

# WORKING AS A COLLECTIVE

109'S CONCEPTUAL, AND CONTEXTUAL,  
APPROACH TO ARCHITECTURE

Words by IEVA SAUDARGAITÉ



> From left to right: Richard Kassab, Youssef Mallat, Nada Assaf, Ibrahim Berberi, and Michel Georr

Located on a small winding road that cuts through an antique grid of staircases, an old stone house, home to the offices of 109 Architects, sits on a slope in the shade of fruit trees that have survived Baabda's construction boom. With Beirut's ever growing skyline and the setting sun behind me, I am warmly welcomed by architects Youssef Mallat, Ibrahim Berberi, Sandra Richani and Richard Kassab, who after sitting down at the meeting table, introduce 109 Architects with a short film. A montage of video clips that play out as the practice's *raison d'être*, it relays their unique manifesto in a way that replaces the more traditional, jargon heavy "Architect Statement" common in this field.

Instrumental to their vision is the meaning behind their name. 109 is a play on words that would be lost on Anglo-Saxon ears; its French pronunciation — *sang neuf* — spells out "new blood." The firm functions as a collective where everybody is encouraged to express, and implement, their point of view. "We work in a matrix, not a pyramid that sends orders from top down. Architects rotate their positions as project managers and team members on different projects, switching responsibilities and thus breaking office barriers to facilitate communication and an exchange of ideas," Mallat says, "so that even a young trainee can feel comfortable in giving her or his opinion."

Perhaps the most notable example of the firm's collaborative spirit stands across from Beirut's National Museum. Designed in collaboration with fellow architect Youssef Tohme, the USJ Campus of Sports and Innovation is a cluster of six perforated concrete monoliths enveloping a large courtyard, carried up to the roof terrace via a monumental open air staircase. For a city bereft of pedestrian friendly public spaces, the campus' configuration allows students to freely navigate between the various blocks, as well as experience the city at both a street and urban level.

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> Tomorrow's SAIFI

This play on different scales of urban experience also appears in Achrafieh 442. Recently completed, it is a residential building with a commercial base that rises at the intersection of two streets meeting at a slight angle. The building is split into three blocks that emerge from this common foundation divided at the intersection, thus creating a recessed piazza at one corner. “We aligned two of the blocks with the surrounding buildings, providing them with terraces and pocket gardens that filter out noise and increase privacy, in close proximity to the neighbors,” explains Mallat, “while allowing the third block to rise above to the scale of the city and provide views of the sea and mountains.”

As the sun dips further west and we move through the firm’s body of work, the conversation turns towards the question of public space. Mallat remarks, “We like to tell stories and often ask ourselves, ‘What does the space evoke as one moves through it?’” In SAIFI, a project that is still in the permit phase, the architects approach a residential building through its immediate surroundings. “The plot is located on a side street just off a busy main road, in a nook that is surprisingly calm and very inviting to pedestrian activity, due to the presence of a grocery shop, a restaurant and a hotel.” In order to capture and promote elements of a vibrant atmosphere, SAIFI is designed around a public circulation area that connects a ground floor gallery with a restaurant, a bar and a gym, distributed between floors allotted to either apartments or offices. “We want to create an experience where one can live, work and socialize in the same building,” explains Richard.





> UniHouse imagined



> Hazmieh2



> Vision of Secret Garden



*"It's a play on the social identity of people who like to show off," Kassab adds, "We wanted to do the opposite by giving them this secret, which only they, like in the book, had the keys to."*



> A suggested structure for the Guggenheim in Helsinki



> The Bamiyan cultural center in Afghanistan's bright future



> Istanbul Disaster and Prevention Center envisioned

Another mixed use project that invites the street into the building is HAZ2 in Hazmieh. Situated on a plot surrounded by three roads, a pair of three story blocks — one residential and one dedicated for office use — it connects two of the calmer streets together. To further enhance the pedestrian experience, the retail floor is fully glazed, thus inviting light and visual transparency. The volume follows the morphology of the site, even taking into account an old tree that the architects wished to preserve, but was unfortunately lost.

Whereas most of the practice's projects are designed with commonly used materials in Lebanon, such as concrete, stone and wood cladding, their design for UniHouse departs from the norm. Conceived as a skeletal megastructure to house two independent corporations on the edge of an evolving industrial area in Dekwaneh, its structure is designed with steel. "It's a material that the local industry did not possess the knowhow for until recently," notes Berberi, "but after working with it to construct the roof of the sports complex at the campus, we feel very confident." Instead of choosing to close off or open to the site's surroundings, the steel matrix allows for multiple situations and encounters as spaces can be plugged in anywhere within it, enabling a flexible structure, and the relative growth and downsizing of the two companies that make up the core of the building. The final configuration will be composed of internal clusters, lush green pockets, open terraces and peripheral spaces looking out to the street. "Think of it as a living system," Kassab says, "a megastructure of greens," in reference to the climbing vines that cover UniHouse's skeleton, which Richani says was inspired by the idea of having vines and overgrowths in a dense city, a bit like vertical gardens.

Gardens, in fact, seem to inspire the practice quite a bit and Richani tells me more about their Secret Gardens project, which was actually a proposal submitted for a competition run by Benchmark in 2012. The group makes it a point to participate in local and international competitions twice a year, in order to exercise their creative faculties. This one was almost a parody of the Faqra resort, which was the subject of the competition. "It's a very exclusive community," Richani says, "so we wanted to look at how the people could live together in a communal space and at the same time, use the story, The Secret Garden, by creating a garden within a garden. Every house has an interior garden, which you only discover when you enter the space. They are like secret pocket gardens."

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Last year, 109 participated in another competition: the design for a Guggenheim in Helsinki, by creating an airy museum on stilts. Among the questions they asked themselves was: "How do you intervene in a space you don't know and how do you bring the Guggenheim to such a city, that's located on the water? We wanted to do it in a way that it isn't blocked from the water, but rather, through a platform that floats above it," Kassab says. "It looks a bit fragile because it is on sticks, like it doesn't belong. We wanted to express this dilemma. And at the same time, it's meant to mimic a forest like environment, knowing that nature is very much ingrained in the Finnish identity."

This year, they conceived of the Bamiyan cultural center in Afghanistan for a UNESCO competition, which is set on a high platform that overlooks the so called Buddha cliff (where Buddha statues were built in 507 AD and destroyed by extremists in 2001). Now, there are only empty spaces in their place. 109 worked on this notion of absence/presence by forming a building that corresponds to and completes the shape of its site, and also by creating voids inside the center itself, using stone, to reflect the surrounding environment. It is a "negotiation of how you can experience the imprints in an unfinished building," Richani says succinctly.

One of the recent competitions, where they were successful, was the design for the "Istanbul Disaster and Prevention Center," which will be constructed soon by the city's local municipality. "It is unique since you only have such things like earthquake simulations in places like Japan," Kassab says. The way they have dreamt up this highly futuristic space is through a network representation, characterized by corridors (the flow of information) connecting a series of black boxes (the nodes). "We went into network geometry to approach this center that is based on flow of information before, during and after disaster strikes," Kassab says.

All in all, 109's contextual approach produces projects that share principles much more than they share aesthetic similarities. "We do not have a style," Mallat insists "nor do we want to have one." And in a way, the fact that they don't stick to a uniform approach makes them a dynamic, project based, collaborative thinking practice that shows how the whole can be much more than the sum of its parts. 