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## Lebanese architect blazes new path

Joseph Hammond March 7, 2019

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### Article Summary

For Beirut-born architect Amale Andraos, it is still surprisingly difficult to operate as a woman in architecture.

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 Raymond Adams Photography/Facebook/WORKac  
Lebanese Architect Amale Andraos seen in a picture uploaded Sept. 21, 2016.

The selection of a design for the new Beirut Museum of Art building marks an important step forward for women in the Middle East and in the Lebanese cultural scene. In December 2018, the museum announced that the winning design was from WORKac, a New York-based firm co-founded by Beirut-born architect Amale Andraos.

Andraos, currently the dean of the Columbia Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, co-founded WORKac with her partner, Dan Wood. The museum design developed by WORKac will sit atop a section of Beirut that was once part of the Green Line, the demarcation point between various factions of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990).

"We are confident that WORKac's design will create an inspiring space for our visitors, exhibitions and programming," Joe Saggi, executive president of the Board of Trustees of BeMA (Beirut Museum of Art), told Al-Monitor. He added, "BeMA's core mission is to be a site of dialogue and discussion among diverse communities in Lebanon, an aim that is both expressed philosophically and concretely facilitated through the porous surface and staggered galleries of WORKac's design."

The new museum is a democratized space and features a honeycombed exterior that also seems to invoke the muqarnas — a type of ornamental vaulting found in traditional architecture across the region. This allows the building to feature more than 70 balconies, some of which will be open to the public and others that will serve as working spaces. The building will feature 2,700-square-meters of dedicated exhibition space to present the work of contemporary artwork from Lebanon and artwork generated by Lebanese in the diaspora.

"The inviting vertical promenade will offer a site for programming as well as accessible public space connecting seamlessly with the cityscape," Saggi said, adding, "Inside the museum, sight lines between gallery spaces encourage audiences to recognize connections across modern and contemporary works."

Andraos was born in Beirut in the early 1970s. She left Lebanon for a life that would take her everywhere from Saudi Arabia to France. After attending McGill University in Montreal, she earned a master's degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Design. She also worked in the Netherlands for celebrity Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas at the Office of Metropolitan Architecture.

Despite the traveling and the turbulence of the Lebanese civil war, Beirut remained home and the subject of her intellectual curiosity. Earlier in her academic career, she also taught at the American University of Beirut.

"BeMA is a culmination of many ideas we have explored through architecture about the city. ... My thesis as a student was also on Beirut — the site of which was downtown — and explored the tensions between the site's past, present condition and projected future," she told Al-Monitor.



*WORKac's design for the new Beirut Museum of Art building in Beirut, Lebanon (WORKac press release)*

Despite — or because of — the destruction of much of the city, Beirut has served as the unlikely incubator for some of the most interesting architects in the Middle East.

There is no shortage of projects that invoke Lebanon's tragic past, often through dark humor. The most well-known, perhaps, is Bernard Khoury, whose haunting B018 night club doubles as a mausoleum to the civil war and just underwent another upgrade this year. Another Lebanese architect, Salim Al-Kadi, has developed a number of interesting buildings but is probably best known for developing a bulletproof keffiyeh in 2016. The wounds of that conflict can still be seen in the bullet holes on many walls and shells of once-grand structures around downtown Beirut. However, Andraos — working closely with her husband and the rest of her team — have designed spaces with a more uplifting vision of humanity from a new community library in New York to a conference center in Gabon.

“The wounds of the Lebanese civil war are still there, and today, new difficulties have been layered unto those. No single project can undo those, but the museum will contribute to sharing a longer history,” she said of the conflict that cost as many as 150,000 lives — most of them Lebanese.

The aftermath of the Lebanese civil war was one landscape she had to navigate; the other was being a woman in a challenging field.

“It is still surprisingly difficult to operate as a woman in architecture, especially within contexts where there are very few of them who are visible,” Andraos said.

Despite the larger number of creative Lebanese architects, there have been few opportunities for women in Beirut and elsewhere in the country of 6 million. An important milestone occurred in 2014 with the completion of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs building on the American University of Beirut (AUB) campus.

Zaha Hadid, who died in 2016, designed the building. Born in Baghdad in 1950, she rose to become an unlikely architectural star the world over who broke some informal barriers to women in the industry. Hadid's design for

the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, was the first art museum in the United States designed by a woman.

“Her legacy and its extent is still to be fully understood, and as we uncover more and more women who were visionaries in their time, redefining what architecture and design meant through an expanded field of practice — from the Bauhaus to artists and architects who are finally being acknowledged today — we will be able to open up new models of practice not only for women, but for everyone with a desire to engage the built environment and the lives it holds,” Andraos said.

Hadid’s building on the AUB campus also holds a bittersweet distinction. It stands closer to her native Iraq than any other project completed during her lifetime. That dream may be fulfilled posthumously, as Hadid designed a plan for a new Iraqi parliament building and a towering new Central Bank of Iraq building. The status of both projects remains unclear at this time, however.

The Beirut museum’s link to the Lebanese civil war demonstrates one of the core competencies of WORKac — namely, the reimagined spaces that were once off limits. For example, the architecture company once redesigned a 1-kilometer (0.6 miles) section of Hua Qiang Bei Road in Shenzhen, which was also a project to reimagine of what had once been a gritty industrial area of the Chinese city.

The firm’s New Holland Island Cultural Center Masterplan seeks to repurpose a space of historical St. Petersburg, Russia, that was once a Tsarist military installation and was off limits to the public for 300 years.

In her work and practice, Andraos continues to deconstruct barriers in cities around the world and build new identities. “It is a great moment for women in the field in general, and we are making strides,” Andraos said.

Found in: Architecture, Women’s rights



Joseph Hammond is a former Fulbright fellow and journalist who has reported extensively from Africa, Eurasia, and the Middle East.

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