Interview: Collective for Architecture Lebanon

Questions by Alissar **Riachi**

Intro: Collective for Architecture Lebanon **(CAL) is a non-profit organisation established in 2019 in Beirut.**

CAL's aim is to create a cross-disciplinary platform for discussion and debate between the fields of architecture, design, urban planning and the humanities. As a platform, CAL will reach out to and engage various agents that hold crucial roles in the development and dissemination of more comprehensive visions and discourses surrounding these fields. Our primary target is the upcoming generation of young professionals in order to empower them to pursue their research and planning endeavors, and translate them into concrete interventions. We aim to achieve this through the organisation of events such as lectures, conferences, exhibitions and competitions. These in turn will involve various stakeholders across fields to come together, debate and connect. The larger vision of the organisation is to raise the status quo of urban and territorial planning in Lebanon on the academic, practical and governmental levels.

Edouard **Souhaid**   Elias **Tamer**

CAL is

Lynn **Chamoun**   Shereen **Doummar**

AR: **What initially drove you to create Collective for Architecture Lebanon?**

CAL: CAL started organically through conversations where we were discussing the relationship between the world of practice and that of academia, which brought us to think about new types of practices. We had noted that there was a lack of communication among the different universities but also between the private and the public sectors in the field.

All of our Diploma work was focused on Lebanon for which we had a strong interest and we were hoping we could take the projects further and enter within a larger debate by exhibiting the work alongside other similar academic projects to try to establish a platform within which we could develop our research as a Collective. Through our first initiative, OMRAN'19, we engaged different partners and institutions that contributed to the project, and allowed us to grow. CAL more importantly developed around the idea of offering the upcoming generation of academics and professionals a platform where they can debate and share their work, and eventually develop it into concrete interventions.
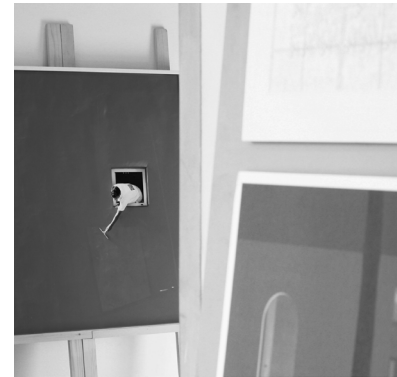
AR: **Your core team is interdisciplinary and can feed different perspectives into architecture. Moreover, the majority are Lebanese, who have undertaken their studies abroad in places such as London and Paris and in a cyclical pattern returned to their identity. How can you reflect on your journey of going back to Lebanon and creating a non-profit organisation based in Beirut?**

CAL: Although the NGO is based in Beirut we work at the moment between Paris, London and Beirut, which allows us to have access to a larger network of practitioners and academics with who we have collaborated with and will collaborate with in the future. It means that we manage to always anchor back our discourse beyond the "borders" of Lebanon and that exchange for us is very important; breaking in a way the redundant cycle of the architectural discourse that is enabled by stagnating within the same context.

AR: Your OMRAN'19 exhibition during the summer took place in Beit Beirut, a former sniper's nest during the war. With this building having been re-appropriated into an art venue/museum, what was the particular reasoning behind your choice of venue?

CAL: Beit Beirut is a place that represents a very important period of Lebanon's history. It has great significance within the urban context, as one of the few buildings left standing that bear the scars of the war - a period many have tried to erase from our built environment. It was therefore very relevant to be able to exhibit urban projects, and open a discourse about the importance of urban planning and the architect, within that context. Since the museum is not fully functional, we were very pleased that we could open it for free to the public for three consecutive weeks.

AR: It's interesting how the cycle of this building has experienced many different uses, will you continue to try and utilise these types of historical buildings for future events?

CAL: Even though some laws and legislations exist about protecting historic buildings in Lebanon it is not often enforced. In the past two decades, we saw the destruction of much of what was left of the French, Ottoman and Modern era buildings in Beirut. Appropriating historical buildings to use them as cultural venues is not a new phenomenon in Lebanon. It is a great way to open them to the public and to revive these unused spaces and to experience them in a new light. Every time we work on a new project, the space we choose is crucial; it guides the project but also offers us the possibility to show significant buildings to the general public.

AR: What inspired your choice of *Architecture of Territory* for your launching forum and exhibition?

CAL: This year's main theme *Architecture of the Territory: the paradoxical relationship between the state and its territorial planning,* was a way to pierce through the academic discourse around architecture in Lebanon and open the field

beyond the built environment to other disciplines such as economy, politics and social policies studies - to read the territory as a geographical delimitation that is subjected to the power of a centralized authority and understand the role of the architect within that construct.

We believe that there is an urgency for the state to rethink the way it manages and plans its territory, and to discuss various methods through which new strategies of implementation and systems of collaboration can be put in place in order to achieve this goal. There is a paradox that exists between the State and its territorial planning, due to the lack of stability in the state resulting in a weak/non-existent urban strategy, and in a weaker national unity in Lebanon. It must be stressed that Lebanon is an anomaly in the global planning trends. Elsewhere in the world the relationship between state and territory is a very intimate one, where the functionality of the state is dictated by an organization of the territory. In Lebanon, this is obviously not the case; the governmental state of Lebanon benefits from a lack of planning since the imaginary power of the state rests in its post-1990 power-sharing division of governmental positions and their unfair distribution across the territory. Hence the territory is under-represented and unorganized, and we feel discussing this is of utmost importance.

AR: How does this tie to the overall ethos of CAL going back to Lebanon and creating a non-profit organisation based in Beirut?

CAL: As a Collective we are concerned by the relationship between Architecture and the various fields that affect the development of our field, and so Lebanon's flagrant economic, political and social failure has made it urgent for us to rethink the essential role of the architect as a primordial figure in the implementation of a territorial and urban plan strategy. We decided we could begin to discuss these issues through the format of an architectural forum, OMRAN. As we were developing the brief of the forum we arrived to a premise that must also be questioned within the context of Lebanon as a failed Nation-State. Is a 'cohesive Nation-State' the ultimate goal? Or is there a possibility for the assimilation of a Post-Nation-State condition? As a Collective through development of OMRAN we have strengthened our position on the discourse around the role of Architecture and the management of a territory and this is what is pushing the work we do.

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AR: Round 1 of your conference dissected Global and Local. Many European countries have recently demonstrated an increased re-investigation and interest in locality and identity. The Middle East, on the other hand, seems more receptive and reactive to global patterns in architecture, as is the case with contemporary developments in Beirut. What were your conference's conclusions on the future of traditional cities like Beirut that have a constant dispute between global and local?

CAL: Cities in our region have undergone violent morphological changes as a result of war, violent master planning, introduction of alien urban forms and universal architectures, and Beirut is an extreme paradigm of this condition. Through these changes, these territories have lost the urban, domestic and cultural typologies that defined their form and their ability to generate the framework that produced the societies that inhabited them. The conference reflected upon the tensions between various moments of confrontation between the global and the local. Adrian Lahoud the keynote speaker in that round discussed global trends in the built environment, highlighted issues around the production of Lithium in the Atacama Desert and the effects it was having on the local population, and environment. These types of examples were then brought back to global trends affecting Lebanon through the lens of Photographer, Ieva Saudergaite, who has documented moments of tension in the built environment, highlighting the mass development of a globalised architecture infiltrating the tightly knit urban fabric.

AR: What lessons has your team learned from observing the treatment of public spaces in various countries? How do you think this can be applied back to your home country and other Middle-Eastern nations?

CAL: It's important for us to understand the nuances of public spaces in various contexts, which we call, free accessible secular spaces. And we did that because in the context of Lebanon the notion of a public space can be very skewed as historically the city was never built around these spaces, and for various reasons evolved to marginalise them for the profit of capital gain through real estate speculation, which we are witnessing today. That being said we do believe there is a need for such

spaces where citizens can congregate and that need is being voiced more intensely recently.

AR: It is arguable that neo-liberal planning has erased the character of urban spaces in Lebanon and has somewhat depoliticised them. How do you think this has affected the psyche of the population?

CAL: Neo-liberalism has to some extent affected the urban fabric of Lebanon, along with a lack of awareness towards the preservation and the value of vernacular architecture. Effectively by violently destroying a building, a block or a neighbourhood at the mercy of capital gain, the effects on the inhabitants are not null. It is the collective memory that is attained and disturbed. It has also promoted an individualistic approach of citizens that tend to favour the private interest over the collective one.

AR: What can we learn from these places?

CAL: We learn from the events that happen in these places. It is the people that define these places, as urban planners and architects we have to offer a framework and let them appropriate the space. The idea of depoliticising is important because ultimately politics is about how you organize frameworks for its citizens. A place should represent an idea of politics and that is the difference between a simple park and a place, even though they are both public spaces. They have a different purpose in the city.

AR: How has your venture with CAL and The Architecture of Territory been received amongst students, architects and members of the public?

CAL: In general, the Architectural Forum, OMRAN'19 has been very well received as it brought together, for the first time, students from various universities to exhibit their work, as well as discuss it at the conference with practitioners and academics. In Lebanon, for some reason, most academic projects and research are made on a neighbourhood scale with limited political/economic and social effects. It was somehow interesting for students to discover a territorial scale project and the conversations that created. In addition, one of the main objectives of CAL is to open up the field of Architecture to the general

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public, and disseminate the importance the profession could have if we begin to practice in a multi-disciplinary context and develop new methods of procurement and practice.

AR: CAL was launched in the summer of 2019, only a few months before the start of the Revolution in Lebanon. The socio-political climate and the population's discontent seem very much connected to your aims and objectives. How do you think CAL can be an actor and mediator in this situation and what do you think you could do to contribute to the improvement of social and urban conditions?

CAL: The team at CAL is very much interested in the relationship between politics and urban spaces, as you might have noted with OMRAN, and more recently "100 years online" our submission that won 2nd place at the competition for the Lebanese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. We are developing our research on Civic Spaces in Lebanon, and are working on strategies that we would eventually like to share and develop with other NGOs, practices, researchers, and experts. But as we are a platform first and foremost for young professionals, we also welcome any invitation to debate the issues that we are currently facing but also facilitate the implementation of new projects.

AR: The current revolution has demonstrated the rediscovery of public spaces, as per one of your objectives. Why do you think this has come naturally to the protestors and how has the revolution humanised these spaces of collective heritage?

CAL: Appropriation and accessibility are fundamental in public spaces. The notion of the "Saha" being a place for everyone, where the public expresses collectiveness and cohesiveness, has expressed itself in a natural way through the revolution, because these are exactly the spaces that contain in their DNA the potential to allow this appropriation by their mere composition and localisation. We are very sceptical of western ideals of public spaces since our understanding of the public is different. Lebanese cities witnessed a massive uncontrolled urban growth in past decades which almost obliterated the amount of open spaces where citizens could meet. It is important to note here that social

media played a role in being a virtual space where citizens could interact, exchange and express freely their ideas and opinion. With the beginning of the national protest movement this "virtual scene" naturally translated into a physical one in the few public squares of the cities. The events happening today in Lebanon (the idea of decentralization) show that we need spaces where people can meet freely but also can cultivate the notion of togetherness. Planting tents, adding furniture, flags, kiosks, chairs, tables and other objects on the "Saha" is a clear appropriation of space by the people. The moments when that happens these public spaces become crucial because they create a sense of collectiveness and will retain the collective memory.

AR: What defines a democratic space for you?

CAL: That is a question we raised with our proposal for the Lebanese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2020. Representative Democracy is being questioned in the West but also in Lebanon. A democratic space is where citizens partake in and express democratic practices and rights. It is directly linked to the notion of freedom of appropriation of a space and the deliberation of any type of hierarchical conscription a space can encompass.

AR: Regarding the theme of this issue, architecturally, politically or socially – what does The Cycle mean to you?

CAL: The notion of the Cycle is very relevant today, we are in a moment of transition whether it's in the architectural field, or in global politics but even social relations. In the field of architecture, we are seeing a break away from the concept of the Starchitect towards more inclusive forms of practices, collectives, cooperatives etc… This new phase brings with it a new form of architecture that deals much less with spectacle and the object, but becomes much more the subject of its context. In that sense, we can also notice where architecture would always borrow from other disciplines, philosophy, economics, art etc it is today contributing to the discourse of other disciplines breaking a very repetitive cycle, and emancipating itself as a discipline.

AR: How will Collective for Architecture Lebanon now be moving forward?

CAL: CAL is at the moment carrying on with the publication of a small booklet reassembling the findings of OMRAN, putting together the projects exhibited at Beit Beirut, the conference at AUB and gathering contributions from various other people that can engage in the debate of "Architecture of the Territory". We will soon also begin the organisation of OMRAN'21 as this year was the first edition of what will become the Architecture Biennale Forum in Lebanon, and hopefully become an important event in the region. We are also working on some smaller research projects that we hope in the future, when the situation stabilizes in Lebanon, can become the first prototypes of self-launched projects.

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