

Aslihan Demirtas: A New York Architect



Whenever I think of the work and presence of Aslihan Demirtas in New York I start smiling to myself. The mirth comes from thinking of the way in which a young architect, a woman in a male dominated field staked some unconventional ground and announced at every point that she had something to contribute to the discussion from her unique vantage point.

This vantage point is not easy to pin down, but it flits precariously above the unyielding concrete curve of the Cubuk Dam on the one hand to the earthworms eye view of the historically tended soil at the Yedikule Bostan. The simultaneity of ecological thinking allows this architect to embed the everyday within the larger complexities of human and non-human networks.

In contrast to the cult of the “starchitect” producing stylized commodity architecture, Aslihan Demirtas’ s practice flexes to adapt the existing fabric of the living environment to create thoughtful change. Process not product guides her works by encompassing the social, ecological and material dimensions critical to her design strategy. This strategy has been crafted through many years of careful observation, experiments with materials, methods and conceptual rigor.

Early in her career as an architect in New York, Aslihan Demirtas began collaborating closely with the renowned architect IM Pei. Mr. Pei, as the office respectfully referred to him, continued to practice well into his nineties, working on select projects with a small team of trusted collaborators. The talented young designer from Ankara by way of Cambridge (Massachusetts) right away caught Mr. Pei’s attention and Aslihan became the chief designer on the Museum of Islamic Arts in Doha. This special project, the last of Mr. Pei’s renowned art museums in a new cultural and environmental terrain provided the grounds for new research into form and material concepts. The project revolved around Mr. Pei’s lifelong interest in primordial geometries- the cube, the sphere and the prism and he looked towards Aslihan to interpret these pre-existing obsessions in what for him was an unfamiliar context.

Having grown up in a post-nationalist global milieu, the stereometric geometry of the Cairene domes referenced in this project as the “Islamic” prototype was not necessarily familiar territory for Aslihan. Neither was the mathematically constrained proportioning system of Mr. Pei’s design methodology something that Aslihan had previously considered as part of her own design process. However, discovering the subtlety and nuance within the disciplined geometry of Mr. Pei’s system and gradating the interior into a climate-controlled museum allowed for a degree of experiment that surprised the young (and restless) architect. Assuming the role of the design director as the project went into construction Aslihan worked with craftsmen and fabricators from all over the world. The final contours of the Museum with its enigmatic sculptural presence on the Doha waterfront are a result of this cross-generational, cross-cultural collaboration.

Alongside the task of coordinating and designing this monumental museum, Aslihan pursued her personal interests at the other end of the spectrum envisioning how invisible ecosystems and small-scale design interventions impact everyday life within the city. Teaching at the Parsons School of Design and opening her own office in 2009, she began collaborating with activists, architects and students to examine how design could be an instrument to implement change. The act of participating in the collective project of building an architectural assemblage is evident in the Bronx River Crossing Project. Here the work of an architect is to facilitate an exchange between the academy and a community of high school students that discover the watershed that is their home. Together with a team of college students, architecture instructors and a metal fabricator they construct a model of this varied terrain out of recycled metals, plastics, and trash. The whole unwieldy ensemble is built into a raft and canoed down the Bronx River. The precarity of the undertaking – canoeing a gigantic raft down a river is matched by the precarity of the life of the high school students along a forgotten river and a polluted watershed. This knowledge is acquired via the engaged design process.



The interest in ecological processes and the critique of privileging Culture -- with a capital C-- is something that Aslihan Demirtas challenges by way of her practice. Her drawings and writing on the ruins of Ani present this tension where she advocates that the sheep be allowed to wander and that the project of war and identity be stalled for a moment to ponder the significance of this profound landscape. This tension between the conservation of culture (past and future) and the need for reification of contentious histories is diffused through a turn to the essential task of architecture to materialize and be accountable to something larger and more sustainable. As a result, Aslihan Demirtas is not afraid to return to sites that are deemed delicate/precious and channel the narratives through understanding the long durée. She thus proposed to the hundreds of visitors to the Gallipoli Peninsula that they walk through fields of geological schist that in her own words, “form a common ground and unify the war relics”. I suggest they take up on this wonderful offer.



When I stand in my homemade fabric mask amongst the suspended cranes, vacant streets and public squares in the city of New York I feel that we (architects/ educators) need to consider something larger than ourselves and the demands of the market if we wish to remain relevant. Re-visiting the work of Aslihan Demirtas, with her sustained interest in the search for a more generous common ground, provides us with a potential way forward.