

Architecture in state building



Most of Kobane was completely destroyed during the long war with ISIS. Looking beyond the constant threat of Turkish aggression, Rojava's authorities embarked on new construction projects in the now expanding city.

When implementing the large memorial project in the destroyed area, the municipality gave the displaced people plots of land just south of central Kobane in a new, centrally-planned development, which also sought to attract investors and residents from across Rojava.

The construction of a new area, therefore, opened the possibility to test out Rojava's ideology in built form. However, the realpolitik and physical constraints dictated otherwise.

"There were no attempts to add anything ideological [...] we consider this new neighbourhood [to be] part of Kobane, and there already are some public squares in the city," says Mahmut from the municipality. According to Mahmut, the political programme found expression in the built fabric of the city. Therefore, embedding democratic spaces in residential construction projects isn't necessary.

Meanwhile, despite the revolutionary ambition to reshape the economic landscape of the area, Rojava remains embedded in the usual vectors of global economy. Put under a partial economic blockade, the revolution is yet to escape the need for private capital and investment. One of the common models of development for the plot owners is finding an investor to build a multi-storey apartment block on their land and take one or several floors for themselves.

The authorities had to take into consideration people's wishes and financial situation, according to the committee. They could do no more than design the building standards and shape of the whole neighbourhood, and the committee couldn't commit to full ecological measures, "as people had to build quickly – they suffered a lot," says Mahmut.

Urban fabric and defence



By November 2018, authorities in Rojava had issued new planning laws that stipulated a multi-tiered protection requirement when constructing new dwellings. At the minimum, every new building should include a basement, and if possible, a reinforced staircase, a small or a large basement that could also be used by several dwellings, or a shelter located anywhere on the plot of land.

There is a clear contradiction between designing for a peaceful future and addressing an omnipresent need in Rojava for defence. Building open spaces and wide streets improves citizens' lives, but it also makes defence against a state actor more difficult. The contradiction is difficult to reconcile.

Hausmann's 19th-century reconstruction of Paris enshrined wide and straight streets to favour the ruling power – by allowing firing lines and movement channels for imperial armies, the French autocracy hoped to put down urban, commune-led insurrections the likes of which had hit the country in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Meanwhile, medieval city layouts, or the dense urban mazes of cities in Syria and the region, have historically favoured lightly armed and mostly insurgent-type militaries like the Kurdish guerrilla fighters.

Yet in Rojava, the understanding of future needs reverses Hausmann's thinking and is more in line with the modernist planning principles of post-war Europe. According to the Kurds, wide streets and open spaces are needed to break with the narrow and cramped environment associated with the economic conditions imposed by the Assad regime.

Constructing a political capital



Perhaps more important than the construction of new residential neighbourhoods, or preserving destroyed ones as museums, is the behemoth undertaking in Ain Issa, some 85 kilometres from Kobane. There, architecture and urbanism have a direct role in state-building, no matter how detached it is from the initial decentralised grassroots society Rojava had envisioned.

Located in the geographical heart of Rojava, the town aspired to house the new government institutions of the Syrian Democratic Council.

At first glance, Ain Issa is a far cry from a future capital city. Surrounded by a vast landscape, the town comes into view just as one passes a large refugee camp. Ain Issa borders fertile plains to the north and a desert that makes up most of North-eastern Syria to the south. Besides small commercial shops that make up the economic heart of towns in the region, there are several compounds that house different branches of SDC governing structures and its security apparatus.

From conversations with representatives of the ministry, it is clear that the plan for a government campus is progressing slowly, due to the uncertain outcomes of the conflict. These worries became reality just a year later, when the frontline between the Kurds and the Turkish-backed forces snaked just a few kilometres from Ain Issa. The refugee camp and the outskirts of Ain Issa were hit by shelling during the fighting.

If Rojava's authorities continue the theoretical framework of their future capital – its future now in jeopardy due to the Turkish invasion – they risk repeating the mistakes of Western countries when creating representational space. Detached from population centres, the ministerial compound will likely set political space apart from grassroots space, the Commune. In the words of Lefebvre, “we know that the most important decisions are made elsewhere,” which “creates a sense of disappointment in urban reality.”

The committee responsible for the initial project is careful not to make predictions about what the buildings will look like. However, the guiding principle is “culture and civilisation, as Öcalan’s [vision] was a democratic nation made up of all the people here,” says Jalad. “Before the revolution, there was only the Arab culture [in the region].”

Read more: <http://rojava-story.herokuapp.com/#/chapter/4>