



STARS IN THEIR EYES

ANALYSIS

Should the regeneration of Beirut be placed in the hands of big-name foreign architects? Oliver Ephgrave investigates

Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Qatar are well known for their penchant for 'starchitects', perhaps best epitomised by the Cultural District on Saadiyat Island. Yet the same appetite for big-name designers can be seen further north in the Mediterranean city of Beirut. The continuing regeneration of the city centre, fol-

lowing the civil war from 1975-1990, has seen developers turn to some of the most famous architects in the business.

For starters, Foster + Partners has celebrated the start of construction on 3 Beirut, a residential and retail scheme within the masterplan by Solidere, the government-backed company tasked with the regenera-

tion of the city centre. One of the largest completed projects in the centre is Beirut Souks, now the city's biggest shopping district, designed by Spanish master Raphael Moneo.

Meanwhile, Solidere is behind a glamorous waterfront district, masterplanned by Steven Holl Architects, which saw the launch of Zaitunay Bay section in June 2011. The city centre

will also see a department store by Zaha Hadid, an office and retail complex by Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners and an apartment tower by Herzog and de Meuron.

Another foreign architecture firm to win work in Beirut is Allies and Morrison. The UK-based practice is behind District//S, a residential and retail scheme developed by Estates SAL on a plot bought from Solidere.

Alfredo Caraballo, director, reveals the status of the project: "The design is still being developed. We handed the schematic design to the local architect, R&K Architects and Consultant Engineers, and they are now doing an archaeological survey. After this the enabling works will start. We are hoping that they don't discover anything important. It will

take around four years to build, but excavations are taking much longer than expected."

Commenting on the current design climate, he remarks: "The city is experiencing a creative boom - a lot of exciting things are happening. There are so many big name architects that are doing stuff. Beirut is a crossroads of East and West, with Arab, European, Ottoman, Roman influences. There are so many layers of history, which you can see in the faces of different people."

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Alfredo Caraballo, director, Allies and Morrison

He believes that Solidere has helped to transform the centre of the city for the better. "All the developments that Solidere are doing are interesting. I think that Solidere has done a terrific job with the regeneration by mixing different types of architecture.

"Some buildings have been completed rebuilt to what they were before. With Raphael Moneo's souk they took the floorplan and made a new building, on the traces of the old, while District//S is completely new.

The clock tower roundabout in Beirut's reconstructed centre.





Raphael Moneo's Souk scheme is the largest completed project by Solidere.

Advert

Foster + Partners' 3 Beirut (top) and Allies & Morrison's District//S.



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Elie Abs, managing partner for local firm Accent Design Group

Solidere has been quite successful in its selection of architects."

However, Elie Abs, managing partner for local firm Accent Design Group is less positive about the impact of the scheme. He remarks: "We all thought Solidere would reactivate the public space but we ended up with a lack of public and an excess of private space. It's like a membership club that is accessed by credit cards. "I don't think that [beautifying the

centre] is the priority. When you are landing on the plane you can tell the areas that need to be developed. The basics are not there. Zoning and regulation need to be fixed. People are being kicked out."

He is also sceptical about the use of foreign architects. "I'm not sure about the idea of bringing in big foreign architects. It takes a lot of time to understand how we are operating in Beirut. Developers are using this

strategy for marketing. Most of the buildings they are doing are residential, not museums or airports. What we need now is more urban quality versus architecture. I don't think a building alone will solve problems. What we need is inventions on a larger scale than objects."

Abs states that many local firms are being overshadowed by the famous international firms. "Even without these big names, Beirut is always going to be interesting for architecture. There are many local architects that have a lot to offer," he says.

Caraballo agrees that there are many talented local firms. "For me, what is more interesting than the big names is the young Lebanese practices that have good work, such as

109 Architects and Bernard Khoury. They have an advantage as they have roots in their own culture."

He believes that Allies and Morrison's District//S project manages to reflect the local culture. "We are proud of the project - our client and the local architect feel that it is very Lebanese. We didn't want to do anything pastiche or kitsch and we paid a lot of attention to the historical context. It's about understanding the Lebanese architecture. It's very different here - the buildings are very tight together in response to the climate. It is similar to places like Naples.

"We wanted to do a project that is part of the city with a sense of scale, rather than concentrating on every detail. There will be a market square, looking at local references.

"Beirut and Lebanon feels more European than other places in the Middle East - it has a Mediterranean culture which involves a use of outdoor space. The flats in District//S have enormous balconies, like outdoor rooms, for parties and dinner," he adds.

Meanwhile, Accent Design Group has designed a high rise tower, Beirut Observatory, which picked up this year's WAN Residential Award in the unbuilt category. Abs says the tower, located on the periphery of the reconstructed centre, plays on the hybrid nature of

Accent Design Group's Beirut Observatory (right), and the reconstructed centre (below).

the city. He continues: "Beirut has a fragmented identity, that is the context we are operating in. The building celebrates diversity versus unity. It's our first project of such a large scale in Beirut.

"We have tried to challenge the Beirut high-rise typology. There's a contrast between the stacked glass boxes and the solid block on the back. The boxes create a dynamic relation with the highway and increase social interaction between tenants. The client has approved the design concept - I think it is just a matter of time before it goes ahead."

Regarding future opportunities, Caraballo comments: "Office buildings will be a big thing, we know this from conversations with our clients. The high end office market is under-supplied, because companies are coming into the city due to the boom. It is difficult to find high-end offices with big floor plates.



He continues: "Also Lebanon has huge tourist potential, so hospitality is important. But the main opportunity is in residential, in all price categories. The middle class has a huge demand, and there is development potential on the surrounding

hills. The centre is high-end due to the land values."

Caraballo also points out the lack of public space, but adds that the waterfront district will help to address this need. "Beirut has very few public spaces such as piazzas, it's very dense. However, the waterfront will have a huge park facing the sea. It will offer a new skyline and public space."

Caraballo reveals that Allies and Morrison is currently working on a 100m tower for Estates SAL within the waterfront area.

However, Abs is cynical about the nature of the waterfront district. "The scenery is like Dubai - there are contradictions everywhere. They are projecting a beautiful, lavish image with boats. You wake up after a few seconds when you are at the traffic lights. We are not against regeneration, but it's more important to focus on other areas rather than having expensive toys." 🗨️

