

The Arts as a Medium of Reconstruction in Beirut

Recommendations for international agencies on the integration of art in post-disaster urban reconstruction

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Brief Summary

The value of involving the arts in reconstruction programmes is currently overlooked by humanitarian organisations and funding agencies. This policy brief makes a case for artistic interventions as a critical aspect of integrating and articulating community needs within the process of (post-)disaster reconstruction. The evidence is drawn from research in post-blast Lebanon and suggests that many artists have developed an extensive array of techniques and practices that foster community building, social and physical reconstruction. Building on *the Post-Disaster Needs Assessments* and the *Culture in City Reconstruction and Recovery* framework¹, aligning reconstruction plans with principles of *Build Back Better*² and the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, this document offers practical guidance for engaging artists in designing creative approaches to post-disaster reconstruction. It proposes an *Arts-led Reconstruction Framework* to advance the inclusion of artists in reconstruction programmes with suggestions on how to integrate artistic interventions into the reconstruction process.

This policy brief:

- Recommends the development of a comprehensive framework that reconnects people, places, and policies through artistic and creative practices in the post-disaster context.
- Calls for humanitarian organisations and donors to engage with artists and creative practitioners in shaping and co-designing reconstruction programmes;
- Recommends the creation of art and cultural funding programmes hosted by relevant international donors such as the UN and EU to work towards post-disaster reconstruction objectives in more context-specific ways.
- Suggests that post-disaster reconstruction programmes should offer immediate and rapid aid to the affected artistic communities and space

¹ UNESCO and the WORLD BANK Position Paper (2018)

² UNISDR, 2017

Background

Post-disaster cities experience extensive trauma and humanitarian problems. They often find themselves faced with the need to restore their social fabric, promote economic development, and manage complex spatial transformation. Although artists and cultural workers have been involved in post-disaster reconstruction, there is little recognition for their work among policymakers, funders, and peacebuilding practitioners. Aside from *Post-Disaster Needs Assessments* (PDNAs) and the *Culture in City Reconstruction and Recovery* (CURE) framework, limited guidelines exist on how to integrate culture and creative industries into reconstruction and recovery processes. The definition of reconstruction used in this document is adopted from the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR). Reconstruction is understood as the medium and long-term rebuilding and sustainable restoration of resilient infrastructure, services, housing, facilities, and livelihoods required for the full functioning of a community or a society affected by a disaster (UNISDR 2017, 6).

In his report to the United Nations Assembly in September 2015, Pablo de Greiff emphasises that ‘lasting societal transformations require interventions not only in the institutional sphere but also in the cultural sphere and at the level of personal, individual dispositions’ (Report of the Special Rapporteur, 8). Similarly, several studies have emphasised the importance of engagement by the performance arts, visual arts, literature, music, and film in ‘broader social reconstruction’, ‘transmission of memory’ and ‘advancing alternative strategies for symbolic commemoration and reparation’ (Ramírez-Barat 2020, 247). The policy brief proposes some suggestions to enhance existing frameworks of city reconstruction such as “build back better” (UNISDR 2017) by integrating arts – in their many forms – music, crafts, audio-visual practices, theatre, cinema, etc.

Due to the chemical explosion of the Beirut port in August 2020, more than 100 museums, galleries, theatre spaces and artist studios were severely damaged (Artnet, 2020). The cultural and creative sectors in Lebanon were already characterised by fragile organisational structures due to COVID-19, and economic and political crises in the country. The communities of artists and others who worked in the cultural and creative field – most of whom were self-employed – risked losing their livelihoods. Therefore,

any reconstruction programme for the port of Beirut must be formulated with the view to support the work of artists to further improve the resilience of the cultural and creative sectors in the region.

Linking Arts to Reconstruction and Recovery Frameworks

Drawing on the research undertaken in Lebanon, this document proposes a framework for international organisations involved in post-disaster reconstruction in fragile contexts: the Arts-led Post-Disaster Reconstruction Framework. Linking arts to the international guidelines on post-disaster reconstruction, the framework adopts UNESCO’s 3P Approach³ (People, Places, and Policies) to the specific challenges of city reconstruction in the aftermath of the blast. Building also on the guiding principles of the CURE Framework (UNESCO & World Bank 2018), the framework approaches the city as a “cultural construct” where built structures and open spaces are closely linked to the creative imagination. Secondly, it considers the (re)construction of cultural landmarks and places of significance to local communities as the prerequisite of social cohesion. Third, it highlights the importance of creative and cultural expressions in facilitating a trauma-informed recovery in the post-disaster context. Fourth, it advocates for mainstreaming art and creative practices in the early stages of post-disaster recovery planning, starting with need assessments and the implementation of emergency interventions that reflect community priorities. Finally, the Framework recommends creative engagement with communities throughout the visioning and implementation process.

Arts-led Post-Disaster Reconstruction Framework

Having established the primary principles of the framework based on the CURE guiding principles (2018), this section draws on the experience of artists in Beirut to propose a series of steps that mainstream arts into the process of post-disaster city reconstruction. Looking into different phases of the project cycle, it elaborates on the critical contribution of artists to civic engagement, vision development, need assessment and implementation of post-disaster reconstruction programmes.

In the aftermath of the blast, various artistic collectives joined efforts to clean debris and restore the city. A group of more than a hundred artists gathered to form the *Theatre Relief Initiative* to support their fellow theatre

³ Culture: Urban Future. Global Report on Culture for Sustainable Urban Development. UNESCO, Paris, 2016.

practitioners and to offer immediate and rapid aid to the affected theatre spaces. The monthly playback theatre by the *Laban Collective* opened the space for the stories of the people who survived the blast. Using art as a tool for solving social challenges, the *Clown Me in Collective* provided relief shows to engage, move, and motivate communities to action. These creative responses to the blast during such formidable difficulties are just a few examples of the many ways in which artists contributed to rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts.

Civic Engagement

Working with children, adults and young people from all ages and backgrounds (Lebanese, refugees, and disadvantaged communities), *Zayrakoun, Laban and Peace of Art* facilitated dialogue among diverse groups. Re-imagining and re-framing the landscapes through street performances, drawing, dance, and physical training these collectives connected communities to talk about destruction and reconstruction. The creative forms of expression provided an opportunity to reconnect and enhance mutual understanding between diverse communities, fostered dialogue and reconciled different identities through creative initiatives.

Needs Assessment

Artists often have skills and tools to help with data collection, mapping, and visualising. The *Stories on the Shore* initiative led by *Laban* in Beirut, shows how an artist-led cultural mapping exercise documented life on the street, the people, and the histories of the areas affected by the explosion.

Vision Development

In the aftermath of the blast, the *Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts - Ashkal Alwan* gathered artists, scholars, activists, and writers to formulate critical inquiries and aesthetic provocations in response to the shifting political landscape. These efforts enabled novel imaginations and new forms of inquiry; to frame new meanings, networks, identities, and visions. Vision development is vital to articulating the direction of the reconstruction process as it provides a shared idea for the future direction of the city and a clear benchmark against which to measure progress. In the case of Beirut, artistic interventions not only enabled grassroots and activist groups' contribution to the visioning process but also created inclusive spaces where disadvantaged groups, women, and youth could contribute to the visioning of the new city.

Implementation

Once the community is engaged, needs are identified and a vision is developed, a plan for funding and a framework for implementation may be created. In the implementation phase, artists can contribute by creating a space of gathering, mutual support, and co-creation. Artists' skills in facilitating the creative expressions of communities can contribute to a more inclusive co-design process.

Recommendations

In Lebanon, the underfunded sector and the project-based working practices do not allow for long-term planning and rarely provide opportunities for artists and creative collectives to develop sustainable initiatives. This section offers some recommendations on ways to support artists as they engage with different communities throughout the process of post-disaster city reconstruction:

- International organisations involved in post-disaster reconstruction programmes should engage with artists on both the macro and micro levels. On the macro-level, the *Arts-led Approach to Reconstruction* could be achieved through (re)construction of important cultural landmarks that embody the identities of local communities. Through their engagement with the collective memory of the city, artists can not only help communities overcome the trauma of destruction but also contribute to the regeneration of a new urban landscape that is more inclusive and creative. An example of this would be Performances Theater Playback and youth drama therapy sessions which were held by *Laban Theatre* in Karantina. Working with *Catalytic Action* and *UN Habitat*, *Laban* also contributed to the renovation of the area by developing “The memories of the living”, a box of memories that came to life after months of brainstorming, consultations and discussions with artists, activists and the local communities who had suffered destruction of their houses in Karantina.
- On the micro-level, artists' engagement in everyday reconstruction efforts articulates new

forms of interaction and organisation among different social groups, bridging cultural divides and cultivating new opportunities to unleash imaginations for an inclusive and holistic reconstruction.

- A comprehensive damage and needs assessment analysis of the affected artistic spaces, cultural and creative industries, artistic infrastructure, as well as the resulting economic losses to the affected artists, needs to be conducted. An art and cultural funding programme need to be created by relevant international donors such as the UN and EU to address the reconstruction of artistic infrastructures and collectives as part of the wider reconstruction plan.
- International organisations such as the UN and EU should provide more technical and financial support to artists, considering artistic interventions as fundamental components of a holistic approach to post-disaster reconstruction. The provision of opportunities for artistic mentorship will enable artists to develop ideas and experimental projects that facilitate processes of social and physical reconstruction through arts. Similarly, a grant programme should be designed for practitioners in various art fields to support the existence and sustainability of the arts sector in the (post)disaster context. This could be achieved through direct monetary support to artists and practitioners who were affected on the personal and professional level by the conflict. The grant programme should provide time, space, and resources for artists to produce artworks that have strong ethical, moral, and political dimensions without being utilitarian or didactic.

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The Project

The Art of Peace: Interrogating Community Devised Arts Based Peacebuilding explores the role of grassroots arts in conflict-affected spaces including, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, DR Congo, and Lebanon. The project is a collaboration between the University of Manchester, Durham University and *In Place of War* and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (grant no AH/S001484/1). The primary source of data for this document is based on interviews with 30 artists working in various aspects of post-disaster reconstruction in Lebanon.

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