I remember the exact place, the chair, the dialogue with the client," explains Baranowitz as if it was last week. Zozobra was one of the first projects the two worked on together; they still talk of it fondly. The restaurant first sparked a creative synergy that continues to drive all that they do today.

Their approach to new projects is novel;



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For W Ibiza (top) and Sir Joan (bottom), Baranowitz + Kronenberg overcame strict planning restrictions to produce designs that speak to the laid-back, bohemian lifestyle of the Balearic isle

conversations are not necessarily about aesthetics, but knowledge and context. The duo see these two items helping to avoid the trap of repetition. Similarly, they try hard not to come too readily to solutions, fearing the easy answer is usually not the best. They describe their methodology as the “down-up” approach. “We dig into the future and by the act of digging we go through many layers until we see the light at the other end,” explains Baranowitz.

The playfulness of their narrative can be seen in the design of Tapas Ahad Ha’am, a restaurant that opened in Tel Aviv back in 2010. The interiors are described using a recipe format of ‘ingredients’, including 20 different kinds of typically colourful Spanish tiles, sturdy wooden chairs – no matter what kind – and a handful of simple yet robust tables. This is followed by the ‘preparation’, which involves ‘pouring’ the ingredients into the container – the restaurant space – before adding the finishing flourishes. The recipe narrative is apt, as cooking is close to their hearts and shown in their love for restaurant projects.

But it was a bar, Gorky, that set the designers on their way. The owner of Zozobra requested they design the “most upscale bar in Tel Aviv”. Having accepted the challenge, the pair became anxious about their lack of specific experience. I questioned this modesty, suggesting that their restaurant portfolio surely gave them sufficient knowledge. “It’s different,” retorts Baranowitz of bar design. “A different galaxy,” adds Kronenberg, explaining that whilst restaurants are open to all, bars are very specific.

To overcome this perceived weakness, they hopped off to New York and visited 24 bars in three days to get some ideas. “People were looking at us quite strangely,” relates Baranowitz. “We were sitting at the bar with a notebook and sketching at all hours of the night.” To which Kronenberg adds: “We didn’t have iPhones back then so we couldn’t take photos.” They go on to talk about the different energies

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of each bar and the people in them. Here, we see the anthropology coming through. A focus is on people; how staff efficiently operate the space and how guests move through it. People are the driver in a Baranowitz and Kronenberg world that is free of prior conceptions.

A tipping point came in 2008 with the opening of Momo, billed as ‘one of the first cosmopolitan restaurants in Amsterdam’ with its East-meets-West cuisine. The restaurant was the first project of Yossi Eliahoo and Liran Wizman, co-founders of The Entourage Group – a creator of high-end culinary concepts. The success of this initial collaboration has seen an ongoing relationship with Wizman, including the design of the first-ever Sir hotel, Sir Albert in Amsterdam in 2013. Here, the design narrative was based on the concept of a 21st century aristocrat – a well-travelled gentleman of the world who populates his mansion with artefacts collected on his travels.

Sir Albert opened under the umbrella of

the Europe Hotels Private Collection, now re-branded Sircle Collection, founded by Wizman who is described by Kronenberg as “a true visionary”. Their successful collaboration continued with the 2015 opening of W Amsterdam, an asset management deal of Wizman’s. Here, Baranowitz and Kronenberg looked to the history of the hotel’s former post office and telephone exchange building for inspiration. The tolerant culture of Amsterdam is reflected in the honesty of the materials palette, which features poured concrete, epoxy resin, steel and brass tubes – 5km of them in fact, reflecting the telephone exchange cables.

Prior to designing their second W hotel in 2020 came several other projects, including many restaurants in a portfolio that exceeds 30 to date. Sir Victor in Barcelona sees the transformation of the former Hotel Omm based on interpretations of life at the junction of mountains and sea. The property also includes Mr Porter, a modern take on the steakhouse and just one of the many restaurants they have designed for The Entourage Group. There is another Mr Porter in W Amsterdam, along with the grand brasserie style of The Duchess and upscale burger option, The Butcher. The latter also arrived in Sir Joan and Sir Savigny in Berlin, as well as a standalone outlet in Manchester. Baranowitz and Kronenberg’s designs for the Isakaya restaurants meanwhile, serving Asian-Japanese fusion cuisine, can be found at Sir Albert and Sir Joan in Ibiza.

And it is on Ibiza, the small party island that has slowly been reinventing its existing hotel stock, where the duo’s site-specific approach comes into its own. At Sir Joan, a tricky roadside location was deftly handled, and Baranowitz and Kronenberg believe the strict planning restrictions required them to be more creative, eventually resulting in a better product. The 38-key hotel follows a design narrative that pays homage to the yachting lifestyle of this port neighbourhood. Along the coast at W Ibiza,

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situated in Santa Eulalia del Rio, Kronenberg saw a “mission impossible” with extremely low ceilings. A major intervention was needed, and a strong storyline followed from their investigation. This centred on the image of a naked woman viewed from behind with her arms spread open to the sea, the wind and the sky. A poetic ode that speaks of a lifestyle language melding the bohemian, flower-power image with the island’s mystique and intrigue.

The re-use and re-purposing of existing buildings is something that excites Baranowitz and Kronenberg. They are keen to develop dialogues with buildings and in their view, the older ones have more to say. Baranowitz sees such sustainability reflected best in the word ‘caring’ – both for one another and for our shared environment. The preservation of an existing structure being clearly more environmentally friendly when compared to a newbuild replacement.

Talk of sustainability in this vein leads to another hotel-related idea, Co-Hito, a project that illustrates the pair’s search for change. Developed in 2018, Co-Hito allows city spaces to be used more effectively. Guestrooms in existing hotel stock would be converted

to hybrid spaces that move between workspaces during the day to sleeping quarters at night, essentially built around a disappearing bed amongst other tricks. “This resonates with sustainability in that we are not adding a square metre in the city and the hotels can run up to 120 and 130% occupancy,” notes Baranowitz.

The future for Baranowitz and Kronenberg includes numerous projects closer to home, as Israel goes through something of a hotel boom, particularly in Tel Aviv. Here is Dizengoff 99 within one of the buildings of the White City area of preserved Bauhaus architecture. There’s also Pinsker on the city’s most important piazza; a luxurious property to be managed by Isrotel alongside high-end residential apartments; and Rothschild 24 Hotel, inspired by the spirit and vision of Baron de Rothschild. Further afield comes The Migdal, a resort on the Sea of Galilee in the north of Israel, which references the religious connotations of the region – a story in its own right. These five hotel projects, along with many more bars, restaurants and others, will deliver further opportunities for storytelling. For born storytellers, writing the next chapter is what it’s all about.

Sir Victor in Barcelona sees the transformation of the former Hotel Omm based on interpretations of life at the junction of mountains and sea



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