

People + Projects

The phoenix of Beirut: Nadim Karam's urban interventions

by Christina Lanzl / August 31, 2012



Survive Beirut

I grew up in this city. I also have the impression that I died here more than one time. My life here continues. My work, my atelier, my family, my childhood. Is all of this a reality or a dream? —Nadim Karam, Urban Toys

Nadim Karam wears many hats: He is an architect, artist, academic and author. His early life and career was directly affected by the civil war in Lebanon, which lasted from 1975 to 1990. An estimated 130,000–150,000 individuals were killed, more than 1 million were wounded (25% of the population) and 350,000 refugees fled to refugee camps, where many live until this day. Karam was among those leaving the country after winning a scholarship from the University of Tokyo in 1982 to pursue his master's degree, where he graduated with a PhD in architecture during his 10-year stay.

In 1992, Karam moved to Paris. Lacking funds and contacts, he became a rebel graffiti artist, painting hundreds of "archaic" figures on billboards, in the Metro and in his sketch books. One year later he returned to his native city, Beirut. Between 1994 and 2000, he created three monumental temporary public art installations at the Nicolas Sursock Museum, the National Museum of Lebanon and in the Central District. After founding Atelier Hapsitus as an interdisciplinary forum for architecture, art and design in 1996, he also commenced work on architectural commissions.

Zooming in on his early career, his initial success in the field of public art, improving the cultural life of Beirut, gave him a solid basis for his architectural work in more recent years. In his early public art installations, he contributed to a process of cultural rejuvenation and the reintroduction of a more harmonious, public life at the zero hour of a new beginning for the country. Karam's creative energy facing the tense, overall situation comes to life in his book *Urban Toys*. He writes: "There is lots of terror on earth, and there are lots of bombs in cities these days. Cities, countries and the world are caught in a tide of nihilism whose protagonists believe that destruction is a solution. There should be a hundred times more creative effort to reaffirm what is being negated." A philosophy of humanistic thinkers distinguishes Karam's writings, whose creative energies are released to overcome violence and destruction.



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Immediately following his 1993 return to Lebanon, Karam began to engage in reactivating his city. The Sursock Museum became the partner for his first urban art project. The leading bank of Lebanon, Société Générale de Banque au Liban (SGBL), and the moving company Debbas signed on as sponsors.

Karam lined the Sursock building's circular driveway with a procession of human-scale figurative objects, which also rested on the elegant facade's cornice. An accompanying sound installation whispered words in Arab, French and English, the country's main languages. In the galleries, Karam presented painting and installation art. Projections of abstract images onto a cube situated on the plaza in front of the building completed the overall concept. The flat, iconic shapes hover between graffiti and archaic symbolism, while establishing stark contrast to the museum's decorative formalism. Recording three languages indicate international presence and ambition of artist, museum and—ultimately—the country.

For his war-torn homeland, Karam avoided laden icons; rather, he invented new symbols to overcome a divided society. Stylistically, they cover the span between cave art to computer graphics, from Egyptian to Chinese mark making. In their newness, these symbols are presumably free from possibly weighted traditions. The next "urban art" project, however, negates this intention by controversy that erupted over one of his objects.

The 1995 *Carrier* installation, again financed by SGBL and Debbas, was installed for two weeks at the National Museum and continued on abutting damaged properties' rooflines, thereby elevating the urban context and promoting rebuilding and restoration after the war. Showcasing the museum with a temporary public art project also created a much-needed, intact public plaza, where neighbors and visitors could gather again. During the war, all the major cultural institutions were struck by bombs and collections were stored in security bunkers. Now, Karam's 45-foot-tall *Carrier* figure indeed carried the message of a culture rediscovering itself and expressing itself, thus improving a collective self-confidence. Following the exhibit, the museum received the necessary funding to reopen its doors.

Anything shown in public is subject to intense scrutiny: One of the *Carrier* sculptures caused a major outcry because of its presumed political content. Among the highly sensitized population, art easily took on a provocative tangent that quickly escalates to an altercation, a constant reminder of a volatile calm. The work was removed without the artist's knowledge.

On his firm's website, hapsitus.com, he outlines the firm's philosophy and mission:

Contemporary cities are reaching the limits of standardization and saturation. People can no longer escape the rules of social systems politically imposed on them. There is a need for emancipation, for ephemeral accumulated actions in different zones within the city that try to break through the existing network and agitate its structure... I call such phenomena hap-situs (happening) + (situation). They can appear as a result of a visible form (urban

setting) or of an invisible order (urban happening) or from a combination of both.

The Atelier's temporary works have to be understood as an urban lab that dared to dream and create after the traumatic civil war. With the renovation of a heavily damaged space in the city center, Karam realized an innovative design, an architecture expressing the desire for light and refuge in uncertain times. A metal-screen facade filters light in abstract patterns. Karam built a team of young, talented designers and architects working with an interdisciplinary approach in the areas of architecture, public art, painting and sculpture. Karam also began teaching at Notre Dame University in Beirut, where he served as dean of faculty for the Architecture, Art and Design Department from 2000 through 2003.

Archaic Procession, Karam's most ambitious urban art installation in Beirut's downtown, commenced in 1997 and became part of the city's millennium celebration. Infrastructure renewal and the demolition of more than 500 buildings dominated Beirut's urban core in the mid-1990s. Solidere, downtown's major local developer, became Karam's financial partner. Crucial for receiving the commission was Karam's international success, which resulted from an installation of his work on Prague's renowned historic Charles Bridge, one of that city's most visited sights.

Archaic Possession's movement across Beirut characterized the cycle: 20 monumental, spirited man and beast sculptures slowly advanced across the city toward the Mediterranean beaches. The figures stood atop the masses of demolition debris, danced along streets and traversed residential districts, carrying the message to believe in beauty and the future. Karam noted:

In the tense postwar climate it was impossible for authorities to decide on one artist from whatever religion to 'represent' downtown revival—my project worked, because it was temporary. It did cause some polemics but these usually abated when the sculptures changed location. I wanted to draw people's attention to the destroyed city center in an abstract and oblique way. I tried as much as possible to shift the sculptures overnight, so that the people woke up one day to find that the sculptures they saw on the bridge the previous evening were missing, but rediscovered them on the roofs of buildings. The concrete of the first two cycles had been supplanted by steel (Information Exchange: How Cities Renew, Rebuild, and Remember [Van Alen Institute, 2002])

The work garnered international resonance: New York's Van Alen Institute honored the initiative as one of five international projects in the 2002 *Renewing, Rebuilding, Remembering* exhibition that investigated the role of architecture and public art in strategic efforts to rebuild in regions of crisis. Says architect Maram El-Kadj: "The continuous movement of the *Archaic Procession* in downtown Beirut was reminiscent of the provisional aspect of the city as a whole. Along with the emptiness around it, it became a justification to rethink the city in terms of a cultural void instead of a real estate one." (from *Information Exchange: How Cities Renew, Rebuild, and Remember*).

Beyond the projects in Beirut, Karam has realized his urban interventions internationally, including in London; Dubai, United Arab Emirates; Tokyo; and Melbourne, Australia, where his permanent *Travelers* commission adorns the Sandridge Bridge. These urban art interventions formed the basis for the international launch of the architectural work after the launch of Atelier Hapsitus. From its modest beginnings as graffiti artist in Paris, Atelier Hapsitus today realizes major commissions. In Beirut alone, the portfolio includes the Net Bridge, BLC Bank building and Encounter Tower. The interdisciplinary approach thus established a solid foundation for professional growth.

Karam distinguishes himself by his humanistic worldview. In his narrative writings, he reflects on overcoming the challenges of identity and self-sufficiency, often by choosing the format of the fable. This literary format allows him to approach issues dialectically and didactically, evident in his essays *Flowers*, *Forgotten Tail* and *The Age of Voy*. His poetic views are evident in the playful forms of his positive, life-affirming sculptures. The architect and artist revive country and culture as creative leader and entrepreneur, while reaffirming presence on the world stage. Beirut and its creative community rise like a phoenix from the ashes.

Christina Lanzl, founder of the BSA's Placemaking Network, is a cultural planner, public art consultant, freelance curator, presenter and author with 25 years of experience working with the creative leadership of neighborhoods, towns and cities to create successful places that become part of our history, our evolving culture and our collective memory. She was recently appointed executive director of the Urban Art Commission in Memphis, Tennessee:

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All illustrations and images are courtesy of Atelier Hapsitus, Beirut and London.