A NEW PARLIAMENT IN ROJAVA, KURDISTAN

MERVE BEDIR
Architect, researcher, PhD candidate (TUDelft), Parter at Land+Civiliation Compositions.

Public Parliament of Derîk in Rojava / Photograph by Ernie Buts, courtesy of New World Summit (2015).

The second thing I pay attention is the half-sphere form. Not a finished, perfect one, but formed of layers and circles, which, together with the trusses seem like one can add to it or change it continuously. Patterns of stars, and yellows, greens and reds create the surfaces. The projection of the spheres on the ground composes the circular seating: there is no hierarchy. Photographs of the construction show us women dancing halay, people running around, watching the construction work, talking among themselves, having their photographs taken in front of the site. I wish that it was possible to ask them how they feel about this process, while they are surrounded by war and destruction.

The founding ideals of the Kurdish struggle of freedom were established around 1970s, and it started to evolve from that of a nation state to the notion of “democratic confederalism” in 2005. This idea rejects the model of the nation state, and based itself on the egalitarian structure of power that rests on the principles of cooperation across regions, the recognition of autonomy, and the recognition of the diversity in the questions of economy, education, politics and society’s liberation. Murray Bookchin’s democratic confederalism holds the basis of this idea, around the concepts of “communalism,” that is a de-centralized stateless self-administration, and “social ecology,” that is an ecology of nature and an ecology of life. In both Bookchin and Öcalan’s thoughts the idea of “acting through practice” is widely explicit. In 2012, peoples of Rojava declared autonomy.

Following this line of thought, the Parliament of Rojava, as a public space is designed to facilitate assemblies from the local to the trans-cantonal level, to be used by local councils, cooperatives and communities for their assemblies, to function as a point of departure and/or end of mass demonstrations, as well as to host international conferences and gatherings. The concept and principles of the design of the parliament were developed by Dutch artist Jonas Staal in conversation with Amina Osse, co-Minister of Foreign Affairs and representative of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and Sheruan Hassan, the Dutch representative of the party in December 2014. The design was developed through meetings with the city council of Derîk, as well as the local communes with the help of the co-mayors Deljo Hamo and Hussein Adam. The design ideas were direct interpretations and expressions of the ideological architecture that has been developed over decades of Kurdish struggle. The work of Abdullah Öcalan and Sakine Cansiz are inscribed on the benches around the parliament. In an email conversation that I had with him, Jonas Staal emphasizes that during the collaboration with Osse and Hassan, “he realized that ideology is equal to Form; an ideologically driven form is a political act. A building that these form specific ecologies of power and political awareness are rooted deeply in a specific morphology; a genealogy of forms through which power expresses itself, and if in the case of Rojava, a collectively performed through communes, committees and cooperatives.

Jonas Staal’s collaboration with architect Paul Kuipers in the New World Summit, continued in April 2015 for the parliament in Rojava. The New World Summit was founded by Jonas Staal in 2012 as an artistic and political organization, providing “alterative parliaments” to organizations that currently find themselves excluded from democracy. In opposition to the misuse of the notion of democracy for expansionist, military and colonial gains, the New World Summit explores the field of art as a space to re-imagine and act upon a fundamental practice of democracy: “There is not such a thing as a ‘limit to democracy,’ for democracy is either limitless or it does not exist at all.” New World Summit claims that the current political order is not able to act upon this principle, because of the geopolitical economic and political interests. “The New World Summit thus claims art as a radical imaginative space ‘more political than politics itself,’ as a space where the promise of an emancipatory, fundamental democracy can take shape.” In 2013, the New World Summit founded its own academy in collaboration with Base for Contemporary Art (BAK): the New World Academy. The academy invites organizations involved in the progressive political projects to collaborate with artists and students to develop projects together that explore the role of art at the center of political struggle, to which the Kurdish Workers’ Movement also participated.

Jonas and Paul have based a lot of their work in the New World Summit and other projects on Russian constructivist art and architecture, as well as on a significant inspiration from Brazilian architects: Oscar Niemeyer, Lúcio Costa, Roberto Burle Marx, and Lina Bo Bardi, who further translated the European modernist paradigm of CIAM into the specific context of contemporary Brazilian society. Jonas refers to Bo Bardi for her particular contribution to a modernism that, in many ways, ran against to the European administrative and formalist paradigm, by investing far more in the sociabilities of architecture and its relations to other cultural domains, such as art, music and theater. “The public parliament that we are developing is both a political and social space, but also an artwork: a public sculpture or monument that is shaped after the principles of the Rojava Revolution. Around it we’re developing a public park as well. This cross-disciplinary approach to the space takes a lot from Bo Bardi’s work.”

Contract: Democratic Confederalism, Gender Equality, Secularism, Self-Defense, Communalism and Social Ecology. Each of these is written on a truss of the structure.
My questions to Jonas were focused on a couple of points, the first being about the spectacle of revolution. In this case, what I mean is the monuments or monumentality erected after revolution that actually places a distance between the event and the people. Jonas and his team deals with the question in the search for an aesthetics of hybridity: “to create a permanent construction that somehow feels as if it’s continuously under construction.”

The parliament from all sides looks very different, because of the fact that the six arches do not completely connect: they are not a unified shape, but a confederal shape — to stay in the discourse of Rojava. The principles of the revolution seek for connection and mutually strengthen each other, but also differ. “We asked them how they approached the idea of the parliament also as a confederal shape and space — a moment of crystallization of something that is in process of being constructed, a monument that is never finished, but functions as a point of orientation in furthering the process of being constructed.”

My last question concerned the issues of land ownership in Kurdistan. In different parts of Kurdistan, Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran, different ownership and representation rights for Kurdish people. For instance in Turkey, modernity seemingly meant a land reform process in Bakûr (North Kurdistan), in 1990. The election threshold of 10% has made it very difficult for the Kurdish citizens to be represented in the parliament, until recently.

Jonas says “In that light, I feel that this project is a crystallization of a lot of my work from the past decade where I collaborated with political parties, organizations and social movements. For politically engaged art to become of relevance, it needs to ally with progressive and emancipatory political forces. The imaginary of art and the imaginary of emancipatory politics need to meet, in order to strengthen and liberate one another from their dogmas and blind spots. This intimate meeting of art and revolution I believe has come to being in this process in Rojava. The ideals of Rojava revolution shaped this public parliament, and the parliament further shapes the imaginary of the revolution.”

The initiative of Jonas Staal and New World Summit in Derîk makes us question the role and position of artists and designers be involved in such contexts, if, architects are allowed to intervene as long as they do not challenge the power structures. How should artists and designers be involved in such contexts, if they are allowed to intervene as long as they do not challenge the power structures? As Jonas puts it, we are being told that “the artist’s role is to ask questions.” “Hold up mirrors to society,” “confront” and “name paradox and ambiguity.” Are designers and artists allowed to challenge everything, but not to change anything?”

---

Amie Clear, Jonas Staal, Younis Bousaid and Farida In der Maur welcome the public on the construction site of the new public parliament.

Photograph by Ruben Hamelink, courtesy of New World Summit (2015).

The Parliament in Rojava requires us to think about the notions of democracy, self-governance in opposition to nation-state, [gender] equality, public space, communism and social ecology. Is it possible to imagine a society evolving from form to discourse, facilitating decolonizing practices, (resistance and) struggle for human rights, direct participation of rounded citizens in a rounded environment? If democracy is indeed more than the hegemonic narrative of the nation-state, we have to take its practice beyond the limitations of it. As Jean Baudrillard puts it, utopia doesn’t have to be postponed to a perfect future. It should be practiced here and now. It seems that we need this more and more today considering the current context of politics of austerity, massive refugee displacements, the so-called “war on terror,” and rising radical nationalist tendencies.