



Case Study: Beirut's RiverLESS Forest

Planting urban forests across Beirut

D&AD Future Impact recognises and supports initiatives and products with the potential to drive positive change in the world. In 2019, we chose 11 winning ideas to receive a 12-month programme of support. This included a two-day accelerator with talks and mentoring sessions, hosted at the McCann offices in New York, with the aim of helping these ideas improve, evolve and continue to make an impact in the world.

Here we take a closer look at one of these ideas: Beirut's RiverLESS Forest - an initiative that's planting urban forests across Beirut, to create new public space and raise awareness of the city's polluted river.

Beirut has some of the lowest rates of green space per capita in the world. While the World Health Organization recommends at least nine square metres per person, in Beirut the figure is 0.8. Public space in general is in serious short supply, with the Beirut River- which at one point performed an important social, environmental and cultural role- channeled into concrete in 1968. Since then, it's become a kind of no man's land, disconnecting communities from each other and turning into a dumping ground for waste, sewage and other industrial pollution. Sustainable architecture consultancy The Other Dada has been studying the effects of this since 2013, to understand how it could address the river's loss and create new green space for Beirut's inhabitants. The answer? Planting pockets of forest in the city.



Beirut's RiverLESS Forest: Future Impact / Wood Pencil / Initiative / Environment and Sustainability / 2019

“Instead of reviving the river itself, which is in concrete and not possible to renaturalise, we thought we could bring back some of the services it was providing, such as regulating temperature, water levels, water cycle, habitat for different species, cultural services and meeting places for people,” explains The Other Dada’s founder Adib Dada. “This includes creating pedestrian crossings over the river, public parks on either side so people can cross and meet in a park, and looking at nature-based solutions to stormwater management- so diverting water from the streets into specially designed areas and parks or sidewalks.”

Using crowdfunding platform SUGi Project, The Other Dada raised the money to plant its first forest in partnership with Afforestt- who are experts in urban rewilding. The practice took part in a six-day intensive workshop in the middle of 2019, which included planting 800 trees and shrubs for its first urban forest. Since then, The Other Dada has continued its mission, planting 2,500 more, and creating six miniature forests as part of Beirut's ongoing protests.

"It's our way of reclaiming public space," explains Dada. "One of the big demands of the revolution is the lack of public space, and that's a very political decision in terms of not wanting people to congregate. We are targeting leftover plots of land and urban landfill- so basically not sexy or useful types of spaces. We want to take completely neglected spaces and turn them into great public spaces, or just a great green space that can be accessible to the public or not, depending on the location."

The forests have drawn an enthusiastic reaction, with people joining The Other Dada to plant trees, and join maintenance sessions- needed for the first two to three years of a forest's life, before it becomes self sufficient. "People come and plant who have never touched a plant before, and they're doing it right in the comfort of their city," says Dada. "They're city dwellers who don't venture out, so it's reconnecting them with nature in a very urban setting." Many of the forests are located close to the river as well, which Dada says has raised awareness and opened up conversations around its polluted state.

The project recently received a \$14,000 Future Impact development grant from D&AD, which will help replant Lebanese forests that burnt in the October 2019 forest fires, fund the afforestation of a coastal area in Lebanon and the creation of a food forest, and also support a carbon sequestration study.