THE RECONSTRUCTION OF BEIRUT: A DIALOGUE ACROSS BORDERS

Khaled Asfour reflects on a recent symposium and exhibition.

"The duration of the war in Beirut has 'sophisticated' the means of sustenance, and, in turn, those have managed to muffle the impact of an explosion ... and to face terror with sheer hedonism".

Exhibition leaflet, 'Demarcating Lines'.

There is now hope that Beirut can return to a situation of normality. The 'means of sustenance' that were sharpened by the war should help to build peace and to permeate the barriers between conflicting factions. With this hope in mind, a group of young Lebanese architects organized a one-day symposium and six week exhibition entitled 'Demarcating Lines' at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Cambridge, USA) during June and July, 1991. In October the exhibition will move to the American University of Beirut.

What can restore normality in Beirut? An international group of intellectuals and designers, participating in the event, presented various scenarios. Nevertheless, there was a consensus that the city should neither be perceived as a group of autonomous non-communicating clusters, nor as a homogeneous whole that overlooks individual characters of the sub-cultures. "They were ideas about how people and groups relate to one another", said William Porter.

Some participants translated this 'neither-nor' situation by dwelling on what is common among the sub-cultures. They sought common grounds, perceptions, and characteristics. Tarek Kazzaz emphasized the notion of consumerism as a generic theme in the culture. A poster designed by him shows the billboard intact, despite the surrounding destruction; highlighting the activity of buying and selling as a cultural mechanism that helped cushion the surrounding destruction; highlighting the activity of buying and selling as a cultural mechanism that helped cushion the tension of war. Consumerism as an incentive for gathering, and a magnet for other activities such as recreation and business, was captured by Ousama Kabbani in an idealized project located in the dividing line between east and west Beirut. This area, known as the green line, formerly no-man's land, a battle-front that invoked all meanings of hatred, now becomes an agent of reconciliation, a meeting place that can re-establish a lost dialogue, or perhaps, an old friendship.

Through a series of public institutions and parks that resonate with various sections of the city, the citizen is encouraged to walk in this strip of land, enjoying once again a sense of civility. Similarly, Shirine Boulos has developed another common ground, the seaport, as an attractive focal point for various social groups.

In their search for common perceptions the architects also explored the collective memory of society. Robert Saliba and architecture students from the American University of Beirut have researched the image of the city as perceived by different age groups. Mental maps demonstrated the sharp difference in perception between the war generation and the previous one, underlining the need for reconciliation between groups of not only different background but also different ages.

What do we learn from these projects? If the ugliness of war focused on dissension, the rebuilding of Beirut should start from points of agreement, no matter how few or small in scale. They are, perhaps, even points of indetermination. Or better still, they can be re-invented. The war managed to remove some constraints and dislocated others, and so paved the way for innovative solutions. At least, it offered the opportunity to tackle chronic problems, that were inherently convoluted, through the accretion of cultural predicaments over time. From this perspective, Basim Halabi and Bizhan Azad assessed the coastal informal settlement of Ouzai. Through a fiscal impact analysis they concluded that the neighbourhood has potential for housing and economic growth. Abdul-Halim Jabr looked into a problematic area, southern Beirut, where the airport and the surrounding communities are constraining each other's growth. By proposing to relocate the airport to the sea, he allowed for upgrading and development in the area that can enhance the economy of the city.

What these projects imply is the necessary reciprocity between the central authority and private interest: or as Peter Rowe called it, the balance between the 'master plan' and the 'projects'. To ignore this dialogue will lead to a complete failure of planning, as is shown by the urban history of Beirut. Jade Tabet demonstrated the impracticality of Eocchard's Master Plan of 1962 because it ignored the needs of different sub-cultures.

Yet the dialogue in which great hopes are invested to re-establish normality cannot be initiated by drawings alone. As Samir Khalaf suggested, there could be an intermediary authority to act as a link between the government and various sub-cultures, which can act as mediator during the rebuilding of Beirut today? Can they be the intellectuals of the culture?

This middle group, or what I would call 'dialogue brokers', can assume another role in the society: they can mediate between the flickers of hope and scars of war. Flickers of hope are captured by Amir Kalantari, Rodolphe el-Khoury, Monica de Leon and Nader Tehrani, who celebrated the social cohesiveness amplified during the war in a new apartment typology. Scars of war are commemorated by Joumana Ghantous, who converted a Holiday Inn into a vertical cemetery. To what extent does the culture need to simultaneously remember and forget the ugliness of war so as to continue to maintain the state of normality? The answer, I believe, is in the hands of the 'dialogue brokers'.

Design and drawings for Plan 1 courtesy of Abdul-Halim Jabr, Beirut, Lebanon

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

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REPORT

1. Jahr, development of southern Beirut with a new airport in the sea.

2. Kazzaz: the billboard, an icon for consumption.

3. Tehrani et al: a new apartment typology where the landing is no longer a corridor but a central space for interaction between neighbours.

4. Kabbani: green line development; was a battle front and is now an agent for reconciliation.

5. Boulos: the seaport development; a common ground for various sub-cultures.

6. AUB students and Saliba: image of the city as perceived by the war generation.

7. AUB students and Saliba: image of the city as perceived by the pre-war generation.