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Building 'The Eternal Succa'

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Israeli artists Sala-manca construct a succa from the materials of a Beduin home. The structure goes on view at the Israel Museum this month

In July 2014 Diego Rotman and Lea Mauas, two Israeli artists who operate under the alias Sala-manca, began a process that involved the purchase of a Beduin house, the materials of which they intended to use for the building of a succa.

The structure came to be named "The Eternal Succa" and was recently acquired by the Israel Museum.

Rotman and Mauas are the directors of the Mamuta Art and Media Center at Hansen House in Jerusalem. Previously based in Ein Kerem, they have built up a reputation as an art collective of integrity and commitment, curating and often participating in quality exhibitions involving collaborative efforts with many artists.

In anticipation of the upcoming Succot, Ayelet Dror, the director of Hansen House, offered Rotman and Mauas a modest budget to build a public succa for visitors to the compound.

"Initially I was unsure if I was interested," said Rotman. "Usually it involves doing something that is merely decorative, which is not something that interests us. It was important for us to connect the idea of Succot with present-day Israel.

"The holiday celebrates the Jewish people leaving Egypt and dwelling in makeshift housing, in a way similar to the plight of the modern-day refugee. We thought the Beduin of the desert and their situation closely embodied the idea of Succot. The question for us was how to represent, in the visual form of a succa, the status of a refugee in a contemporary Israeli context," he continued.

Rotman and Mauas discussed their idea of bringing a Beduin home to Hansen House with other artists, two of whom, Yeshaiau Rabinowitz and Itamar Mendes-Flohr, joined the project. They then contacted Alon Cohen-Lifshitz, an architect involved with "Bimkom," a non-profit organization whose focus is social and political issues connected with urban planning.

Lifshitz recommended the collective speak with Abu Suleiman, the Hebrew-speaking representative of the Al-Korshan family, members of the Jahalin community, a Beduin tribe.

"We traveled to the Judean Desert to meet with Abu Suleiman and were hosted in the traditional manner in a Beduin tent. Suleiman told us the story of the Jahalin tribe, how they had been uprooted between the years of 1948-50 from their lands in the Negev and relocated to the West

Bank.

"We explained our idea to him, that we wanted to buy a Beduin home, remake it as a succa and tell the story of its origins. He liked the idea, but would first need to speak with the muktar, the leader of the village," said Rotman.

The transaction was given the go-ahead and completed in a somewhat clandestine manner, because the tribe wanted to replace the structure being sold and put another in its place.

Many Beduin families are not granted planning permission in the West Bank, often resulting in them building illegal, temporary living quarters. If the transaction were carried out under cover of darkness they would be able to build a home in the same place as the former structure without the Israeli Civil Administration realizing what had happened.

The artists agreed to the family's request.

On the agreed-upon night the family were paid the sum of NIS 6,000 and the home, constructed out of wood, iron, tin and plastic – was dismantled, its parts carefully numbered, and transported back to Jerusalem.

"It took about three days to build the succa, which we reconstructed exactly as found. It was kosher and built according to halacha (Jewish religious law). Inside we placed mattresses and clothes that we had bought from the Beduin and a few decorations belonging to our children," said Rotman.

"The reactions from religious and secular visitors to the succa were interesting and I think it raised questions for both about the holiday. Maybe it was because when you entered the succa you got the feeling that it was a real house inhabited by real people; it had the smell of the desert. At the same time the overlapping of the two realities, Jewish and Beduin, was strong."

Over the course of the holiday period the artists hosted a series of talks in the succa relating to the situation of the Beduin and to public housing in Israel. They then approached the Israel Museum with a view to selling the structure as an artwork, which would be accompanied by a video documenting their working process.

Amitai Mendelsohn, the museum's curator of Israeli art, has been following Sala-manca's work for a long time and is primarily responsible for bringing the Eternal Succa to the museum.

"I like their way of thinking, how they deal with art and how they became an integral part of the Jerusalem art scene. They've chosen to remain in this city while most artists move to Tel Aviv," said Mendelsohn.

"What I find interesting about this piece is how it has its own life, in the sense that it has transitioned from Beduin shack to succa and finally to an artwork housed in a museum.

"They have turned one thing into another, and shifted its context. You can look at the piece as 'ready-made,' but it's also a political and social act. By acknowledging the life of the Beduin and its hardship it has, I think, opened people up to a more universal way of experiencing the Jewish holiday of Succot," he continued. "It also poses questions such as what makes something an art piece, a question that has been going on for over a hundred years," he said.

Rotman and Mauas's idea to remake a Beduin home in the form of a succa is an original reimagining of an ancient tradition and, to the knowledge of all involved, a first.

Ironically, the sale of the structure to the Israel Museum has resulted in the preservation and conservation of what was originally an illegal dwelling. Half of the proceeds of the sale were given to the Al-Korshan family.

Sala manca's artwork is conceptual in nature. The shack turned succa turned artwork is not

Sara-Manca's artwork is conceptual in nature. The shack-turned-succa-turned-artwork is not aesthetically pleasing or pretty, nor was it intended to be.

Is the Eternal Succa a subversive work or act? If this was the intention the artists might not have realized their aim. But in their engagement with the "other," and the recreation of a dwelling that crosses cultural boundaries and political borders, they might have created something more meaningful in its stead.

The Eternal Succa can be seen in the upcoming exhibition "We The People," opening on September 20. For more info visit www.imj.org.il/en.



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