

AUB Founders Day 2009
“AUB Campus: A Tolerant Space”
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Second Winner

For more than four years, I have been an AUB student, and for more than four years, I have been overwhelmed by the AUB campus spatial qualities. As an architecture student, I have learned to appreciate space not as a static pre-planned construct, but rather as a dynamic construct, envisioned with enough tolerance to invite participatory gestures that can re-invent the space. The AUB campus is a good example of such a space, where all open spaces invite the AUB community to appropriate them as meeting places, and the AUB community in turn always celebrates these meeting places. Here I perceive AUB not only as a university that provides generous open green space, but rather as a semi-public “park” that integrates educational facilities with gathering and recreational space. For its community, AUB is indeed a park that functions properly, and when a park is functioning properly, this reflects its inertia in accepting and promoting diversity. In fact, the AUB campus provides a space that catalyzes the interaction among diversities, and a policy that prevents a conflict of diversities.

The interaction between enclosed space and open space is at the heart of accepting diversity in AUB. The enclosed spaces are not merely “buildings in the park” because each building creates an intermediate space between indoor and outdoor, thus making the transition from the architecture to the landscape more fluent, and in turn inviting AUB students to use the entire campus space. For example, each building has an entrance porch, a colonnade, or a courtyard that can become a gathering space. This means that at the immediate threshold between a faculty building and open space there is a third space that will naturally attract students to exploit it during their free time between classes. This is an opportunity to get students of different nationalities, cultural backgrounds, educational backgrounds, beliefs, socio-economical status, and gender, to spend time together. This is an important step towards accepting diversity because tolerance starts by knowing “the other”. In addition, this transitional space created by architecture will reinforce the open green space as part of the whole, rather than as left-over space. In other words, if a student is walking from one building to another, because the two buildings blur the boundaries between indoor and outdoor, the green space in the middle will be perceived as a natural extension of the space defined by the buildings. This invites students to use this green space, and thus initiates more interaction among people of different backgrounds.

Now within this continuous space of gathering that invites all AUB students to celebrate their diversity, the AUB campus still respects individual preferences, which is also an important aspect of accepting diversity. The campus provides a space for people who prefer to be “low-profile”. For example, a student who is leaving Jafet Memorial library and heading towards Nicely Hall can always decide to pass by Marquand House instead of West Hall if the student prefers a less crowded promenade. Moreover, many faculties and departments provide indoor lounges for students. These lounges are intended for students of comparable majors, but there is always room for guests who come from different faculties or departments. Furthermore, even the green spaces provide instances of low-profile meeting places, like in case of benches that overlook terraced landscape. These spaces provide privacy for people who look for it, without promoting introversion among the AUB community; as such spaces are not abundant.

The aim of accepting diversity should be enhanced by policies that prevent conflict among the different diversities. This is happening in the AUB campus. For example, the recently-applied smoking policy enables non-smokers to enjoy meeting places more without having to worry about second-hand smoke. As for smokers, they are still granted their right to smoke, but in specific areas. This promotes more and more tolerance of diversity in the long run, as meeting places will be more and more used. Tolerance of diversity is also read during SRC elections. The university grants students the right to express their affiliations, but it forbids any offensive behaviour by any student. The SRC election process is an example of how the AUB campus aims at celebrating diversity, even if this requires a lot of efforts, including augmented security measures.

These policies promote the AUB campus as a semi-public park for AUB students, faculty and staff. However, it is necessary that this semi-public park addresses the whole city. Actually, the campus has an initiative to engage surrounding neighbourhoods in the celebration of diversity. This is reflected in events like “AUB Outdoors” or “Folk Dance Festival”. In addition, there are facilities on campus that create an interface with the city, including the Archaeological Museum or the Charles Hostler Sports Center. However, I feel that this is not enough. AUB should better communicate with the city, perhaps by organizing tours on campus for Beirut residents who do not intend to visit any of the AUB facilities, but are only curious to experience this park AUB creates out of its campus. After all, it is the right of people to know their city better, and AUB represents an important lot in the city.

The AUB campus remains an interesting model of a space of exchange of ideas, whether at the educational, intellectual or cultural level. In order for such exchange to occur,

tolerance should be promoted. This tolerance comes from spatial qualities that do not discriminate any diversity and policies that amplify these spatial qualities.