

FROM TECTONIC TO VISUAL: THE BEIRUT SOUKS COMPETITION

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INTRODUCTION

I will discuss in this short presentation the results of the Beirut Souks Competition, organized in the Spring of 1994, to mend one of the critical areas of the Old Beirut, the Markets district (or "Souks"), damaged during the war and then levelled in the early phase of reconstruction.

The early plans for reconstruction projected a total cleansing and proposed a unified vision of a city of uniform pseudo-vernacular mid-rises in the center and a Manhattan-inspired waterfront of skyscrapers. This unhappy utopia was shelved after severe public criticism and a more promising process was inaugurated with the organization of an international competition to redesign the souks, which constitute an integral part of the Beirut Central District.

The competition brief called for a reinterpretation of the Souks in light of the new needs of the present, without ignoring the memory of the past. This is of course the main dilemma to be always faced in historic cities, and it became more pertinent when the program called for a large underground car parking, to be fitted under the site of the old souks, thus making the exact replication of the original street pattern almost impossible. The recollections of old citizens, included in the competition kit, featured nostalgic remembrances of things past such as the Juice Fountain at the crossing of the Old Souk Ayyas.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SITE

By the competition date in the Spring of 1994, most of the buildings that survived the war had been demolished, except for the Majidiyé Mosque, the Bank building next to it and the Orient newspaper building behind, the buildings along the Eastern edge which were recommended to be preserved, the Souk Al-Arwam twin structures in the center and a recently discovered Islamic mausoleum at the Southern edge. The competition brief left open the possibility of reconstructing a major structure that had existed on the site west of the Mosque. This was the caravanserail, a historic type of motel common along trade routes of the East, built around an internal court with space on the ground for carriages and beasts, and hotel rooms above for the travellers.

The site had undergone many changes throughout its history. As can be seen from these early maps, its northern boundary reached well into the water at one time, and was only later in the middle of this century separated from the water by the new port expansion. After the war of 1975 and in the absence of proper disposal services, a large area of refuse accumulated and severed the site permanently from the sea.

The Souks themselves developed as distinct elements, each as a linear street, the more prominent being the Old *Souk Ayyas* dating to the first decade of this century at the center of which was located the fountain already mentioned, *Souk Al-Jamil* underwent a serious transformation from its early days as a covered street market to its pre-war condition. *Souk Al-Tawilé* constituted the central spine of the area, economically and geographically, although architecturally it was the least significant. A minor but strategically located market was the Jewellers row, forming the southern edge along Weygand street.

In the summer of 1994 the site had been cleared for the impending reconstruction, but its actual beginning had to await the archaeological excavations, which span from the winter of 1994 to the spring of 1996. Finally, at this moment, the souks district has become a large excavated hole awaiting new foundations, with the exception of areas around the preserved buildings and the discovered Perso-Phoenician part of the city under what used to be Souk Ayyas.

THE COMPETITION: A REVIEW OF PROPOSALS

More than 300 participants submitted designs for this competition. From these I have chosen a selection to present. They are representative of different approaches to this problem through engagement of different paradigms, underlying which and in different ways the "tectonic" is made manifest.

But first, I wish to clarify what I understand here by tectonicity, which is the critical theme in this conference. If tectonicity refers to the tectonic joint, "the ontological symbol of connection and transition" then it leads to a conception of a highly articulated construction, as epitomized in the classic Greek temple. The problem remains to define this notion and its relevance at the urban dimension. No city can boast of such a clear and analogical construction to the Greek temple, despite the analogies between house and city. The city remains more complex and more resistant to overarching systems of organization and articulation. The tectonic as defined earlier can therefore be detected at the level of the architectural object, and more clearly where this object lends itself to an anthropomorphic articulation. At a more abstract level, however, the analogy could lead us to a reading of the tectonic as a manner of inscription, which leaves traces of its author or operation onto the map of the city. Following this, we can posit different kinds of tectonicities at work within the different design paradigms of an urban project.

TPOLOGY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

First and foremost, we find the typological method which has gained some wide acceptance. A great deal of entries proposed solutions based on this paradigm. In varying ways existing, assumed or invented types were proposed beginning with the Caravanserail building. The typological method, as Rossi and others explained it, proceeds from the general model at the urban scale to the particularity of construction, and not the other way around.

Aldo Rossi's own entry which won a citation reveals a project of bold initiatives: on the one hand, a very conservative move to preserve the same pre-war street pattern while on the other hand inserting signature landmarks that we find in Rossi's other urban proposals such as in Berlin; namely the ziggurat tower. These personal artifacts, however, seem to have more relation to the architect's desire than to the context of Beirut: they are in fact autobiographical notes which pursue the architect in his wanderings. For Rossi the typological method remains therefore an open text which is not as scientifically set into rigid methodologies as we see in other projects. Its tectonicity is based on a familiar set of objects which, when translated to the architectural level, are often articulated in the specific dialect of the context in question.

Among the multitude of projects that followed a typological process, I will mention here Mauro Galantino's entry (Italy) which somehow fails to deliver an interesting solution despite the intricate assembly details: for instance it extends the Caravanserail building but in this process negates its typology. Another project clearly exposes the process of development of typical units and so-called architectonic tools, all to show that this well-assimilated lesson of typological tectonicity is no guarantee of a work of great urban significance, as is evident from the small vignettes. One point of interest in this proposal is the creation of a large plaza at the southern edge of the souks, well-defined by the Mausoleum on one side and a cubic structure on the other side (Atelier d'Architecture, Lebanon).

On another level, we may trace within the typological stream, instances of projects where the conception does not begin at the urban level, as is usually the case, but rather originates at the level of the joint itself. The proposal by Architrave & Synergy (Belgium) is an example which seeks "to marry the Orient to the Occident" through the reinterpretation of the tectonics of arch and vault into steel and glass. Yet the complexity of this structural system again fails to reach a project that goes beyond the mere modular repetition of unit types.

Beat Gassner's project (Switzerland) wavers between a pure abstraction and a typological study where for once the normative recreation of the Khan structure at the northwest side is replaced by three strips of building blocks which effectively become a new market area analogous to its neighbors to the south but with a different orientation.

Luciano Semerani's project also seems to lack a clear resolution. A repetitive block of units along the Old Souk Ayyas opens up to an agora squeezed against the opposing structures. The design is quite eclectic in its choice of types, some of which are overwhelming as in the structure at the southeastern edge. The mosque also finds itself overwhelmed among the proliferating urban forms around it from theatre to department store and offices, all of which converge on this point.

ARCHI-TECTONICITY OF VOLUMES OR SPACES

From another perspective, Zaha Hadid's proposal shows the predictable sweeping lines that translate into horizontal strips running along the south-north axis, overlapping and interlocking. This geological tectonicity still leaves one searching for clues among the cryptic diagrams for the generative strategy of this urban project. Hadid employs here the same method employed in smaller architectural tasks; with the slight exception that in this case one part of the site, the northern half, is left out to be occupied by the required "regural" structures such as the department store, which constitute a contrast to the linear souks that represent more accurately her familiar language. The design seeks to avoid any nostalgic recollections, it provides only the syntax, purified and raised to a higher pitch, of a score that remains unfulfilled and somewhat burdened by the additional functional requirements concentrated in the northern part.

AIM Consultants from Nigeria also projected sweeping lines that open up at the northern side to create a large crescent-shaped plaza around the mosque. The asymptotic volumes that define the eastern and western boundaries reveal an organic attention to detail that contrasts sharply with the simple cubic volumes of the interior. The wide angled perspectives clearly emphasize the notion of "speed" as if the intention of the authors is to project the site into the future while preserving relics of the past such as the mausoleum, frozen for display.

Robin Edwards' entry (UK) can be read as a text where interlocking signs encroach upon each other defining critical voids, voids that do not seem in the least predictable. Yet underlying this unfamiliar text one finds again, upon a second reading, the familiar public spaces of the Greek agora, duplicated, shifted and truncated. The operation here is meta-linguistic, it seeks to reveal through the investigation of broad themes such as "encampment," "memory," "religion" and "landscape" the potentials of these signs to recreate a contemporary and complex public realm.

THE GHOST OF REASON

Similar to Corbusier's project for a hospital in Venice, many entries insisted on the same challenge to an equally irregular context. The grid, in various forms reappears as a datum of choice in some cases supported by the historical argument of the original Roman grid of the ancient city. Thomas Kirkpatrick (Belgium) proposed a regular grid along the cardinal axes, where the only distortions are those inherited from the more recent past.

Fabio Penteado's entry (Brazil) is a case where a grid frame organizes the souks district within an enclosure of floating horizontal slabs leading to the northern end which is framed by a great monumental arch, whereas Constantin Pastia's grid (France) is scathed by a diagonal originating at the nearby Place de L'Etoile and terminating at the mosque. The water-pond projected there is one that figures in many other proposals that sought to reevoke the site's lost connection to the sea.

Jean-Paul Viguier's entry. (France) is the most intriguing of this group. Here the grid is developed into an architectural layering of space creating a rich interplay of light and shadows. The intent was to create also an enclosure enveloping this dense world within, which opens up at the northern level of the mosque. Behind this clear systematic approach, or transcending

it perhaps, is a poetic fluidity of space : the souks are once more reinterpreted in modern terms to reach a synthesis of past and present.

CYBORG URBANISM

In the post-tectonic space, all notions of physical connectedness give way to a more virtual conception of reality no longer based on reality itself, but on a space conceived as a site of operations of dissection, refraction, protraction, or contraction. Anthony Vidler called this kind of space a “cyborg-space” where the interrelation between body and machine is dispassionately scrutinized and where the body becomes a mere tool for self-transcription. This haunting vision is the arena of a confrontation between the organic and the mechanical, and it can be read in the work of Stan Allen (USA) whose proposal features a system of organization that constitutes an overarching canopy under which are placed the souk units that twist and turn to the dance of a hidden operator. The relativity of the operation here displayed is a self-projection that only attests to the architect’s desire to inscribe onto the city some traces of his self, but not his body. This is of course a different attempt than the Renaissance architect’s ideal city which is closer to Rossi’s proposal than to Allen’s. The paradigm of the complete Body is replaced here by that of the operation to which the body is subjected. And the operation only takes certain cues from the geography of the site and the reified cultural package that constitutes a mediatized knowledge of it.

AUTOMATIC WRITING

Quite close to Allen’s position is that of others for whom the site is again not a locus, but a map onto which are projected arbitrary and abstract systems, overlaid by another set of free operations.

The project by Castillo & Gastano (citation-Spain) is one example of this operational paradigm where the process is almost that of an automatic writing on a cartesian grid that carries within it the assumption of unquestionable certainty. Within this matrix of order and play the souks are contained as if by default.

Two other examples exhibit a similar strategy. In the first one (Thresholds, France) a uniform grid is laid over the site, interlaced with the several layers of function, circulation, and enclosed by a resurrected fragment of the ancient city, the city wall, thus creating an enclosure that invites the users to a process of discovery and “unveiling.” Gilles Cuille, on the other hand, (France) weaves the different functions into a carpet of different forms, with a significant potential of architectonic effects and events.

THE OVERLAY: HISTORY/PRESENT

In another series of projects, the contrast between the city’s ancient memory and its present is emphasized. The project by Maurice Bonfils (Lebanon) proposes a horizontal slab that constitutes a uniform ceiling which covers the heterogeneity of forms and textures underneath. This contrast which is apparent between the ground and upper floor plans is one solution to the desired synthesis between two distinct times, the former multi-layered and indefinite, the latter more uniform and homoge-

neous.

Christian de Portzamparc also projected a design which recaptures the morphology of the old souks without referring to any archaic representations nor to typological “tools”. This collage overlays two systems on top of each other, the lower souks running north-south, the upper souks running along the diagonal. This recreates some of the shaded spaces that existed before, yet they carry a new spirit in the dynamic plazas and the playful geometries evident in the treatment of the area around the mosque.

Metastudio of Italy proposed a city unto itself composed of a multitude of building components arranged liberally within the bounds of certain limits (axes, roads, curved paths). An oversized portico frames the southern boundary of this new city which is also quite well protected along the other sides. Within this enclave, the play of difference between various forms is pushed to the limit forcing the grid into dissolution. The density prevailing in this project is quite expressive of an important characteristic always found in such markets.

Nikos Georgiadis from Greece developed a project that reinterprets the souks as a multi-layered entity. This layering process is more forcefully carried here into the third dimension, proposing radical spaces hovering over the gateways as well as large-span undulating roofs that run south to north. The volumes generated, in their stark simplicity, juxtapose the arbitrary to the ordinary as seen in the plan where the set order is occasionally broken letting loose a sequence of elements that dance to another rhythm and begin to threaten traditional notions of boundary and limits.

A project submitted by a team from the University of Pennsylvania projected a situation where the different grids meet and overlap in the centre producing three different zones with their distinct architectures, the central one being the zone of the clash where a transparent -structure market is located. The strategy used was also to preserve every fragment remaining on the site following the metaphor of the shrapnel, that too-familiar element of war, as the element that directs the treatment of the body through a process of extraction that leaves the scar as an evident memory of the terrible events. The shrapnel is thus removed, but the scar remains to tell the story.

ORIENTALISM/OCCIDENTALISM: THE POWER OF IMAGES

A few projects have attempted to deal with the delicate and controversial issue of recreating an “orientalist” souk. Edward Said, opens with an introduction to his famous work on this topic with a citation of a regretful French journalist writing during the war on the tragic destruction of these very districts of Beirut. The journalist lamented the disappearance of an Orient, which according to Said was constructed as an image to satisfy European imagination and desires.

The history of the site still lead some to propose a recreation of this very Orientalist image. Yet this option remained in the minority and ironically was explored mainly by teams from Arab countries. One example being a project by the Mimar Group from Lebanon where the desire to create a new style leads to a language of domes, vaults and arches, all assembled in a meticulous Beaux-Arts fashion around the surviving structures. Another one by a team from the University of Jordan proposed a more labyrinthine pattern with post-modernist facades.

Vittori Maschietto (Italy) presented one of the more original interpretations of this genre. Here the problem is not defined in terms of arch, vault or any other clichés, but in terms of mass, enclosure, and scale. The site is invested with a sacredness that sets it apart as an enclave, akin to the precincts of ancient temples, where a new experience of public space may become possible.

As a dialectical equivalent to this orientalist image, stands the Occidental representation of the Souks as an unapologetical supermarket of commerce (JAM Architects, Switzerland) where the human scale is obliterated in favor of images that span the whole height of buildings and the whole width of blocks, banners that proclaim the familiar icons of a triumphant capitalist world manipulated by marketing systems. The borrowed references are multiple: from Jean Nouvel's Berlin project to New York's Times Square, the whole is an overt homage to that "Other" that haunts the Orient and seduces it at the same time: it is the image of ambivalence in which tectonicity is reduced to the "zero-degree" of an imagistic space. Here perhaps we reach the point at which the visual triumphs over the tactile, the rhetorical as well as the tectonic qualities of place, which were all once equal constituents of the public realm in old cities.

CRITICAL SPACE OR SPACE OF THE QUOTIDIAN

There are very few projects which could be read, and perhaps unintentionally, as critiques of the power structures and the cultural symbols underlying any architectural project from the moment of its inception as a project. I propose here to read this particular entry (Halwany-Lebanon) against the background of Henri Lefebvre's critique of modernity through the notion of the *Quotidian*. This notion usually translated as the everyday has also the connotations of the routine, common or ordinary. But Lefebvre even read the quotidian in the quite unordinary work of James Joyce, where as he put it, "the act of writing seizes the world of desire."

In this project, I also posit that the quotidian has been raised to the level of the extra-ordinary, the realm of passion, desire and even the erotic. The act of architectural inscribing here also seizes the world of desire and illusion, and could be interpreted as a critique of a modernity often translated in this social context as a crude and sometimes excessive marriage between a western consumerism and an oriental exoticism, bringing so to speak the best or the worst of both worlds. Looking at these images what is conveyed is a certain hyperrealism which seems to be a sarcastic critique of the projected modernity, the modernity seen by Lefebvre as an antithetical opposite to the quotidian.

Again, according to Lefebvre, the modern is marked by the nostalgia for style, by the absence of style and the obsession

with it. In this scheme, the pursuit of style is ironically depicted at all levels, from the heroic figure in the centre with a wind-blown jacket to the flying man headed towards the minaret to the handycam-toting lady in the cave-like interior of a night club situated below the Mosque.

This scheme smacks of all the trimmings of a post-modern modernity. Here, as Lefebvre would put it, style is intentionally degraded and split apart into the mass-culture and the high-art. Here art is no longer rooted in the quotidian village fest and its rituals as in the traditional spaces of the Old Souks; it merely becomes a fetishized ornament to the quotidian. And likewise, architecture, as high art, becomes only an ornament, a backdrop to the bizarre activities displayed. Its kitsch buildings confirm their role as screens that truly carry the artifice to a more daring end than the first pre-competition proposal.

CONCLUSION

All said, these questions have perhaps all been raised before. Manfredo Tafuri, for one, questioned the possibility that any work of architecture could actively lead to a reform in the realm of praxis, i.e. the political dimension of architecture. All these projects, even though they do not cross over the limits of the given site with few exceptions, still aim to transcend the condition of conflict which is perhaps the only reality of the site in question, being the center of the city and the locus of commerce and public life.

The relation of each proposal to the creation of a public realm where fabrication may occur alongside public action, as was the case in the souks or in the Greek agora, could constitute a more objective criteria in the evaluation of such a competition than the search for the different forms of tectonicity. Historically, the souks always contained public places from the mosque and its court to the public baths, the water fountain and the small cafés, and even around the shops where production and retail were prevalent. Nabil Beyhum, a prominent Lebanese sociologist wrote in 1992 before the competition was even conceived, that the souks should constitute an entry to the whole question of reconstruction in post-war Beirut since they constituted a desirable micro-model of social urban life.

Yet does the architectural project that proposes such places guarantee by itself the renaissance of a political life where public interactions could occur? Does the form by itself generate the political action necessary for its maintenance? It was the purpose of this paper to question whether, notwithstanding the necessary normative critique of all these proposals, an important aspect escapes and perhaps always remains outside the boundaries of any criticism. The difficulty of criticism lies perhaps here in the self-resignation to a task that one knows will remain forever subject to unpredictable parameters, a task that will remain somewhat incomplete.