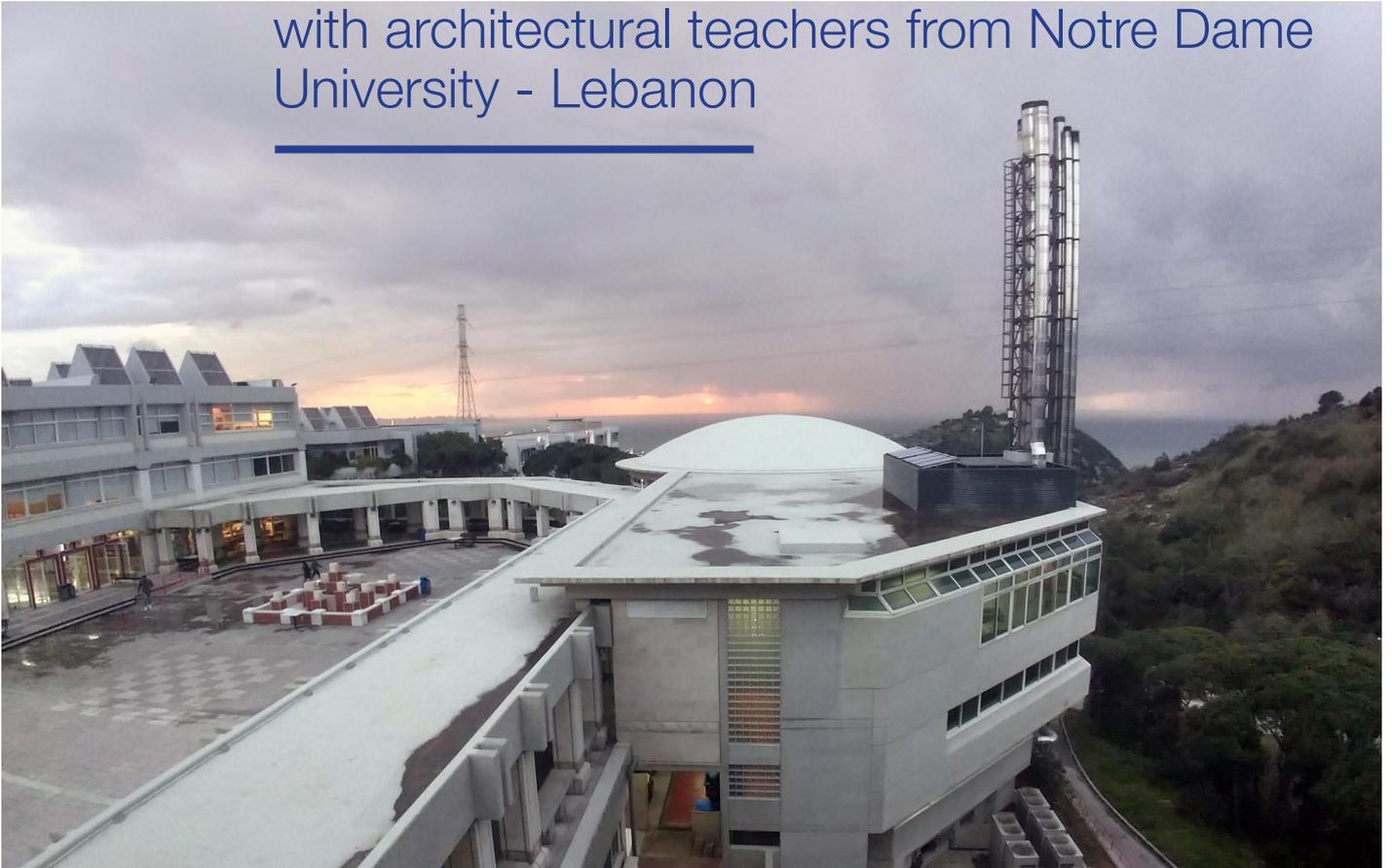


Remote teaching of architecture in challenging contexts: a short dialogue with architectural teachers from Notre Dame University - Lebanon



In March 2019 I had the chance to spend some weeks teaching at Notre Dame University – Lebanon. There I met a vibrant community of students, engaged in the debates that were arising at that time in Lebanon concerning the use of public space, financial speculation and methods of teaching. I also met colleagues that were open to discuss not only their methods, but also the relevance of the themes tackled in their classes as well as the conditions (economical, political) in which they are operating. This short dialogue generated from that experience.

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In dialogue with

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Nadine Hindi - Assistant Professor
(Notre Dame University – Louaize, Zouk Mosbeh – Lebanon)



Context

You both experienced distance teaching in studios before the outbreak of the pandemic. The political and economic situation in Lebanon is forcing you to find tactics to operate in a constantly changing environment. Can you introduce the context and the constraints in which you are operating since Fall 2019?

On October 17, 2019 started a revolution against the Lebanese Government's years of corruption and the resulting serious economic crises that lead the country in March 2020 to default with regards to Eurobonds and other debts. The revolution was manifested on ground through demonstrations, roads closures and in few cases rioting. The University had to close (ends of October to Beginnings of December) its doors when the roads where being closed and we had to resort to online teaching. This first experience and reaction to the politico-economic situation was a good training to face the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic resulting towards the ends of February and the total lockdown, especially of schools and universities, until this date. During the first closure we did not start using online software but relied on power point presentations with voice of instructors, transformed into MP4 file and uploaded on YouTube. Students where then assigned research papers and quizzes by relying on Blackboard Learning Management System (BB) (it is a virtual learning environment and learning management system developed by Blackboard Inc. Its main purposes are to add online elements to courses traditionally delivered face-to-face and to develop completely online courses with few or no face-to-face meetings). Note that we have been relying on BB asynchronous platform since years now. The outbreak of the pandemic and the renewal of the closure forced us to start looking for platforms allowing synchronous interaction and delivery of course material to students as well as evaluation and assessment of their learning outcomes. We first started using on an individual basis ZOOM platform. The first extention of the lockdown forced the univeristy to instittutionalize online teaching and accordingly asked all faculty members to go online by using the Skype for Business (SFB) platform, which license was purchased in 2019 when we moved to Microsoft Office 365. We are currently finalizing the semester online. On May 17, 2020 the government issued a decision to schools and Univrsities to conclude the academic year online. It also important here to highlight some constraints: the lack of good internet connection for some students was a major constraint; it is a general constraint for consulting large files as well. Another secondary constraint was the shortage of fuel-oil in Lebanon back in December 2019, when some instructors used online teaching for the first time.

→ Practices and tools

Which are, in your opinion, the elements of your distance learning experiences that are working the best in the conditions you described? Which tool has been important for you in these experience?

In our opinion moving online requires the possibility of synchronous and asynchronous teaching/learning, which is the same when it comes to regular teaching in-sito. It also requires a powerful WIFI connection. Accordingly, a combination of a platform such as ZOOM, Microsoft Team, SFB or the like with BB, Moodle or the like are necessary tools for teaching online. However, in the case of teaching Architecture, Design or any major relying on visual communication, we have noticed a preference of both instructors and students to use ZOOM because of a more flexible use of drawing tools. Moreover, a major equipment needed for a better visual communication between students and instructors, especially for design critique/review sessions would be the availability of a digital graphic tablet and pen. The OneDrive connected to NDU platform was a major storage and connection tool amongst students and instructors.

→ Rights

The forced remote teaching conditions are displacing rights to access training. The availability of good internet connections, of digital sketching devices, the difficulties in moving with private means of transports is creating unforeseen division among the community of your students?

I am not sure about students' reactions, but we experienced certainly different difficulties that you have mentioned in your question hereabove. However, as instructor we did our best by giving additional sessions to students that experienced power cuts for example and to add to the above difficulties, during a critique session or a quiz for example (note that this is a significant challenge we have in Lebanon that you probably cannot fathom as we have been living since the civil war huge issues with the energy sector; power cuts for us are a daily routine compensated by private generators; we will not dwell further on this issue but it is an important parameter to take into consideration when it comes to adaptability). Nevertheless, students in remote areas like villages with poorer internet infrastructure suffered from an equal access to the on-line classes. This was not resolved yet at University level. Some students could not afford a good enough internet access due to the strong economic crisis; no solution yet to this problem.

→ **Space**

According to the experience, how you envision the transformation of the space of the university and its use in the future? Which are, in your opinion, the characters of the space we will need to deal with more and more unstable condition in which to operate?

We are not sure what is being discussed currently at the administration level, but we still believe and prefer on-site teaching combined with the online teaching. We found huge benefits in online interaction at the different levels; it could help students to recuperate lost sessions or information (this certainly depends on instructors' availability); it allows for distance teaching/learning; Our university has three campuses North Beirut (the main campus), North Lebanon Campus, and the Shouf Campus (south-east of Beirut), since in our system full coordination should be guaranteed to students in the three areas, online teaching may help delivering for example one lecture in the main campus as well as synchronously in the north and Shouf campus. It would also allow collaboration between universities in Lebanon, the region or abroad through online lectures, conferences, review sessions, juries etc. Furthermore, the online experience can benefit us in the research field to organize e-seminars, particularly during the actual dire economic crisis

→ **Future**

Which elements of the remote teaching that you are experiencing will be important in the future of your practice? What of all this will stay and what will be lost?

I think I've answered this question in the previous one. We could add that many meetings will be held online even if during normal times, especially during hard winter weathers (and across the three campuses). It can allow jury member to join online; or a skype lecture (if connection permits); this is to be tested on campus first. Few years ago the internet capacity did not permit such a thing.



Jean-Pierre El Asmar holds a PhD in Sustainable Built Environment from the De Montfort University, Leicester, United Kingdom (2008), and a Laurea Di Dottore in Architettura, Università degli Studi di Firenze, Italy (1991). He is interested in sustainable development as a holistic approach to growth with particular focus on the sustainable rehabilitation of the man-made environment “to meet the needs of the present generations without compromising the needs of future generation”. He has been teaching full time in the Faculty of Architecture Art and Design since 1994, and his main areas of expertise are in Architectural Design and Building Technologies. He has served as a chairperson of the Architecture Department from 2005-2011, and is the Dean of the FAAD since Fall 2012. His research study is in the fields of energy efficient Architecture, and mainly passive design strategies and technologies. The approach is by learning from vernacular Architecture and adapting vernacular design into the contemporary buildings. This is also incorporated in his projects as a professional consultant Architect. He is currently interested in the area of Architectural Phenomenology as he believes that: Form Follows Experience. He coordinated a group of Architects from Italy in the International Competition of the Beirut Martyrs’ Square International Urban Design Competition. The project they proposed was short-listed among the first six projects of 122 designs submitted from 45 countries to proceed to the second phase of the competition.



Nadine Hindi is an architect and urban designer. She earned her Bachelor of Architecture from the American University of Beirut (AUB), Lebanon, 1996. In 2010, following several years of professional practice, she did her masters in the topic of Urban Design: Art City and Society, at the University of Barcelona, Spain. She joined directly the Ph.D. program Public Spaces and Urban Regeneration at the same university at Barcelona, Spain, and earned the title of international doctor in 2015. She practiced architecture in various firms in Beirut since 1996 and contributed to design ideas and competitions in Spain. Her teaching methodology combines professional practice with theory in design studios and seminars. Her research interests focus on topics related to public spaces, waterfront, and urban regeneration paradigm. She participated as a reviewer and juror at universities in Lebanon and a guest speaker at COAC Barcelona.