

Ashkelon mayor: New arts facility to be 'architectural icon'

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By Noam Dvir

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A new performing arts center, designed by one of France's preeminent architects, is coming to Ashkelon and will boast two halls, plus space for music and dance schools. Manuelle Gautrand will be designing the 4,500-square-meter, NIS 60-million center, which will also feature a public square for outdoor performances. Gautrand will work together with architect Batya Swirsky Malul of Holon.

The center will have two separate wings that will house a dance school and a municipal conservatory. There will be two auditoriums on the ground floor - one seating 500 people and the other 150 - thus providing the city with medium-size performance venues that complement the city's existing Heikhal Hatarbut, which seats 900. Construction will begin in about a year.

The exterior of the structure will resemble a collection of boxes, covered with perforated metallic sheeting that will lend the building the aura of an unusual sculpture. Gautrand chose to build the classrooms and workshops on top of each other, and imbue the spaces with a feeling of volume that is visible from the outside.

On the top floor there will be a lookout point with an open terrace from which one can view Ashkelon and its environs.

Gautrand explained that her design was meant to create a "lively, festive place," but this declaration does not exactly correlate with the center's location: far from the downtown area. Though the city had originally planned to erect the facility in a more central place, it decided to move it to give it more space and visibility.

Ashkelon Mayor Benny Vaknin said he hopes the new center will be "an architectural icon that will draw people from all over the country and the world."

Ashkelon's future arts center is the latest in a long line of public and private projects currently being planned in the country by foreign architects, among them the new Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design's campus in Jerusalem (Sanaa Architects of Tokyo), a residential tower on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv (Richard Meier of New York) and the Safra Center for Brain Sciences building at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Givat Ram campus (Norman Foster of London).

Recently, prominent local architects have protested the decision by Yad Hanadiv-The Rothschild Foundation to invite a number of "star" architects, four of them foreign, directly into the second round of a design competition for the new National Library building in Jerusalem, while Israeli firms must compete in a first round.

On Sunday, the National Library construction company announced the panel of judges for the first round of the competition: Spanish architect Prof. Luis Fernandez-Galiano (chairman); Prof. Rafael Moneo, winner of the Pritzker Prize, also from Spain; Italian architect Massimiliano Fuksas; Prof. Elinor Barzaki and architect Gabi Schwartz.