

Views on the “Design Sector in Lebanon” by Ghassan Salameh July 2019

i) Industries, markets and sectors

When talking about the design sector in Lebanon, it is important to focus on the roles of different stakeholders. The following text offers insights on the relation between businesses and startups in the fields of product, furniture and lighting design, and the manufacturing and real estate sectors. It discusses opportunities and includes recommendations for designers willing to start their business in Lebanon beyond disciplinary constraints.

Traditionally, Fashion and Jewelry are the most established sectors among the Lebanese design industries. Along with Advertising, Branding and Graphic Design, fashion and jewelry design attract affluent clients and have the capacity to mobilize large capitals. The growth of these design sectors capitalized strongly on Beirut’s position as a regional hub for creative industry production, especially after the civil war which coincided with the rise and development of the Gulf countries.

Furniture design businesses have made a resurgence in the 2010’s in the local market (after the rise and fall of the Tripoli furniture manufacturing sector) through a scene of local product designers presenting customized and bespoke design work. This led to a boom in the alternative and independent design businesses compared to major agencies traditionally dominating the design market. This shift echoed the international trend in global economy that is shifting from large corporations to an entrepreneurial and startup-based economy. Fortunately, this coincides with the nature of the Lebanese economy that was long constituted by small to middle-sized businesses.

When it comes to product and furniture design sectors, the growth of those types of businesses has been influenced by different factors; (1) the establishment of design fairs and exhibitions promoting furniture and collectible product design, (2) the development of new design university programs that are more disciplinary and diverse and (3) the significant growth of the real-estate sector during the post-war reconstruction era reaching its height between 2007 and 2010.

However, with the local and regional political difficulties that erupted in 2011, the real-estate sector performance was highly compromised. The slowdown continues throughout 2019, regardless of the slight improvement in 2014. The luxurious residential segment has dropped from a share of 7% in 2009 to 3% in 2014. Today many construction projects in Greater Beirut and across other regions have been suspended, and the economic situation has demonstrated an unprecedented level of instability leading many different stage businesses to shut down.

The development of the design startup scene is closely tied to the booming of the luxury and design sectors as a new trend in the real-estate industry that incorporates design in every aspect, from concept development to construction. Design has become an

independent entity and, consequently, gained a remarkable position throughout the overall decision-making processes and the planning phase of any project.

When talking about product and furniture design businesses, construction is the key market driver for design in Lebanon and the region. It notably shapes prominent demand trends from promoting local creations to celebrating craftsmanship, urban inspiration and eco-friendly, sustainable solutions. Additionally, a rising trend of incorporating Arab design into architecture and interior design has settled in the last few years.

The regional and international interest in local designers however, is limited to designers who managed to circulate their work in design-centric cities mostly through their affiliations with particular niche collectors and design enthusiasts. The Lebanese market is a considerably small market in comparison to European markets but Lebanese designers have managed to establish a reputation and develop leading businesses in the Gulf and other Middle-eastern countries.

Many of those product design businesses today are still closely joined to craft and artisanal practices with a focus on limited editions and custom by-order objects, which offer a wide range of opportunities yet to be explored

According to a report on Lebanon's Manufacturing Sector by the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies¹, Lebanon has undeveloped sectors and unconquered products leading to missed opportunities despite the presence of skilled artisans, craftsmen and industries. This untapped potential is amplified by the fact that the country's main exports are to the Middle East which shares a very close cultural and visual identity, meaning that products designed and created here already have a positively receiving market.

We have a chance today especially in developing economies to grow steadily by supporting potential sectors that could drive economic change. If the manufacturing and local craft sectors have proven crucial to producing and exporting local design and there is regional and international interest in them, then empowering those sectors should be a priority starting with raising awareness around local and traditional crafts and existing manufacturing and production industries, introducing those skills in educational institutions and creating a link between students and future designers within the sector, to the funding and induction of contemporary manufacturing tools, techniques and technologies and vocational training programs in order to ensure responsible and sustainable growth of the sector.

ii) Designers, producers & startups

When is the right time for designers to start a business?

First, designers need to gain an extensive cross-disciplinary experience in the field involving research and collaboration with other practitioners. The key is to gather enough tools to sense the right time to seize an opportunity to venture alone.

There is no guarantee that a business idea is profitable, but the homework needs to be done and it should incorporate all the necessary business planning, market assessment, prototyping and testing to evaluating the right time for launching a project.

Innovation, experience and credibility play a major role in establishing trust-worthy brands in which customers and funders alike are willing to invest. When it comes to product design for instance, it really depends where the production is happening, what kind of material is being sourced and where from and how conscious and responsible the designers are across the whole value chain. This means that there is a need to support designers in all of those development stages from research and planning, mentorship and training programs to seed, early stage and project-based investment and funding.

Designers are also invited to investigate and approach other markets and divert from traditional career paths towards adopting new modes of doing business that are compatible with the new economic models while finding specificity in their local markets.

This cross-disciplinary approach is also very much related to design-for-impact in sectors where there is a need to make big progress against the imminent and pressing crises of the current times.

Designers become drivers for change and get involved in new markets and sectors.

Design is not only about products and commodities, it is critical and restorative and it has a key role in transforming societies. From design for social change and environmental impact to planning the cities of tomorrow. Design is found in every discipline and has a key role in shaping the future.

It is the duty of designers to bring forward the notion of integrated design which will naturally be appreciated and recognized and is bound to open new and untapped markets. It is crucial to understand the extent of the impact designers can have on redesigning systems and solutions, while helping the public understand the value they create. While many designers may know their own value, others—including decision-makers—still have little awareness about what design can do.

As quoted from my interview² with Executive magazine I restate the below:

“[The public] doesn’t know how to define designers or what the real impact of design is. They don’t see that design is important for innovation, or the role of design in the creative economy, they don’t know how large design [as a field] is, and so designers are not given the right appreciation,”

Ultimately, designers, like anyone else, must make a living. “Supporting the design ecosystem is important because it gives designers [financial] stability to be able to spend more time solving bigger problems and looking for real solutions, instead of getting stuck in jobs where they do executional work,”

Lebanese designers need to initiate more grassroots movements: “Two years ago this conversation didn’t exist in the way it exists today. We are moving in a good direction, but I think it’s the responsibility of designers to mobilize and raise awareness about what they do so that people and decision makers alike understand how much impact design can have. Designers often don’t see the power they have.”

References:

(1) Inaction and Untapped Potential

Sebastian Bustos & Muhammed Ali Yildirim published in 2017 by
The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies www.lcps-lebanon.org

(2) <https://www.executive-magazine.com/special-report/nurturing-lebanons-design-ecosystem>

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