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Conflict Transformation through Culture: Peace-Building and the Arts

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Morning panel speaker Phloeu Prim leads discussions during the afternoon's working groups

Post-conflict Approaches to Peace-building Actors need to master the art of listening

Alex Jackson

Arts and cultural approaches to conflict have undergone a massive transformation in identity and understanding in the past decade alone. In the post 9/11 world, there has been a socio-revival of ideas pertaining to humanism. Instead of political and economic frameworks, there are increasing examples where words synonymous with the ideas of home, identity, belonging, entitlement and rights are being brought to the fore.

On the second day of the Salzburg Global Seminar session on "Conflict Transformation through Culture: Peace-Building and the Arts" the 63 Fellows from across the world discussed the differing post-conflict approaches to peace-building and reconciliation.

Led by panelists Jacqueline Bertrand Lessac, executive producer and founder of Global Arts Corps in New York, Nigel Osbourne, emeritus professor of music at the University of Edinburgh, UK, Phloeu Prim, executive director of

Cambodian Living Arts in Phnom Penh, Cambodia and Paul Smith, director of the USA office of the British Council in Washington, DC, the Fellows considered why this shift in tone is resonant of a change in attitude that sees the arts as baring a power of international reconciliation, offering alternative mediums and means by which to explore our pasts and our futures in equal measure.

These modes are as diverse as they are engaging: from music and dancing, to film making and free journalism, the exponential explosion of a new language by which to address conflict resolution allows artists and activists alike to probe fundamental questions that might be otherwise out of bounds.

In order to fully explore the perimeters of this new space, artists must acquiesce on the historical gravitas of conflict. Many communities are ravaged by the horrors of war, not just resulting in an immediate loss of physical historical and cultural reference points, but also creating disjuncture between generations, class boundaries, and races.

In the case of Cambodia, for example, 90% of artists were killed as a result of the Khmer Rouge and this threatened traditional dances that were taught from generation to generation. In Pakistan, the drawing of countries lines by politicians that did not understand, nor took the time to comprehend the magnitude of, divisions, has resulted in a huge displacement and distrust of opposing religions.

In order to understand how these pivotal moments have deeply affected the present, there have to be authentic voices, not just actors playing roles. In this sense, a nation must know itself before it can develop itself and explore itself.

Moving forward, culture needs to be considered not as a side project to diplomacy in rebuilding, but a complementing and parallel avenue by which people that have lived through these traumas can be part of an organic process of local, national and international redevelopment.

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Doreen Toutikian speaks with Salzburg Global's Alex Jackson

Interview: Doreen Toutikian

“It is not okay to say ‘it is not okay to say it’”

Alex Jackson

The Director of the MENA Design Research Centre and cofounder of Beirut Design Week considers the continued conflict in Lebanon and how untraditional art forms can provide solutions.

“We weren’t doing painting or theater or deals with Syrian refugee camps, so our project didn’t really feel like it was one of the priorities” recalls Doreen Toutikian, the Director of the MENA Design Research Centre, when reflecting on establishing the roots of design research. Now doubts and uncertainties of investors are quickly being dispelled in the wake of her creative transformation.

Over the past couple of years alone, Toutikian has become a formidable force in the design industry, heading up the specialist MENA Design Research Center, nurturing this program through projects including DESMEEM (a combination of the words ‘design’ and ‘tasmeem’ – design in Arabic), and successfully piloting Beirut Design Week, which will see its third installment this June. She is an educator, a designer, a pioneer; all achievements that are undoubtedly

a testament to her tenacity, as she remarks that there needs to be more arguments to stimulate discussion.

“I think I might have provoked something upstairs in the discussion; but we need to challenge ourselves to tackle these problems. Is it relevant to discuss them here when we all have different views? If there are people here who are listening to me and saying ‘Yes what you are doing makes sense and is similar to what I am doing in this area and this is how we could learn, we can collaborate’ that is the best thing that we can hope for.”

However, Toutikian’s determination to probe these issues stems from Lebanon’s refusal to address parts of its own history, stifling generational growth and hopes for future resolution. “There has been this ongoing conflict and it has been like that since the 70s in the region: it is bigger than the Arab Spring notion of 2011.

“The problem is it has been over 30 years and people aren’t really talking about it. In Lebanon, some of the basic reasons things can’t improve is because all of the youth and all of the students in university have no idea what happened in the civil war. They’re not even OK with teaching it in schools. These kids really don’t

know how to take on and tackle this as an issue because they have no information about it, which causes misunderstanding.

“They know skewed or partial elements from family and friends; there now has to be a process of re-education, which is a difficult but essential task.”

In order to explore the ‘other’, there has to be an understanding and a feeling with them. Toutikian reinforces the idea of empathy as one of the most important values for this process of relearning, as it provides a human framework that is nuanced in its approach – being simultaneously sympathetic, yet direct.

“As a designer, there is room to be more lenient and to be more empathetic which provides new angles to express yourself. There isn’t so much political correctness. It is not okay to say ‘it is not okay to say it’. There are unturned areas being explored and being spoken about for the first time in constructive ways. Breaking down taboos allows a new genesis for the creation of creative ideas.”

Of course, Toutikian’s steely resolve and determination in redressing these balances is likely the result of living at the nexus of James Thompson’s axes of war, with conflict a weekly reality.

“We get bombs once or twice a week. I am on my way to work and there is a bomb. And people start to deal with it in this nonchalant manner, introducing ideas of denial. The problem is that then you don’t know where you stand, because part of you also wants to forget what is going on a daily basis.”

In a war-torn region, the temptation to uproot is overwhelming, yet the mass exodus of parts of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region leaves a void and cultural hole that wreaks havoc beyond the scene of the warzone, causing in political, ideological and social realignments. “You’re in a daily conflict of ‘should I stay or should I leave?’ The most common questions tend to be: ‘What am I doing?’ ‘Is it worth it is it not worth it?’ Others have tried, others have failed; they have left the country. But it doesn’t mean that they have come to terms with the upset this has caused. But, this is an ongoing thing. The conflict stops me from being able to be the international person that says OK you’ve got a conflict, I understand, I am looking at you as an observer. I have to be involved.”

The MENA Development Research Center formally gave Toutikian the opportunity to really grapple with the conflict from within the communities of those affected: “It started up as a think tank of a local branding and digital company and then became its own independent organization and initially we thought we would depend on funding and grants, but then we thought about doing something like Beirut Design Week, which actually sustains the center now and lets us go forward and live on.”

Perhaps the key stumbling block in her journey was convincing organizations in the region that design, though not a traditional art form, was a valuable concept. “It was very difficult for us to explain why we’re doing what we doing and at the same time for funders to understand that this is not something that we are doing just for luxury purposes. Even though we are there to support the designers and to support the crafts industry that is emerging and growing in the region, we are not there to say that design is a luxurious thing that is just for the elite.” Clearly, this simplistic approach is something that Toutikian holds as a life mantra, as she is dressed comfortably, complete with trainers.

Such touches make Toutikian much more relatable, regardless of her wealth of experience, and this is an important factor she finds when she meets new students and young designers.

“We try and get people to think of social issues, such as sustainable development, the environment, LGBT issues, in lots of fun and interactive ways; so we get lots of graphic designers, working with interior and fashion designers and we try to have them develop ways to understand the problem, before we then find ways to communicate that back to a wider audience. For this, we will do an exhibition or a video or give a talk. We try to find different ways to engage civil society with these issues, through the lens of a designer.”

The significance of her work was probably solidified when DESMEEM hosted a number of stakeholders, companies and organizations from the US as part of a three month project in Lebanon. Through actively involving these US firms in local NGOs, there was a personal foundation for conflict resolution. “The head of a big organization turned to me and said: ‘What I found really special was how designers are doing things that are so different from what people are doing in advocacy and policy making, and it is because they have a way of talking to people’s hearts and so they have a really emotional way of telling the story.’ It really encourages influential groups and organizations to engage in creative ways.”

Beirut Design Week, now a name in its own right despite not having held three events, came about as an offshoot of DESMEEM to deal with the unusual issue of a lack of funding.

“We said okay let’s do something like an event where we don’t just do an exhibition, but we get other designers involved as well and they can showcase their work. In Lebanon people are not going to trust young people and new designers coming in to display things so this was a real outlet for new potential and new design. The first year, we barely made it through.”

Now, Beirut Design Week has other similar projects trying to use the cache of such a renowned group, right down to copying the name. “It is great proof that what we are doing is speaking to people and they are taking it on and really trying to get new meaning out of it.”

Post-conflict Approaches to Peace-building

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Speakers testified to the fact that in regions where there were generational gaps, youth coming of age had grown up with the legacy of conflict, yet misunderstand the legacy. This leads to a sense of uselessness, a settling anger, confusion, resentment and a further cycle of conflict.

Rebuilding in a positive manner is crucial in tackling this ‘genocide generation’ head-on. They are a watershed in post-conflict reconciliation; if they are not reached, then it becomes increasingly difficult to unlearn false histories.

This process of relearning allows a de-otherization of perceived enemies and proffers a negative space in which to proactively discuss how problems arose and how they might be resolved, often in ways that turn the table, giving minorities a voice, and leaving aggressors overwhelmed by a real sense of empathy.

Culture projects not only provide the context for breaking ground on these most obvious of boundaries, however. They also work to heal the more invisible struggles in post conflict regions, readdressing biological concerns. Traumatized populations, particularly children, tend to have higher heart rates, but this can be regulated by exercise opportunities. Those suffering breathing arrhythmias also stand a better chance of improvement if they are active in an environment where they can sing, increasing the lung capacity and regulating the heart too. Movement dysregulation can be tackled through dance.

In a multifaceted approach, arts tackle both the physical and the psychological scars that stem from conflict. Through their approach, arts projects humanize ideologies and redress the past in ways we can understand and affiliate with today. If there is a passion for creative means, then there is a passion for recreating the self, and exploring the potential of that self. This has to be done through a process of collaboration so as to create a genuine dialogue. Communities can’t craft well if they don’t master the art of listening.



Ever since 1947, Salzburg Global Seminar has taken a group photo of each session. Welcome to the tradition!

Hot Topic: “How does art help societies to look at their history post- conflict?”

“In Rwanda, there are lots of films that have been made explaining history, why the genocide occurred. But, I am working in Rwanda as a country now, post-genocide, dealing with its aftermath, the societies that are still living it, and history is part of the tools we are using to get used to what is past and therefore how we can build a bridge through which a future may be possible.”

Francois Woukoache
*Film Director; Producer; Chairman,
KEMIT, Rwanda/Belgium*

“I am an archeologist. I find that memories are an inseparable part of people, so the architecture and the culture layers becomes a new inseparable part of their memory, by which people associate with a country or place or time. It belongs to a certain group of people and helps in solving conflict between

those different groups as histories and appreciations for architecture are shared and this works over conflict.”

Neriman Sahin Güçhan
*Head of the Graduate Program in
Restoration, Department of Architecture,
Middle East Technical University, Turkey*

“I think art can help people to look at history from different points of views, so they can see there are different points of views, and it can look into very emotional issues, but it can also focus history as something that preserves distance, so I think that art in any case can help to define new insights.”

Christine Muttonen
Member of Parliament, Austria

“Many of the young people in Srebrenica be they Serb or Bosniak obviously respect, empathize, grieve for those that were killed in the genocide in 1995, but their view of history is that they want a future. Some of them have risked, it is sad to say, their future as Srebrenica is a museum and as a result is a dying town, meaning the people are not allowed a future, through education, work or history.”

Tina Ellen Lee
Artistic Director, Opera Circus, UK

We know many of you here are writers, journalists and bloggers and we welcome submissions to our website, SalzburgGlobal.org!

If you're interested in writing either an op-ed style article or a personal reflection blog post whilst you're here this week, please let Salzburg Global Editor, Louise Hallman know or email your submission directly to lhallman@salzburgglobal.org.

If you do intend to write for your own publication either whilst you're here or afterward the session, please make sure to observe the **Chatham House Rule** (information on which is in your Welcome Pack). If you're in any doubt, do not hesitate to contact Louise.

We'll be updating our website with summaries from the panels and interviews with our Fellows, all of which you can find on the session page: www.SalzburgGlobal.org/go/532

You can also join in the conversation on Twitter with the hashtag [#artandpeace](https://twitter.com/artandpeace) and see all your fellow Fellows on Twitter via the list [www.twitter.com/salzburgglobal/lists/SGS-532](https://twitter.com/salzburgglobal/lists/SGS-532)

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