

Arab Center for Architecture champions Lebanese modernism

By India Stoughton

BEIRUT: What do Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum in New York, Jorn Utzon's Sydney Opera House, Oscar Niemeyer's Niteroi Contemporary Art Museum in Rio de Janeiro and Richard Rogers' Lloyd's Building in London have in common? It's simple. They are all celebrated examples of modernist architecture, and, as such, no one would ever think of tearing them down to make way for a block of luxury apartments.

Unfortunately, modernist structures in Beirut – designed by Niemeyer or not – run just such a risk on a regular basis.

The Arab Center for Architecture aims to change all that. Founded in 2008 by George Arbid, Jad Tabet, Fouad El Koury, Amira El Solh, Hashem Sarkis, Bernard Khoury and Nada Assi, the NGO is in the throes of its first public function this month, an exhibition at Clemenceau's Villa Salem, entitled "Modern Design and Architecture in the Arab World: The Beginnings of a Project."

The organization's mission statement explains that it aims to provide a public forum for discussion relating to the past, present and future of architecture. In tandem, it hopes to develop awareness of the cultural importance of modernist architecture as well as pre-independence and ancient architecture.

To further these aims, explains architect and exhibition co-curator Mazen Haidar, the center is engaged in creating an extensive archive of architectural documents, including blueprints, sketches, models and photographs, as well as actively participating in efforts to save the remaining modernist structures from destruction.

"The purpose of this exhibition is, first off, to introduce the center to the general public," Haidar says, "and also to highlight modern heritage, because it's not considered part of the architectural heritage of the country."

The exhibition consists of a well-balanced mixture of architects' drawings, photographs, sketches and models from the center's archives, as well as some on loan from private collections – drawing attention to the lengthy processes involved in designing and executing a building, and the value of documentation in conveying this knowledge once the structure is completed.

Exhibition plaques provide the architect's name, the year of completion, the building's location and its status – demolished, at risk or disfigured.

A particularly interesting insight into the architectural process is provided by several buildings about which multiple items are on display. Take the Arida Building in Sanayeh, which is at risk. Designed by architects George Rais and Théo Canaan and completed in 1951, it is represented

by several photographs, a sketch and an architect's model, conveying the design process and the building's unique structure in a variety of ways.

Equally fascinating are two large blueprints of the Villa Salem – where the exhibition is being held – built in the late 1930s by Lucien Cavro. Restored by Nizar Fawwaz under the aegis of the ACA, these drawings help to draw attention to the fact that unique modernist buildings are used daily for all sorts of purposes in Beirut, but are rarely remarked upon by the public, who generally do not consider them of interest.

“We want to change the mentality,” explains Haidar. “It has always been said that the Middle East has been a passive basin for modernist ideas brought from the West, which is not true. ... These architects have been exploring in this context, and modern architecture was developed by different tendencies in the country. It was adapted to the country and it was adapted to the needs of society – it was adapted to the network in the city of Beirut.”

The association is supplemented by volunteers, from architects and lawyers to students, who help out scanning documents, archiving and cataloging. The ACA also restores damaged documents and makes copies of those lent out by deceased architects' families.

Haidar explains that while the primary focus at present is on expanding the center's archives, they're also open to collaborating when it comes to taking an active approach towards saving buildings at risk of destruction. Activist groups, he notes, such as Save Beirut Heritage or the Association for Protecting Natural Sites and Old Buildings in Lebanon (APSAD), could benefit from the scientific and legal know-how of the ACA's team.

“The main intention [is] to preserve the buildings,” he says, “and probably to give guidelines for any conservation project, to preserve them as they are. ... [We] have original photos that could be helpful in preserving the artistic and historical value of these buildings.

“If one of these buildings is in danger,” he continues, “I can in an afternoon make a report for the Directorate General of Antiquities and probably stop the demolition. Or get in contact with the architect who's intervening on this site and try to convince him to rely on original drawings of the site without changing it.”

For the moment, Haidar hopes the center's first exhibition will succeed in raising awareness of the threat facing Lebanon's modernist buildings and highlight that modern architecture has its own charm and appeal.

“People don't see it as beautiful,” he says. “Generally there's a real lack of knowledge about this. So whenever you mention a building like the Shams Building on Raouche people might think that it's interesting, but nothing more than this. People are so used to destruction that they think that in order to preserve the site you have to demolish the building to build something new. This is extremely dangerous.”

“Modern Design and Architecture in the Arab World: The Beginnings of a Project” is up at Villa Salem (formerly Otium) in Clemenceau until June 1. The Arab Center for Architecture's headquarters in Ashrafieh will be open to the general public on June 9, as part of International Archives Day. For more information please call 03-209-226.