

REVIEW
AND
SHORT PAPERS

APRES LA GUEREE [AFTER THE WAR]: DESIGN WITHOUT FRONTIERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the multiple roles of design professionals in the rebuilding of a range of cities decimated by armed conflict. By working 'without borders', I suggest that architects have a significant opportunity to assist peace-making and reconstruction efforts in the period immediately after conflict or disaster, when much of the housing, hospital, educational, transport, civic and business infrastructure has been destroyed. The aim of my exploration is to expand the traditional role of the architect from 'hero' to 'social reformer' and discuss how design practitioners and design educators can stretch their wings to embrace the proliferating agendas and sites of civil unrest.

Keywords: *Post-War Reconstruction, War, Architecture and Peace-Building.*

1. SITES OF DESPAIR AND SITES OF TRIUMPH

Events in Beirut during 2006 that re-escalated war one again in Lebanon prompted me to re-examine cities, as simultaneously sites of despair and sites of triumph; as urban pawns in a spin-doctored war of so-called global terrorism. Beirut: a city I thought I knew so well (a city I lived and worked in for three years; 2000-2003) and yet it had become an unintended terra nullius; with the Lebanese capital transformed into a fierce battlespace and its inhabitants the unwilling targets. How does the architect engage with such shifting political and geographic landscapes of fear, trauma and spatial annihilation?

This paper focuses on how design professionals can play more effective roles in cities destroyed by social conflict and natural disasters. My investigation is a response to the dilemma presented when we examine the roles played by other professionals in alleviating the chronic human and physical suffering caused by the alarming acceleration of urban conflict: the doctors, lawyers, and engineers are ever present, but where are the architects and urban planners? In the aftermath of conflict, where and what is the intersection between reconstructing the physical landscape and reconstituting civil society?

2. THREE SNAPSHOTS: BEIRUT, NICOSIA AND MOSTAR

The original research for this paper was based upon a series of interviews that were conducted with thirty-five architects, urban designers, politicians and social commentators in Beirut, Nicosia and Mostar between 2000 and 2004. Reflections upon these discussions revealed that design professionals might play any one of five roles in post-conflict reconstruction. These include the designer as: Pathologist, Hero, Historicist, Colonialist and Social Reformer. In this paper I will briefly examine how these roles were specifically played out in Beirut, Nicosia, Mostar, (with fleeting references to Jerusalem and Berlin).

3 FIVE RECONSTRUCTION ROLES

I: Design Professionals as Pathologists

As pathologists, design professionals seek to diagnose the post-war city and prescribe the

right “medicine” in the aftermath of sustained civil conflict. This role can suit reconstruction goals of domestic peace, economic restructuring, and recapture of lost investment and tourist dollars. In practicing architectural surgery, design professionals often see themselves as facilitators of control and order and as curers of pathological diseases who cut out the diseased cells.

II: Design Professionals as Heroes

The contemporary concept of the designer as “hero” largely results from the celebrity ranking system that operates within the international design community. In this elite hierarchy, we see much continual glorification by the profession and the press of individual design professionals such as Frank Gehry, Rem Koolhaas and Daniel Libeskind. Linked to this hero model is the supporting role of the architect as an independent artist and creative genius, who sullies his profession in any act of artistic compromise by dealing with clients or community.

III: Design Professionals as Historicists

The reconstruction of historic city areas and cultural monuments has been accorded high priority in many design approaches for rebuilding destroyed cities. For example, the rebuilding of Beirut’s downtown district has focused solely on the rebuilding of the former city center and its associated archaeological relics rather than plans for the much larger and socially disadvantaged Beirut metropolis.

IV: Design Professionals as Colonialists

Design professionals in cities such as Beirut, Nicosia, Mostar and Jerusalem are often working within the colonial mentality of “we know what is good for you”. The colonialist stance in architecture is clearly not limited to post-war cities. The reliance on international aid agencies in countries such as Bosnia also illustrates such colonialist-colonized relationships. In Mostar, for example, design professionals have played only a small role in determining the future of their city, as they are completely dependant on foreign aid for reconstruction projects.

V: Design Professionals as Social Reformers

If the division lines of war are political, do design professionals have a political role within the broader mission of achieving social reform? Architectural and landscape projects can be used to bring conflicting parties to the table in the political mediation process, as I observed in Nicosia. There is something tangible about an architectural plan as a basis for negotiation rather than just a series of discussions, policy or peace treaties.

4 CONCLUSION: SANS FRONTIERS?

My interest as both a design professional and educator is to envisage alternative and often liberating futures for designers, as roaming, collaborative mobile agents able to work outside of traditional sites and constructed environments. My analysis of cities after urban conflict, sees the task of the design professional in the much more expansive role of city mediator, moving between the design of actual buildings to the negotiation and problem solving inherent in the urban reconstruction process. The role of the designer is thus not limited to being satisfied with opportunities and constraints, so much as imaginatively finding ways to engage with diverse community expectations and associated planning processes.

It is thus only by looking over the self-defined walls of the architectural profession into more pressing issues affecting the social and physical health of cities that the practice of architecture can be re-invigorated. Focusing exclusively on aesthetics, on the understanding of architectural form and its representations, while paying lip service to “others” in the process, has confined architectural discourse within the extremely narrow community of its own professional elite. Without such a radical change in their professional direction, design professionals may therefore become increasingly marginalized and irrelevant in terms of their potential contribution to society at large and the complex and increasingly fragmented landscape we inhabit.

Finally, both architecture and planning are systems of spatial thinking that can be linked

to both site-specific design problems and to a wider contemplation about urban and regional territories and their associated patterns of social contexts. This broader definition of design extends the role of the design profession beyond acting as the conceivers and executors of designer objects, to, potential negotiators and mediators of urban politics and planning. While an urban pathologist maybe needed to dissect the diseased city at hand, it is the social reformer and educator that ensures the prescribed medicine: the capacity of architecture to contribute to the social and physical reconstruction of the proliferating club of destroyed cities and communities, is therefore vast, but still unfortunately, largely untapped.