Samir Kassir Square

Beirut
Lebanon

Vladimir Djurovic
Landscape Architecture
Introduction

Samir Kassir Square lies in the midst of Beirut’s Central Business District, bordered on three sides by buildings and by a street on the fourth. Despite its frenetic setting, it is a place of calm and peace. At its heart are two old ficus trees, large enough to shade most of the space. A reflecting pool with water cascading over its edges marks the border between the square and the street. The pool is flanked by a raised timber deck that encircles the trees and supports a long bench of solid stone. The western side of the square is a bermed area that accommodates the downward slope of the site. The berm has a ground cover of dwarf Natal plum (*carissa macrocarpa*), a water-conserving plant known for its dark evergreen leaves and its white star-shaped flowers and red berries which grow throughout the year.
Jury Citation

One could read Samir Kassir Square simply as a stone bench, a wooden deck and a reflecting pool designed for the sole purpose of providing a visual frame for two of the oldest trees in downtown Beirut. Another possible reading would be that of a highly crafted and complex urban artefact which skillfully tackles the spatial conditions and infrastructure of its locality with a few calculated moves. The strength of the project is that it is purposefully situated between the two readings, in a state of restrained and silent complexity.

It is through the rigorous design approach and an economy of elements and language that the project achieves its objectives. The insistence on showing only what is essential – and nothing else – is what makes this particular work excel. One can trace a harmonious and logical thread that links the general idea to the detail, the architecture to the landscape, and the space to the city.

The importance of this work lies not only in the assimilation and transformation of its context, but also in what it necessitates, or rather how it actually transforms. This project conceives the public urban space as a shift in the city’s rhythm. It emerges as a contemplative space where the diverse is celebrated, and allowed to exist in serene silence.
Project Description

Solidere, the Lebanese Company for Development and Reconstruction, has been rebuilding the war-torn central area of Beirut since the mid-1990s. The company, Lebanon’s largest, operates as a land and real-estate developer and a property manager. It has been granted powers of eminent domain as well as a level of regulatory authority subject to some controls, such as the granting of construction permits by the Beirut Municipality. Over the last decade it has commissioned new structure from both Lebanese architects and international practices such as Ricardo Bofill, Kohn Pedersen Fox, Steven Holl, Rafael Moneo, Jean Nouvel and Christian de Portzamparc.

The masterplan that Solidere developed for the Central Business District includes a number of public spaces, of which Samir Kassir Square is one. Occupying a site of 815 square metres, the square provides a space of greenery, shade and calm within a busy urban setting. Directly to its north is the an-Nahar newspaper and publishing house. To the west is the Beirut Municipality building, which dates back to the early part of the twentieth century and is currently being rehabilitated. The building to the south, now under construction, will house the headquarters of the National Bank of Kuwait as well as retail spaces and coffee shops. Another new building, a hotel, is rising to the east. In the very near future, then, the site will be completely surrounded by buildings, which will make its role as an open space even more vital.

Solidere initially considered cutting down the two old trees, as ficus are notorious for their invasive root system and extensive shedding of leaves. The architect dissuaded them, and instead masterfully incorporated them into the design. He argued that the trees are amongst the few mature specimens surviving in the area, and are an expression of the history and memory of the place. They also have a powerful inherent sculptural quality that makes them the main visual focus of the square.

The area around the two trees is covered with a raised timber deck made of Burma teak planks. This raised deck serves a number of purposes. It separates the floor from the root systems of the ficus, which can break on-grade pavements made of concrete or stone. It also protects the trees: the more usual practice of adding layers of earth to the original ground level to cover the root system carries the risk of suffocating them. In addition, the use of the raised deck creates space underneath for the mechanical room housing the pumps and filters for the pool.

The reflecting, cascading pool provides an element of separation from the busy street flanking the site on the east, helping to create an intimate and contemplative space. The sound of the water brimming over the pool’s grooved edges has a soothing effect and creates a counterbalance to the noise of the surrounding city. The reflecting surface of the pool mirrors part of the surroundings, creating a sense of expansiveness.

Vladimir Djurovic’s work is known for its meticulous detailing and emphasis on durability, and he generally focuses on a limited palette of materials in each of his designs. At Samir Kassir Square, he accentuates hard-scaping (primarily stone) with plant materials. Local basalt pebbles line the inside of the pool, and imported Italian Bardelio stone is used for the sides, since no local stone could be found with the requisite characteristics of colour and reflectivity. Local Kour limestone is used for the floor paving, the long bench and the steps. The latter are made from solid stone blocks rather than a reinforced concrete skeleton sheathed in paving – this solution, although more expensive in the short term, will better resist extensive wear and tear.

The large ficus trees and the pool create a very pleasant cool and shaded microclimate within the centre of Beirut, a place to escape the heat of the summer months. Many who work in this part of the city come to the garden in search of peace and quiet. The square is especially popular with the staff of the an-Nahar newspaper.

Originally known as Square Four, the space was renamed Samir Kassir Public Garden after the assassination of the popular intellectual and an-Nahar columnist Samir Kassir in June 2005. His widow, Gizelle Khoury, campaigned to have the square renamed in his honour, since he was known to be fond of the space and liked to spend time there.

In the way it draws people towards it, the square highlights the positive role that public spaces can play as places of refuge, calm and contemplation – at a time when many of the public spaces in our cities are being programmed primarily for leisure and recreation.

In its visual conception, in its sparing use of materials and forms and in the quality of its detailing, the garden points to a clear new direction for landscape design in a region where the discipline is not yet well established or mature, and where designers often try to emulate prototypes (such as tropical, English or French gardens) that are inappropriate and out of context, both visually and environmentally.

The text was adapted from a report by Mohammad al-Asad.
site plan
1 solid stone bench
2 wooden deck
3 ficus trees
4 reflecting pool
5 entrances

elevation

section
Lebanese architect Vladimir Djurovic established the Beirut-based Vladimir Djurovic Landscape Architecture (VdLA) in 1995. The firm offers a full range of landscape architectural services with all their architectural and interior comple-
ments. Its expertise extends from the creation of getaways and retreats to the planning and development of boutique hotels and resorts, from private residences to intricate urban spaces. Djurovic has been successful in architectural competitions and has won a series of awards, including the American Society of Landscape Architects’ Residential Design Award of Excellence for the Elie Saab Residence in Lebanon in 2007 and a Cityscape Architectural Review Award in 2005. He has lectured at Imperial College London and the Architectural Association of Ireland and his work has been featured in many international journals and magazines.
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