

Al Baqaa Project: Modernity meets Tradition

The Fishermen of Tyre, who form a community at the bottom of the social ladder, have fought to renew their habitat; they belong to one of the most marginalized socio-economic groups in the country. Their families have no access to health and social insurance programs or retirement support schemes. An obsolete technology coupled with military and security considerations limit the possibility of fishing far beyond the seashore and thus result in serious overfishing. A continuous drop in the catch has yielded a systematic decline in the average income of many fishermen; their families did not benefit from the construction boom that the region witnessed during the last three decades, due to their lack of financial resources or urban regulation and constraints in the old city quarters. Their small, old, and damp houses had become overcrowded. Public health experts testified to the high levels of asthmatic and rheumatic problems amongst the members of this community.

In 1998, fishermen families from the city of Tyre organized themselves into the cooperative Al Baqaa. Through their partnership with the Association for the Development of Rural Capacities (ADR) in south Lebanon, they were able to join efforts with the Greek Catholic Archdiocese of Tyre, the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation (AECID), and the Social Promotion Foundation (FPS), as well as generous Lebanese, locals and expatriates, to support a social housing project. The project aimed to provide housing to 80 families of young fishermen and at the same time to provide public spaces that serve as a platform for developing other productive, social as well as educational activities.



Hashim Sarkis, who teaches at Harvard University and practices architecture in many countries, was the man for the job: listening to the needs expressed by fishermen and attentive to the social factors that bind their community together, he imagined this large building that met their traditions and recalled the old houses in the port, without keeping its defects. On the outskirts of Tyre, a little away from the sea, a new and colorful building stands between the grey concrete buildings and the vacant lots. Surrounded by palm trees, it adds a cheerful note to the decor of this developing semi-urban area, and its warm hues allow it to blend into the sun-drenched landscape. Behind the walls, two large, shaded courtyards are juxtaposed, which offer a coolness that is overlooked in this region. Windows and balconies open facing each other, on three floors, housing apartments where families of four or five live. Mothers can watch their children play downstairs; in a corner, fishing equipment waiting to be put away after a trip to the sea.



The first step was to maintain the balance between the private space of families and the public space, so as not to harm the community spirit that reigns among the fishermen. The building must offer a common living space to its inhabitants: this is the role played by the double inner courtyard. However, while all the apartments are oriented towards this courtyard, each of them constitutes a separate unit, in which a single family lives.

The other challenge," says Sarkis, "was not to create inequality between families. The fishermen expressed their desire to benefit from the same area in each unit, but given the conditions of the land, it was difficult to create 80 identical apartments. The solution was to design several types of housing, all of the same size, but arranged differently depending on their location in the complex. Some have a garden, other balconies, or a terrace, but they all have a comfortable opening to the outside. At the request of the fishermen, it was by drawing lots that the housing was distributed among the different families.

The fishermen of the cooperative only have to pay a symbolic sum, within their means, to acquire the apartments for 99 years.

The project has received international awards: it was awarded a Design Award by the Boston Association of Architects, and it was selected to represent Lebanon in the Phaidon Atlas of Architecture for the 21st Century.

It is now a model for the construction of low-cost housing.