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THE GRAND THEATRE QUARTER

EXPERIENCING PUBLIC SPACE, BEING INSPIRED BY CULTURE

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REFLECTION PAPER

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HERITAGE
IDENTITY
THEATRE QUARTER
CULTURE 3.0
PUBLIC SPACE

The massive blast of August 2020 severely damaged Beirut's architectural heritage. It is in the very city centre that most of this asset is concentrated, but since the end of the 1975-1990 Civil War citizens have been denied access to this area.

Here stands the former Grand Theatre, which will be the epicentre of a new artistic quarter that will allow all Beirutis to re-establish a cultural presence in their city centre.

Two layers are analysed during this process. First, the Lebanese theatrical scene, which must rely on the flourishing film industry and tourism to recover. Second, the globalised mainstream of Culture 3.0, that has broadened the basin of culture producers and made casual public space act as a proper theatrical stage.

4.1 RESEARCH AND DESIGN

Once the actual graduation project design is completed, it is useful to look back and reflect on the relationship between research and design, if the evolution of the one into the other was effective and profitable. There are two sections of this research, which were applied respectively in two aspects of the project. There is a factual research, accompanied by a substantial amount of data. In this case, this regarded the state of art of theatre and entertainment industry in Lebanon and the history and current conditions of the main element, the Grand Theatre. This first piece was displayed as a major part of the design brief: it made it possible to determine how many and which spaces were needed in the

project area and how to develop a building from the existing artifacts. The second part is instead more theoretical, relating to the cultural and social situation of the Lebanese nation and the contemporary global lifestyle. This second type leaves more room for interpretation and can therefore create divergences of views in the actual architectural design. For example, which restoration theory should be implemented on a building like the Grand Theatre, testimony of a glorious past in Beirut, but today reduced to a state of ruin? Or again, how to create a space where contemporary artistic and cultural manifestations can flourish? How is it possible to welcome the energies of this city?

In this sense, The Grand Theatre Quarter addresses what Complex Projects Gradua-



Figure 1: current appearance of a neighbouring street.

tion Studio intends to deal with: a project is not a mere aesthetic or functional fact, but it is the result of a much larger multitude of layers deriving from diverse inputs. For instance, there are urban conditions. Hence, the situation in Beirut - which has had no city centre for a quarter of a century - is really exemplary. There are then social conditions: think of how these people are struggling to express themselves and to integrate as one united people. In the context of Beirut, the political component is very relevant too: how to shelter from a tax system that harasses theatre and cultural activities in general? What virtuous examples can one look to in order not to be crushed by this unfavorable situation? Complex Projects Graduation Studio also intends to deal with buildings that are 'complex' in terms of function and size. The Grand Theatre Quarter suits this requisite: all these external features become concrete elements (flows, views, consequentia- lity of- and relationships between spaces).

The theory of restoration and the case-studies relating to the expansion of the Grand Theatre are independent of the function and geographical context. It is all about positioning oneself within a line of thought or contemporary architectural current. Again, how can research help predict what will happen in this space, which today is nothing more than an urban void? Case-studies can help to a certain extent. Therefore, a method and comprehensive research of the more abstract and intangible social and cultural structure also comes into play.

4.2 FIELD RELEVANCE

Based on these assumptions, the graduation project assumes a wider social, professional, and scientific relevance. First of all, Beirut represents a paradigmatic case of a city whose urban and social fabric is the re-

sult of multiple catastrophic events. Not only the blast of August 2020, but also the previous Civil War. Situations like these can be transposed more generally into contexts superficially labeled as 'difficult', where there is an attempt to necessarily carry out a reconstruction and to return to a decent urban life. In a scenario of destruction and war, the main theme of this project - culture - takes on particular relevance. Culture has always been what has allowed cities and peoples to save themselves, not by forgetting the past, but by metabolising and assuming the awareness of what was in order to gain a strong future momentum. The Grand Theatre Quarter also assumes relevance as it is proposed as an almost pioneering case of an architectural complex capable of accommodating the contemporary cultural form. If until now theatres have been switched on only for a couple of hours a week, what form will they take in a present and future where each of us is eager and able to absorb art and culture twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week? Finally, dealing with the Grand Theatre is particularly relevant for the architectural profession, which will increasingly face restoration and reuse rather than a construction from scratch. Then, what does the identity of a historical artifact consist of? That is: what is essential to keep and adapt to modernity?

However, this path was not completely linear and problem-free. In particular, given the difficulty in traveling during this last period, it was not possible to test directly on the site what was being produced miles away. It was not a problem of finding appropriate sources, but rather of the possibility of perceiving first-hand the troubled situation in Beirut and its city centre. On the other hand, the profession of architect nowadays presents - and perhaps requires - the ability to capture and work with the 'spirit of a place' without actually experimenting it.



