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THE GRAND THEATRE QUARTER

RE-ESTABLISHING A CULTURAL PRESENCE IN CENTRAL BEIRUT

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HERITAGE
IDENTITY
THEATRE QUARTER
CULTURE 3.0
PUBLIC SPACE

The huge 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.

Introduction

It took only few seconds to destroy 40% of the city of Beirut on August 4, 2020. That mere few seconds was enough to determine the near fate of the Lebanese capital's urban and social framework and its architectural asset. Years and years of accumulated cultural heritage fell again into total disrepair. A heritage that in the last century alone saw an accelerated series of events and changes, from the Ottomans to the French, from the Green Line to the Construction Boom. A few seconds erased a portion of this past, badly compromised the present, and brought future aspirations back to their knees. The current scenario is still a frighten reminescent of the infamous 1975-1990 Civil War.

Looking at Beirut today, the romantic notion of resilience appears very forced. Facing a tormented population, that is preparing to challenge an unknown and unimaginable future, it is natural to ask how much these people and their culture could resist before reaching a no-return breaking point. The destruction of a city is not just a physical question: the Civil War and the explosion shattered the heart of Lebanese ideology and culture, undermining the very reasons for which the nation itself lived. It is true that Beirut has always been the embodiment of optimism and the coveted destination of all those Lebaneses who over time have, despite themselves, given birth to a diaspora. However, the Beirut of today is not the Beirut of yesterday and its collective memory is in serious danger.

Problem statement

Beirut has been settled for almost 5,000 years. As the Lebanese capital city has kept evolving, it has continued to leave traces. It is not hard at all to be aware of the beauty of Ottoman and French rule-era architecture looking at some old postcards. However, in the wake of the blast on August 4, 2020, many concerns have been growing about how to safeguard what remains of that architectural heritage.

85% of ancient valuable buildings have already been lost in the three decades since the Civil War ended, as remiss state protection allowed developers to tear them down and replace them with modern skyscrapers. This was the answer to what Beirut demanded after years of clashes. Now, many fear that structural damage done by the explosion may be used as an excuse to destroy the few that *were lucky enough to have survived both the Civil War and the subquent real-estate frenzy* (Stoughton, 2020).

Often these buildings are isolated amid new high-rise apartment blocks, however, *they represent a complete urban fabric that is flawless and coherent* (Stoughton, 2020). Their glamour is faded by the mark of time, from broken shutters and windows to the scars left by bullets and shelling, but their spatial and symbolic potential is still safe. How can we make this potential to perform again? The National Library is a great example of how a restoration-plus-enlargement intervention can make this happen. The recent protests show how people are willing to re-inhabit public heritage buildings like the former Grand Theatre. These are *buildings that represent the possibilities of what the city can still be. They give it hope, and remind of a thriving Beirut* (Stoughton, 2020). Connected to these spontaneous manifestations there is the wider popular need to have back a political and cultural centrality.

Little was left of the glittering Paris of the East before the explosion, and even less has remained following the catastrophic blast. However, the main part of the architectural evidence of Beirut's history is still concentrated in the centre, where the soul of the whole city should expresses itself to the maximum power. Is it possible to affirm this even in front of a deserted city centre? Let's consider this: a historical centre is defined as *an active human settlement strongly conditioned by a physical structure originating from the past and recognisable as representing the evolution of its people* (Mutal, 2012, p. 1). A necessary condition for it to happen is that *the historical centre is inhabited and forms a living cultural nucleus* (Mutal, 2012, p. 1). According to this, *all abandoned area and monumental or archaeological complexes are excluded, because they lack an organised and continuous sociality* (Mutal, 2012, p. 1). Hence, Beirut Central District is the expression of the current status quo in Lebanon. However, it is not possible to say that it expresses the cultural presence of the inhabitants as well, as they do not set foot here. The cultural rebirth of Beirut must start from its very centre, hence the conservation of its formal identity is of vital importance.

Research question

Dealing with buildings such as the Grand Theatre is not just something poetic, emotional, or nostalgic. They have a purely spatial potential. In a 1990 study by the American University, a sample of people younger than twenty-five years old showed a faded knowledge of how the city centre of Beirut used to look before the Lebanese Civil War. There is a kind of amnesia regarding the city

Figure 01: interior of the Grand Theatre in Beirut. https://www.jameskerwinphotographic.com

identity: there are no monuments or museums to warn of those atrocious years and the objects on display at the National Museum are all more than five centuries old. Actually, after the war ended in 1990, *Solidere destroyed a contrasting environment in favour of a picture-perfect site. Instead of being the gathering place of all Beirutis from all backgrounds, this is now an exclusive space for appropriate people only* (Makarem, 2012).

Only the built heritage retain the memory of the Paris of the East, thanks to it, it is possible to re-establish an artistic occupancy in a depressed area. How a new architectural development centred on the Grand Theatre can perform a role in re-establishing a cultural presence in Central Beirut? What is the history and appearance of this object and its surroundings? What restoration theory to implement and what form to give to the relationship between the Old and the New?

It must be considered as well that the new theatre will be part of both the Lebanese and global cultural scene. What are the current cultural issues, the mainstream, the emerging ideas, and how could the theatre become home to such a cultural network? The demands and production of visual culture have been rapidly increasing: the personal computing revolution made professional skills relatively cheap and accesible. *Culture 3.0 is characterized by the explosion of the pool of producers, so that it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between cultural producers and users* (Sacco, 2011, p. 7). People interact on the basis of non market-mediated exchanges; regarding the theatre, the scene have been moved from the theatre edifice itself to the public space.

Current state of the art

The research contemplates the analysis of layers. At first, there is an investigation of the heritage layer in Beirut and specifically in its historical nucleus. After documenting the history and the appearance of the Grand Theatre, one can move on to sources that help designing in a complex context like this one. For instance, let's consider 'Planning in the face of deep divisions: a view from Beirut, Lebanon' by Angelique Chettiparamb and Christine Mady.

The historical layer goes hand in hand with the cultural one. The divisive conflicts that have been the fil rouge of the modern history of Lebanon have made basic notions such as 'nation' and 'national' meaningless. However, if we compare the current situation of Lebanese culture to the one of the 1990s, the first one appears much more vibrant. There has been a proliferation of new productions, groups, and theatrical spaces, but this contant progress comes from civil society, which has little or no support from government bodies.

There are some factors pointed out in Mona Mehri's 'Theatre and performance landscapes in Lebanon' that enhance this state of the art. There is no national theatre and there is only one venue made publicly available, the UNESCO Palace; the employees of the cultural sector owe 45% of their revenues in taxes; funds come almost entirely from abroad. This lack of funds actually means that small self-sufficent private theatres simply rent their spaces to guest companies, without having any contribution in the creation of plays and the structuring of a unified and/or shared programme. Hence, since 2014, individual productions and performances have represented the predominant component. This includes monodrama, storytelling, lecture performances, and comedy. Although the theatre scene in Lebanon is quite vivid and dynamic, there is very little documentation that critically reflects on its productions and aesthetics favouring the creation of a debate and the recognition of collective development of certain artistic trends. Furthermore, there is a drastic lack of the central figure of the 'playwrighter'.

However, on the other hand, this circumstance has led to an abundance of shows based on the translation of foreign texts, making the Lebanese scene very international. Another positive impact is the large possibility of experimentation allowed by the absence of this sort of overall system. For instance, there is a tendency to relocate: *we often see productions that have had several tours outside the city of Beirut. They have been touring all over Lebanon presenting their work in peripheral cities, provinces, and rural areas* (Salloukh, 2019). The Lebanese theatre is therefore extremely democratic, as well demonstrated by the work of an ensemble such as Zoukak. This collective uses the theatrical space as a social and psychological support tool, thus directing its production towards an educational perspective. The analysis of the contemporary and global theatrical architecture layer deals with all these tendencies.

Design ambitions

The benchmarking of significant precedents is the main source of knowledge for what concerns the building in itself. Similar projects could provide inspiration or could give useful suggestions to the speculation needed in a design process. Evidently, the creation of a new Grand Theatre has many facets, which correspond to the integrated approach the Complex Projects Studio has.

First of all, it is about the preservation of a historical object. The main necessary condition for an integrated approach is the recognition that built heritage recovery must incorporate both replacement and conservation practices. *When planners and con-servationists approach rebuilding war-damaged cities, there is commonly perceived clash of interest between conservation and replacement: whether to restore a pre-war built environment to the extent possible or clear urban space for improvement* (Barakat, 2021, p. 428). This dilemma has been debated in every case of urban post-war reconstruction since World War II. How far it is appropriate to push conservation? Therefore, how much, what parts, and how is it appropriate to preserve an object such as the Grand Theatre?

Although considered as a very ancient city, Beirut's original reconstruction plan aimed to establish a modern metropolis, with massive disregard to historical significance (Barakat, 2021, p. 438). Perhaps, it is good to keep the appearance of the edifice and readjust its interior to the modern needs of a theatrical building; this has been Solidere's approach here. The ambition might also be the opposite one, because it is fundamental to take note of the fact that a contemporary theatre is not a simple performative habitat.

When dealing with the design of a theatre, it is necessary to know everything about the cultures that are relevant to it, the network it could create, and the spaces and expressions necessary to achieve its ambitions, as a theatre is an institution and an exceptional public space. In the Western World especially, theatres have played a fundamental role in the growth and cultural development of the cities where they were located. Institutions that were often directly linked to the upper class, but still able to shape the cultural landscape of all social groups, mobilising their instincts, fascinations, and values. This is the primary condition of culture and theatre in the cityscape: as mentioned, to stimulate thoughts, relationships, and debates. Thinking about Ancient Greek theatres, it is clear how this cultural expression has a

Figure 02: Culture 3.0 has been making theatre more democratic. https://www.poppinspresents.com

public role and a primary urban assignment.

Within an over-privatised city like Beirut, having back the Grand Theatre could mean re-establishing some of its faltering public vitality. The nearby example of the National Library is a significant precedent in the same scenario. Hence, could the reopening alone be considered as a success? Yes, but the reopening is the end of a first phase in a still active process. The next phase will be complicated, but it will involve for sure *an institution with its own new flagship building* (Stoughton, 2020).

Expected results

During the process, it will be possible to invent relying on design argumentations taken from facts and existing knowledge. These expected result are information spendaable in the proper design phase: programme benchmarking and function definition, space organisations and material visualisation.

As a first step, the design hypothesis requires a decision on the restoration policy of the existing Grand Theatre. It is a representative building of the evolution of Beirut and Lebanon over the last hundred years, but to be considered as a historical palace it must be inhabited again. However, this restoration is not sufficient to give it greater visibility if not accompanied by interventions aimed at making it an appropriate stage for the theatrical and cultural movement of Beirut and Lebanon. To become an institution, the Grand Theatre needs a substantial expansion that includes spaces to accommodate a possibly growing number of specialists in the sector as well as ordinary citizens.

At this point, we compare a catalogue of theatrical spaces with the specific situation of the Lebanese cultural scene, and to this, we apply the modern global trends of theatrical design, found for example in 'Some

contemporary trends in theatre architecture', by Wendell Cole. Cinema and filmmaking are a vigorous industry in the nation: they are privileged as they are taxed as touristic activities (17%). The project leans on these sectors and then provides flexibility to accommodate theatrical shows as well.

Conclusion

The ambition of the research corresponds to an impellent urgency and need of the city of Beirut. We understood that its collective memory is embedded in the historical artifacts of its very city centre. However, this must return to being inhabited. *The disappearance of the city centre from the lives of the Beiruti people for over twenty-four years was one of the main factor that encouraged the growth of independent secondary centres in the suburbs* (Alameddine, 2004). It is not only about recovering the heritage, it is also a narrative of the cultural presence in Central Beirut, of what contemporary cultural space could do for this tortured city and its citizens. The choice of the Grand Theatre as an assignment is also a way to engage in this challenge, in direct relationship with the reconstruction of the city and its parts.

The Grand Theatre is located in an area entrusted to Solidere, but still underdeveloped. This was intended to be the cultural hub of the plan, with the shining House of Arts and Culture to be built here. Nowadays, the entire area appears as a void in the city centre. In a decentralised city where only 0.5% of the land is public, this large space could prove to be an unmissable opportunity for the creation of a Grand Theatre Quarter that will contribute to the refurbishing of Beirut Central District and its opening to the Lebanese cultural scene and urban transformation from a secluded and uninhabited space to a theatrical public platform.

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