

Project looks to a new future for Nahr Beirut

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Susannah Walden | The Daily Star

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BEIRUT: The view down the narrow streets on the western edge of Burj Hammoud ends abruptly at a concrete wall, blocking the sight of neighboring Badawi. Eight meters below the edge is the shallow trash-strewn trickle that is the Nahr Beirut river. Long a bane for those living on its banks, there are those who are imagining a new future for the river, both in its ecological rehabilitation and its reconnection to the neighborhoods it bisects. “[The river] was integrated into our social and economic fabric and the image of the city. It was part of our life,” Arpiné Mangassarian, the founder of Badguèr – a nearby hub for Armenian artisans, crafts, cuisine and community told The Daily Star.

“[Now] it is absent,” she said, spreading her small, worn hands on the lace-covered table. “[Locals] are not conscious that there even is a river. This element that was natural, very important, created an interaction between people and gave a feeling of calm, they’ve lost it.”

Less than 50 years ago, the river was a source of ecological and social value. Now it is a source of disgust and derision, famous for turning blood-red from unidentified industrial waste, stinking with sewage and teeming with garbage.

The river was encased in concrete in 1968. While it helped protect the low-lying Burj Hammoud from flooding, it destroyed the ecosystem and the associated benefits of regulating air quality, soil and water flow, and its role in supporting the life of plants, animals, and people. It also prevented locals from using it as a recreational and community space.

Beirut River 2.0, a collaboration between architecture lab theOtherDada, UN-Habitat, and the Lebanese Center for Energy Conservation, is a project looking to improve the technical and environmental elements of the river. They also highlight the impact the river’s pollution and potential rehabilitation have on the local communities.

Funding permitting, the pilot project would create greening projects on a 5,000 square meter plot donated by the LCEC on the Badawi side, and an equivalent space in smaller “pocket parks” in the much-denser Burj Hammoud and Naba’a areas. The initiative also proposes to build a pedestrian bridge, upgrade waste and storm water infrastructure, and improve habitat regeneration in the area.

Adib Dada, founder of theOtherDada, emphasizes sustainability and social awareness in his work, whether in architecture, research or consulting. He has long been interested in the waterway, but it was the announcement of the installation of 30-meter stretch of solar panels above the river in 2013 that planted the seed for a project to revive the river.

Dada and his team have been developing ideas and partnerships, pro bono, for over two and a half years now. “For us it’s a project ... we self-initiated,” he said. “[We] think it can have a major impact and it’s part of giving back to our community.”

Dada believes that the concrete channeling changed the river significantly. “It became a no-man’s-land, no one had access to it anymore, no one felt like it belonged to them,” he explained. “Our theory is that ... it started deteriorating from then [on] because it became a dumping ground, because no one cared for it anymore.”

A key element of Beirut River 2.0 is to rebuild a sense of collective ownership of the river. TheOtherDada has been working to engage with the communities in Burj Hammoud, Naba’a and Badawi, running focus groups, among other initiatives. These are held in collaboration with TandemWorks, a nonprofit that works on social, cultural, and environmental issues through art interventions.

“We’re trying to partner up with many different people and organizations that would come and take part of this project and make it their own,” Dada said.

The challenge, however, is raising awareness and changing people’s perceptions of the river. Yasmina Choueiri, urban environmental consultant at theOtherDada, said the focus groups reflect this. “We had people who were 15 to 80 years old and we were asking if they had the choice of doing anything what would it be?” she said. “They just wanted to cover it and have parking. It makes sense coming from them because of the smell, so if they cover it they would solve the problem[s].”

This highlights the importance of the other element of the project led by UN-Habitat – infrastructure improvement. “The population ... has a range of other problems to think about before they start thinking about the river, and that’s fine ... but we know that the sewage they have in the street goes into the storm water and vice versa, that also affects the river,” explained Synne Bergby, program planning adviser at UN-Habitat. “The river gives you the opportunity to talk about different challenges related to the area – sewage water, public spaces, solid waste, how the city has organized the river as a divide – there are so many bits and pieces of infrastructure that are not working that have caused the river to get to this state.”

UN-Habitat has already completed a refurbishment of Burj Hammoud’s dilapidated water pumping system in a separate project and has mapped where the neighborhood’s storm water and sewage systems cross – in over 30 places. “Doing a full upgrade of the Beirut River is a massive project, and that in itself wouldn’t repair the standards of the infrastructure system, so you need to look at that as well,” she said.

Dada said the municipality has responded positively to the project. However, besides the challenge of securing funding, there needs to be people power behind the ideas. “Even if there’s no funding [it progresses] if there are a lot of people who take the initiative.”

For Mangassarian as well it is people who are at the heart of the river’s future. “A place has a soul,” she said, “people create a story and this story gives a place soul.”

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Daily Star on August 23, 2016, on page 2.