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Guerrilla plantings bring urban afforestation to Downtown Beirut

Summary

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Abby Sewell | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: On a stretch of sidewalk facing the protest encampment in Martyrs' Square Tuesday morning, about a dozen volunteers were getting their hands dirty - literally. As a handful of soldiers looked on, the volunteers were digging out the heavy, claylike urban soil from 1 square meter holes in the pavement next to an unfinished high-rise building, and replacing it with a nutrient-rich mix of soil and compost that would be covered in mulch.

Once the ground was prepared, they would plant tree and shrub

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saplings, four to each plot, with species native to Lebanon's forests, including laurel, Judas tree, myrtle, false olive, Spanish broom and sage.

Amid the mass protests taking place around the country, many Lebanese have taken the opportunity to model the kind of society they want for the future. They have organized volunteer-run street cleaning and recycling initiatives and held public debate and discussion sessions.

Some are now taking the opportunity to address the city's lack of green space. Beirut has less than 1 square meter of green space per capita, compared to the World Health Organization's recommended 9.

"Urban afforestation is the best way that cities can mitigate climate change," said Adib Dada, the founder of architecture lab theOtherDada and now one of the organizers of an initiative called Regenerate Lebanon that has sprung up in Martyrs' Square to model sustainable practices.

Before the beginning of the protests that swept the country, Dada's team had already begun planting urban miniforests in Beirut.

In late May, after a crowdfunding campaign through SUGi, an application that provides a platform for funding rewilding efforts and urban forests, theOtherDada led the planting of a miniforest on 200 square meters in a small, formerly vacant lot of municipal land in Sin al-Fil, overlooking the concrete banks of the Beirut River.

The small plot is packed with 17 different species native to the forests nearby, including oak and pine species, sage and the dramatic, pink-blossoming Judas tree. If all goes as planned, within three years, the Sin al-Fil site will be a self-sufficient small forest, replicating what much of the riverbank once looked like.

The project in Sin al-Fil was the first attempt in Lebanon to implement the Miyawaki technique, a method developed in Japan to restore native-species forests in the most efficient way possible.

The technique, which can be used both for reforestation in damaged wild areas and for planting on previously barren urban areas, involves high-density planting of multiple species of trees and shrubs. It is intended to create a more natural and healthy forest

than traditional monoculture reforestation techniques.

An Indian social enterprise firm, Afforestt, which specializes in the method, helped Dada to carry out the plantings in Beirut. The firm has assisted in planting 146 forests in 10 different countries to date, said founder Shubhendu Sharma, who quit his job with Toyota to start the initiative after learning the Miyawaki technique and trying it out in his own backyard.

"Basically what this method does is it brings back our forests as they would have been 2,000 years ago," Sharma told The Daily Star. "We try to identify the forest that existed in any place before human intervention, and by doing that we are able to fix the environmental issues of that particular place."

Along with the site in Sin al-Fil, Dada's group planted a second, 100 square meter miniforest with the same species in a cemetery near Horsh Beirut.

After a second round of fundraising, they had been planning to plant another 300 meters in Sin al-Fil on Oct. 24. But the plans were interrupted by the political uprising unfolding in the country.

"With the revolution, plans changed - for the better, I say," Dada said.

He is hoping to return to plant in Sin al-Fil next week, but in the meantime, volunteers have begun doing "guerrilla afforestation" plantings in the area around Martyrs' Square. The site was chosen because of its proximity to the protest encampment, where there will be a ready supply of volunteers to come and water the young plants - and to provide a counterpoint to the typical method of landscaping in Beirut's urban core, Dada said.

The typical planting method is "basically very much confined to these 1-by-1 meter planter boxes, and there's always just one exotic tree species that has to be artificially irrigated on a regular basis, and of course, treated with pesticides and all of that to survive," he said.

In contrast, the planting method the volunteers are implementing, which includes a denser concentration of plants and all native species, will produce plants that require no maintenance apart from watering - and eventually will not require even that, Dada said.

Nayef Khalil, a student at the Lebanese American University who was

one of the volunteers Tuesday, said he was part of a student group that organized beach cleanups and was interested in carrying out tree plantings as well.

Khalil said he was motivated by "the lack of greenery here that we have in Beirut and the amount of CO2 [carbon dioxide] that all these cars and everything emit."

Standing knee-deep in a hole, trowel in hand, he said, "It's a really tough job - it's not easy and it takes a lot of work and a lot of people."

An accumulation of these so-called tiny forests can have a measurable effect on the urban environment, Dada said.

"We're cleaning the air, reducing temperatures, bringing trees to people, so it has a mental and physical health impact," he said.

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