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Culture

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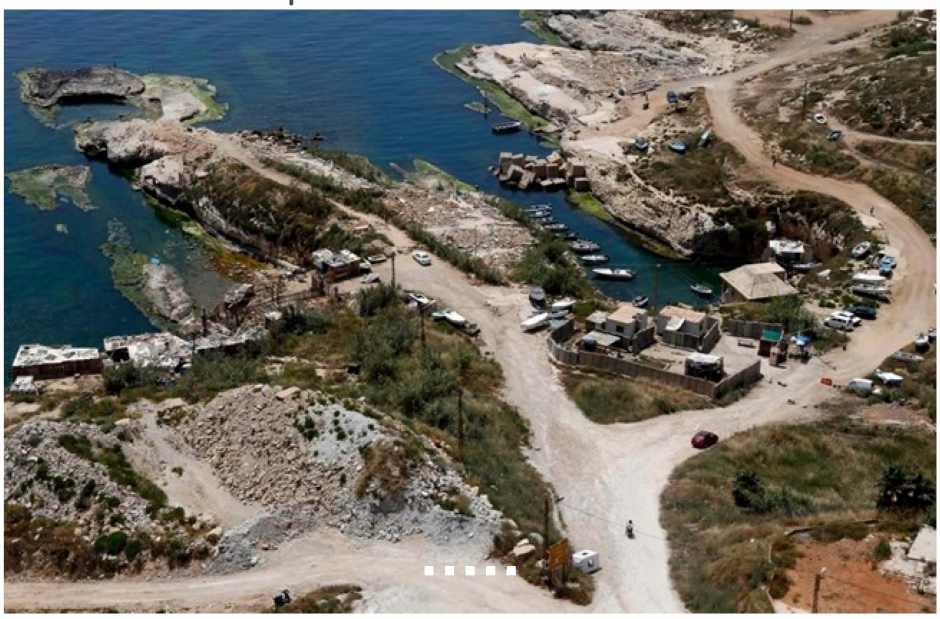
Visions of a public Dalieh



India Stoughton | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Two children play together on a large swing, which hangs from a blue-painted metal bar protruding from a concrete block. Other brightly colored bars form a makeshift playground. Children climb them like scaffolding and swing from them like monkey bars.

This drawing is part of one of the three winning entries in the "Revisiting Dalieh" competition. Organized by activists from the Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche, the competition sought "alternative visions" for one of Beirut's last remaining undeveloped coastal strips, part of a wider response to signs that the landowners plan to begin building on the rocky outcrop.

Dalieh, as it looked before development. Photo by The Daily Star

The 20 entries submitted for the competition were exhibited at AltCity in Hamra earlier this month, the first stop in a touring exhibition. They will be showcased next at the American University of Beirut's Issam Fares Institute.

"Revisiting Dalieh" springs from the differing perspectives and interests of two groups. On one hand the landowners argue that that they are free to do what they want with their property. Civil society activists like those behind the campaign, on the other hand, argue that it's the right of the Lebanese public to have free access to the coast.

Dalieh has been very much in the public eye since a fence was erected around the site in April 2014 and many of the fishermen living and working on the land were evicted, after having received financial compensation from the landowners.

Last month, after the remaining fishing huts were bulldozed one night, the debate about Dalieh's fate and its unusual status as a privately owned but publicly used site grew more heated still.

"The Last Resort," the entry showing the playing children, envisages a Dalieh that continues to facilitate traditional activities – fishing, diving, swimming, boating, picnics and gatherings – within a slightly more developed infrastructure.

The concrete blocks – dozens of which were placed on site by the Ministry of Public Works in 2012 – are transformed into a playground. A wooden platform allows for safe diving from the natural cliffs, while paths and jetties made of lightweight wood crisscross the site, facilitating pedestrian access.

Other entries approached the problem from different directions.

One proposal explores possibilities for a development that combines public and private interests. Drawn in a cartoon style, the design boards feature quotes from people discussing the importance of public space and suggestions for how Dalieh could be useful to the community.

The design breaks down the site into sectors, suggesting the establishment of marine sports and leisure areas, a harbor and art space, botanical and marine gardens, an event area with an arena and fairground and a wellness and gastronomy area featuring restaurants and a spa.

Viewed together, the proposals display a wide range of approaches to and expectations for public space in Beirut, conjuring up an

alternative future in which the land is no longer owned by private stakeholders but protected by the state

Photos by Hasan Shabaan

Architect Abir Saksouk, a member of the campaign and part of the competition's steering committee, explained that the intention was never to generate proposals designed to be adopted by the private developers.

Instead, she said, it aimed to encourage a collaborative spirit among local architects, landscape architects, urbanists and planners; to explore Dalieh's importance as a public meeting point, used by a broad cross section of people from various social backgrounds; and to stimulate debate about issues such as public and private space and coastal access in Beirut.

The brief helped to verse competitors in the complicated history of the site, including its ownership since Ottoman times and the laws relating to private development. These include stipulations stating that at least 25 percent of the site must remain open to the public and that the public must have access to the sea.

"The brief gave a few guidelines on a few important aspects," Saksouk says. "One of them is that the site remains an open-access shared space for all city dwellers. The other one is to preserve the natural and landscape characteristics, and the third one is to keep a sort of informal economy alive, while preserving the site.

"We kept it at a multidisciplinary level, so that people from different backgrounds can take part because we thought it's an important design issue and maybe it can inform us about different possibilities for the entire coast."

Diverse as the entries are, Saksouk says that certain shared characteristics emerged.

"What was really interesting was that the natural features of the site really dictated their design and their proposals," she notes. "Some of them were really focusing on introducing new users to the site. ... Other ones focused more on the ecology and marine biology of the site and a few others also explored how small buildings, that were temporary in nature and demountable, could introduce functions while not harming the landscape characteristics of the site. The three winning schemes really expressed these three directions.

"We're calling on officials to look at the three winning schemes and see how we can implement one or two or a combination of them – the Directorate General of Urban Planning, the municipality. These are the main actors."

Photos by Hasan Shabaan

As things currently stand, however, none of the designs are likely to be implemented.

GroupMed is one of several companies affiliated with the Hariri family that together own roughly 90 percent of the site. Speaking on behalf of the owners, a GroupMed representative who preferred to remain anonymous told The Daily Star that the developers had not yet decided on a firm plan for Dalieh. He added that he was aware of the competition, but said that he had not visited the exhibition to look at the proposals.

"What I've read in the media about the various competitions they had was to preserve the property as undeveloped," he said, "which contradicts the interests of the landowners, basically. Personally, I look at it as this is encroachment on private ownership, because they are looking at the government, the municipality or public entities to take over the land, which I do not see feasible, because it would be quite expensive."

He added that the owners began looking into possibilities for developing the site "a couple of years ago" – the same time they began evicting those living on the land.

"They do not have any particular project in mind," he said. "They are looking at various options of what could or could not be done with the properties, given the zoning and environmental and what-have-you restrictions, including public access to the shore line. So they are looking at possibilities, but nothing has been decided yet.

"Rem Koolhaas has done some studies, which were not agreed to by the principal owners because they believed that that would not fly, basically. ... He's still working, but the initial proposal that he made was not viable, because it entailed certain development that was not within acceptable zoning regulations."

The owners have not ruled out the possibility of working with local architects, he said, but added that there are complications that need to be addressed before the land can be developed. "BankMed is one of the major owners," he notes, "yet it has acquired its ownership by virtue of settling some old debts of third parties, and by central bank regulations BankMed cannot engage in direct development of real estate that it acquired in settlement of debts."

Currently the bank, which owns roughly 30 percent of the land, is working "indirectly" with the other shareholders, he said, adding that should it want to develop the land "it would have either to sell the land or to gain certain exemptions from the central bank to allow it to be involved with the development."

Whatever the fate of Dalieh, the competition serves as a reminder that a diverse pool of local designers exists, and could serve as a potential source of innovative approaches to Lebanon's public space.

For more information about the "Revisiting Dalieh" competition, please visit www.dalieh.org/competition.html.

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