

Projecting Beirut

Episodes in the Construction and Reconstruction of a Modern City

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Prestel

The Vanishing Public Square

Nowhere is the contrast in the design approach so clear as around the issue of urban squares. Where one project seems to run away from the civic public place, the other seems to reinstate it at every opportunity ('entrance piazza,' 'Piazza San Marco,' 'central piazza,' 'the theater piazza,' 'beach piazza'). Dar al-Handasah's four green squares and Linord's single circular garden are seen as amenities to the surrounding residential developments, while civic and institutional buildings surround Bofill's largest squares, the largest and most perfect of which is the marina with its esplanade and sundial. Symbolically, it represents the center of public life. Unfortunately, Dar al-Handasah's ensuing proposal replaces the esplanade with residential buildings and

limits public access to the marina. Clearly, the European piazza is adopted by Bofill as a model to be imported and emulated as a platform for public life in the city.¹⁵ However, his desire to re-create the Italian piazza, whether centralized or open to the sea, came into conflict with the realities of the Lebanese residential market. A distinct piazza is usually carved out, as it were, from a tight urban fabric. The developer, however, insisted on supplying the market with detached apartment buildings that are the residential norm in Beirut.

Within the revisions of the Dar al-Handasah master plan, the single urban space left to design is the marina. In fact, Bofill has been hired back, together with architect Nabil Gholam, by Mr. Joseph Khoury, to design the urban spaces included in his portion of the Dbayeh project, namely the marina and its surrounding area. Together, Bofill and Gholam try and imagine the basin as the large paved piazza in the original project. To define the perimeter of the marina, a colonnade wraps around the basin and is echoed by a double row of trees. The sharp five-meter drop in level between the esplanade and the promenade is mediated by an inclined 'green' plane. From there the landscaped 'talus' provides a green backdrop to the horizon of columns. In the willful articulation of the perimeter can be read Bofill's attempt to recover the central square. Thus the open center becomes the 'public interior' of the city. Unfortunately, however, the public piazza is also a sunken piazza, located below the ground level datum. It is therefore public only inasmuch as pedestrians will be allowed into it in order to shop at the adjacent arcade. Otherwise, it

is planned as a water basin for yachts and it is surrounded by private development with limited access. Such planning totally diverges from Bofill's Cité de la Mer, which provided straight vehicular connections on either side of the marina, all the way from the expressway to the sea.