

# CONTEXTUAL ATHEISM

IT SEEMS LIKE EVERY TIME SOMEONE BUILDS A NEW AMMAN LANDMARK, SOMETHING IN THE PROCESS GOES HORRIBLY WRONG. PERHAPS, AS THE JURY OF A RECENT ARCHITECTURAL AWARD POINTED OUT, IT IS BECAUSE STUDENTS ARE LEARNING TO DESIGN BUILDINGS WITHOUT PAYING MUCH ATTENTION TO WHERE THEY PUT THEM.

Words by Sandra Hiari. Images courtesy Omrania & Associates/CSBE.

**I**N AUGUST, THE WALLS of the National Gallery of Fine Arts were hung, not with paintings, but with the artifacts of a different kind of exhibition. They were the graduation projects of Jordanian architecture students, presented as part of a newly established award in the field.

The Student Award for Excellence in Architectural Design was sponsored by the local non-profit Center for the Study of the Built Environment (CSBE) and the regional architectural firm Omrania & Associates; the award aimed at recognizing quality in the teaching of architecture in Jordan and encouraging design performance among academia.

The hypothetical buildings students designed ranged from a new Amman stock exchange to a passenger terminal in Aqaba, to a collection of museums and scientific centers in Wadi Rum. Participation in the award was mostly from public universities; the Jordan University of Science and Technology (JUST) submitted 16 projects while the University of Jordan offered seven. Private universities were almost absent, with Al-Israa' Private University and Applied Science University sending three projects altogether.

The jury committee was made up of three highly prominent figures in the field. Sahel Al Hiyari is head of the local firm Sahel Al Hiyari and partners; he is a frequent lecturer at local universities and one of Jordan's most recognized young architects. Han Tümertekin leads the Istanbul-based firm Mimarlar Tasarım Danışmanlık; he is a two-time recipient of Turkey's national architecture award and well known for his



DESIGN FOR A MUSEUM AND GEOLOGICAL CENTER IN WADI RUM, BY DEYALA TARAWNEH, HALA HAWATMEH AND HUDA DEBBAS.

publications on architecture. Dr. Farouk Yaghmour is the head of Yaghmour Architecture Office, a regional firm with offices in Amman, as well as a prominent advisor on urban planning and large-scale development projects in Jordan.

It was perhaps no surprise, then, that the jury's report went well beyond simply choosing winners from the submitted projects, to offer a critique of the state of the art itself.

"Though we greatly appreciate the effort and passion expressed in the submitted projects, certain prevalent features in the projects do raise serious concerns regarding

the general state of architectural education as it has evolved over the past few years in Jordan," they said.

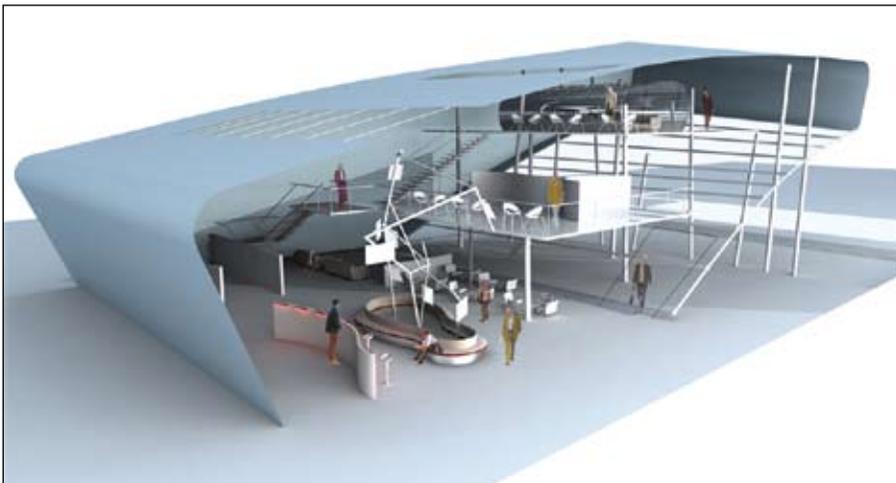
In this highly critical report, committee members described students' work as "highly formalistic," and remarked that much of it "focuses on graphic visual impacts and stimuli," rather than an understanding of the principles of architecture in real contexts.

The students, they said, "have become heavily dependent on superficial readings" of the architecture they see in magazines and on the Internet. They hadn't learned to dig deep into the meanings of the work they



Front Elevation  
scale 1:750

ABOVE: SECOND PRIZE WAS A NEW PASSENGER TERMINAL IN AQABA, BY DIMA ABU-ARIDA. THE TERMINAL WAS TO BE A "TRAFFIC TRANSFORMER," WHICH WOULD "COMBINE MANY TYPES OF CIRCULATION, MOVEMENTS AND ROUTES" IN A "LIVING MUSEUM!"



LEFT: THE MAIN FEATURE OF AJWAD MASARWA'S DESIGN FOR A NEW STOCK EXCHANGE, WHICH TOOK THE HONORABLE MENTION, WAS A "STOCK CAFE," WHICH SERVED AS AN ENTRANCE AS WELL AS A DEFINING METAPHOR.

had studied, and so, when it came time to do their own projects, the results were "derivative and watered down versions of trendy vocabularies"—all style and very little substance.

So what went wrong? The jury blamed many of the problems they noted on an "unhealthy dependency on CAD [computer-aided design] technologies to produce images that are detached from architecture as a multi-disciplinary endeavor."

They noted that students exhibited strong computer design capabilities and had developed a maturity in developing forms, enhancing building programs, and paying attention to structural details. But the majority of their presentations were focused largely on employing fancy computer-based effects, which not only impaired the designs, but in several cases the excessive use of colors and artistic effects came at the expense of the presentation itself.

"Clarity and discipline often are absent, and ambiguity prevails," the jury wrote. "The ordinary, silent, and neutral are feared; clutter often dominates in both design and

presentation."

The academic reaction to the jury's report took the opposite tack. Natheer Abu Obeid, the dean of the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning at JUST, explained that the jury's critique of students' reliance on computer-aided design was "biased and built

AMBIGUITY PREVAILS,  
CLUTTER DOMINATES:  
THE ORDINARY, SILENT  
AND NEUTRAL ARE  
FEARED

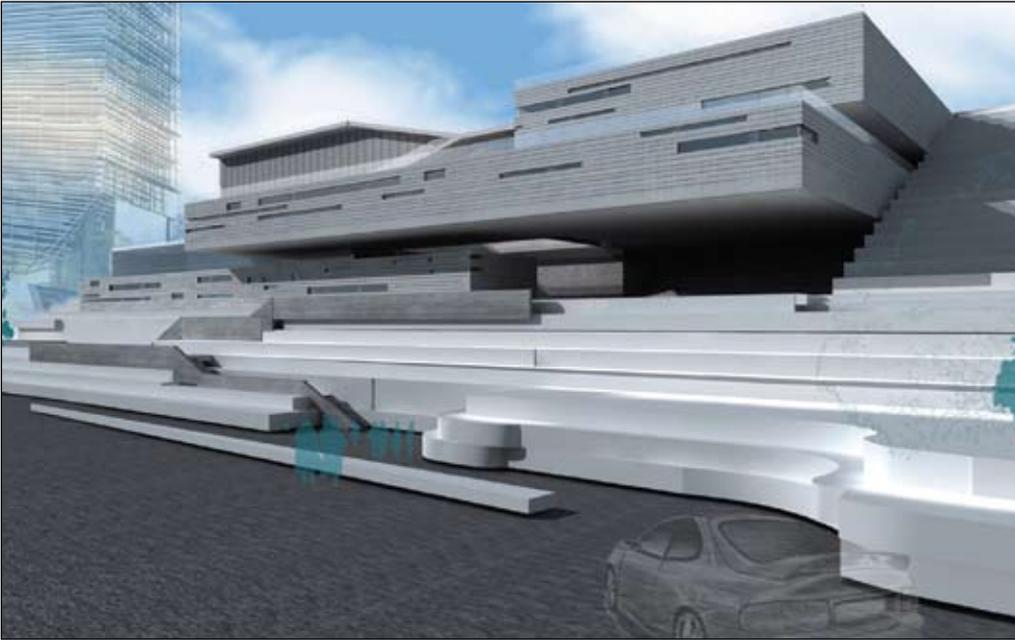
on a value system connected to traditional techniques of conceptual creation and design development."

He did, however, concur with the jury that there was a trend among students to ignore social and cultural contexts. But, he added, this was not just a problem for students. "This is a problem architectural academia in

Jordan suffers from, and ... there is no sincere attempt to overcome it," he added. Importing unauthentic images into local environments has become commonplace.

Looking at the university curricula, it would appear that Abu Obeid is right: it is evident that classes ignore humanities and stress solely on tectonics. Looking at the major influences students are taught, it appears that outdated Western styles are the focus of the curriculum.

Many of the participating projects, for example, were influenced largely by the Modernist style of Le Corbusier and his followers. "Form follows function" was the slogan of that movement. But while students imitated the external features of a modernist design, its materials and outlines, they may have missed the point. Looking at the presentations, it's clear that fair-face concrete was the "in" thing this year. But the aesthetics of concrete finishes as they were used by the modernists, and continue to be used in the global North, was a consequence of structures having evolved from the era of industrialization itself.



THIRD PRIZE: A DESIGN FOR A NEW AMMAN STOCK EXCHANGE, BY DIANA ZIADAT. THE HIGH-CONCEPT PLAN WAS BASED ON A CASINO.

Warehouses were retrofitted into residences and other non-industrial uses; industrial materials were used in the early mass-production of housing, etc. Without having gone through that evolution ourselves, using such finishes is pretentious. Its only benefit, it would seem, would be to transform the future Amman from a city of tan cubes to one of gray.

Would it make any difference if students were shown Le Corbusier's sketch of one of Jordan's royal palaces, with his caption, which reads: "Amman (Syria)?" Perhaps this example would help make clear the limits of modernism's contextual atheism.

It's worth noting, too, that only one presentation was done in Arabic. As they borrowed language, so many students borrowed foreign ideologies that were larger than the life of the buildings they had created, using them in an attempt to add flair to the project. The result was buildings that were imitative and decontextualized, and which seldom fit with either their immediate environment or the region where they were supposedly situated.

Nor were the projects often sensitive to

their own location. The first prize winning project was a community rehabilitation center at the southern terrace of the Citadel, on Jabal Al Qala'. Although it was sensitive to site preservation, and rehabilitated existing buildings, the totality of the design was far off from the economic profile of the area. The materials used, the patterns of construc-

## STUDENTS LEARN TO BORROW FOREIGN LANGUAGES—AND IDEOLOGIES

tion, and the artificial lighting effects were all distant from the surroundings, and hinted at gentrification.

Second place and honorable mention both went to projects that presented new designs for an Amman stock exchange. But in both cases, the building was not based on location, but rather on a particular kind of capitalist

metaphor. In one, case, the metaphor chosen for Amman's financial center was a café; in the other it was a casino.

Despite the controversy—or perhaps because of it?—the organizers of the event said they were pleased with the level of participation in the award.

"The universities view the award as a positive means to give their students an external platform to showcase their designs," said Nur Al-Fayez, the award coordinator at CSBE.

Hani Imam Hussaini, Omrania's resident partner and the principal architect of the Jordan office, felt the exhibition was an opportunity for Omrania and CSBE to learn more about how people will react to new projects, by putting student's work on display. In addition to providing a space to play with new ideas, he said he hoped it would encourage students to work harder on their projects, and be a bit more disciplined in their creative process. Plans are set now to open up the award to participants in the region in the summer of 2009, when it will be seen whether today's controversy has any effect on tomorrow's builders and planners. ■



ABOVE: THE FIRST PRIZE WENT TO A DESIGN FOR A COMMUNITY REHABILITATION CENTER ON JABAL AL QALA<sup>1</sup>, BY DINA HADI, MOUSA SHAHIN AND HAZIM SAMAWI, FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF JORDAN. THE DESIGN WOULD RESTORE THE EXISTING BUILDINGS, (ABOVE, SECOND ROW) BUT WOULD NOT NECESSARILY FIT WITH THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD (RIGHT).

