

PHOENIX RISING

MAMILLA HOTEL

Text by Gwen Lee
Photography by Amit Geron

Opening one year after Santiago Calatrava's 2008 "Chord" Light Railway bridge, the Moshe Safdie-built and Piero Lissoni-designed Mamilla Hotel has become a fundamental symbol of the modernisation of Jerusalem. **Gwen Lee** reports on the new hotel that has risen from the ashes of Israel's infamous mid-twentieth-century combat zone.

"Moshe Safdie's work in Jerusalem is less an architectural oeuvre than a saga."

—*Moshe Safdie* Vol. 1, Paul Goldberger

Newly minted as the Best New Hotel in the 2011 Wallpaper* Design Awards, ranked fifth in *Fortune* magazine's Top 10 Business Hotel list last year, and consistently feted as one of the world's top hotels by Condé Nast *Traveler*, success seems to come easy to the Mamilla Hotel in Jerusalem. Yet, unbeknownst to many of the guests who amble blissfully through its luxurious interiors, the hotel's gestation was anything but effortless. In fact, it took more than two decades to come into being from when its location was first identified in the Mamilla master plan.

One must first understand the history of Mamilla to appreciate the beauty of the hotel. Originally developed in the late nineteenth century as a Jewish-Arab business district, Mamilla is located outside the southwest corner of Jerusalem, running along the western part of the Old City walls. Turned into a combat zone between the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the 1967 Six-Day War, Mamilla degenerated into a no man's land with many of its buildings destroyed by soldiers and guerrillas. The neighbourhood went into sharp decline—civilians avoided it for fear of being shot by snipers or attacked by the Arab Legionnaires throwing stones from the Old City walls above. Mamilla became a slum, occupied only by impoverished families of new blue-collared immigrants who had no better options. After 1967, the Old City and Mamilla came under the Israeli government which set about charting a new master plan for the revitalisation of the city.

Safdie's involvement with Mamilla was serendipitous, having been invited to Jerusalem initially for the purpose of designing a building similar to Habitat 67. The Israeli Habitat was never built, but Safdie became involved in the masterplanning of Mamilla, alongside architect Gilbert Weil. The programme for the 28-acre site included condominiums, a parking garage, public gardens, a hotel and a pedestrian marketplace. It also called for large-scale demolition of existing buildings which was met with massive controversies. After 16 years of political indecision—during which Safdie took the chance to refine his concept—a revised plan was drawn up and a second hotel, which was to become Mamilla Hotel, was added to the plan.

In 1986, Ladbroke Group from the United Kingdom was designated as the developer. The project was revived, but protests by religious groups continued, resulting in a long and painful construction process. In 1994, Al-Rov of Tel Aviv partnered up with Ladbroke to implement the first hotel—the David Citadel Hotel (then known as Jerusalem Hilton) and subsequently the second luxury hotel—Mamilla Hotel.

The rebuilding of Mamilla was completed in 2009 and the Mamilla Hotel opened in the same year to much fanfare. After more than four decades of waiting, negotiations and perseverance, Safdie had finally completed this massive undertaking.



Located alongside the Alrov Mamilla Avenue—Jerusalem's new shopping and entertainment experience—the Mamilla Hotel now commands magnificent views of the Old City walls, the Tower of David and Jaffa Gate.

"The Mamilla Hotel is a quintessentially urban place. It is a combination of historic buildings and contemporary architecture rising out of the network of alleys which connect the walled and the new cities of Jerusalem. It combines the pattern of the old with cutting edge modernity," says Safdie. "It enjoys great views of the Old City and is designed to be in the center of action. The Rooftop outdoor venue is bound to become one of Jerusalem's favorite meeting places."

Heeding Jerusalem law which dictates that all new construction utilises Jerusalem Stone to integrate them with the ancient walls and buildings in the city, Safdie designed the hotel's façade to bring out the beauty of the light-hued local limestone with clean and modern detailing. Together with Piero Lissoni's intimate and masterful interiors, Safdie succeeds in weaving together a series of spaces that merges the public and private domains. A large expanse of skylight illuminates the interior circulation area, turning it into an interior street populated with cafés, lounges and interaction areas. Wandering through this thoroughfare punctuated by flights of minimalist black metal staircases, one is captivated by the shadows cast by the sun on the rough-textured stone walls around. It is as if one has been transported back into an ancient Jerusalem street.

"Our hotel should act as a storyteller—a window through which guests can see and experience the very best of Jerusalem," says Chief Operations Officer Massimo Ianni.

It is obvious that Mamilla's story is an eclectic one. Lissoni's play with the furnishing sees him pairing contemporary with antique; Chinese pieces next to Italian ones; and matted surfaces with glittery tiles. This results in a rich and detailed aesthetic that delights even the most jaded traveller.

The hotel has 194 guest rooms, all of which feature dark wooden floors, bedside walls of exposed large Jerusalem Stone blocks, large metal headboards, and bespoke furniture. The bathrooms, with their deep, cascading bathtubs, are installed with liquid-crystal bathroom walls that frost over at the touch of a button to ensure privacy for the guests.

But the hotel does not just appeal to international guests. Since its opening, the Mamilla Hotel has become a destination for locals seeking to grab a quick coffee from the Espresso Bar located in the elegant lobby or a meal at the Mamilla Rooftop which boasts of a panoramic view of the Old City. For drinks, the Mirror Bar is the ultimate destination with its chocolate-coloured furnishings and seductive lighting scheme.

A product of the controversial rebuilding of the war-torn Mamilla district in which it now stands as a beacon of prosperity, the Mamilla Hotel is indeed an affirmation of the saying: "Good things come to those who wait." ▀

2. Safdie succeeds in weaving together a series of spaces that merges the public and private domains.

3. Wandering through this thoroughfare punctuated by flights of minimalist black metal staircases, one is captivated by the shadows cast by the strong sun on the rough textured stone walls around.

For more information, visit:

Mamilla Hotel: www.mamillahotel.com

Moshe Safdie Architects: www.msafdie.com

Lissoni Associati: www.lissoniassociati.com



2