



The state of the park in Sarhan at the time when this article was written (November 2019)

Strengthening communities in Jordan through the design of public space

Interview with
Marie-Laure Hoedemakers

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How can design of the public space contribute to social objectives such as strengthening communities and creating opportunities for local inhabitants? And how do you design in a context with completely different resources, structures and traditions? Marie-Laure Hoedemakers, partner of LODEWIJK BALJON landscape architects, talks about her experiences in her work in Jordan.

About the projects: As a landscape architect, Marie-Laure Hoedemakers works on the design of public spaces in six different projects in four Jordanian towns of Amman, Azraq, Umm Qais and Sarhan. The aim of the projects is bipartite: on the one hand, they are about managing water, strengthening ecological structures through planting and designing public space in a sustainable way. On the other hand, the projects incorporate a social aspect that is about community-building en creating opportunities for local inhabitants, that are often refugees from the war in Syria. The projects are part of the programme 'Improvement of Green Infrastructure in Jordan through Labor-Intensive Measures', commissioned by an NGO in Germany – GIZ (German Society for International Cooperation), and include work-experience programmes in which unemployed Jordanians and Syrian refugees can sign up to participate. If they are selected, they will work on the execution of the design for the public space. Among the selected people, 20% has to be female.

What was your personal motivation to be involved in those projects in Jordan?

A few years ago, I was involved with the Municipality of Amsterdam and the VNGI (Vereniging Nederlandse Gemeenten Internationaal) in a project about the urban planning and public space of the Za'atari refugee camp north of Jordan and in this way I became familiar with the situation of refugees in Jordan. Once I had been in Jordan, had worked on a refugee camp and had seen the war and refugees from close by, I felt that the necessity to improve people's conditions was very high. The lives of many people have changed drastically because of the Syrian war: families are separated, people are traumatised. I find it very special to be able to do this work in this exceptional situation and to be able to contribute,



Design meeting at the Municipality of Sarhan, Jordan, with the mayor as chairman

albeit a little, to people's lives. At the same time, our office works on projects in India, South-Korea and several European countries. Working in different countries and working with people in different contexts is always very interesting.

Have you experienced your role as a landscape architect in Jordan differently than in the Netherlands?

I would say that the possibilities of a landscape architect are different in Jordan, and that you have to design with a different mindset. In Jordan, we are working with the principle of 'labour-intensive measures', which means that we want to design interventions that create employment opportunities for local inhabitants. In the Netherlands, labour force is usually relatively expensive and materials are relatively cheap, whereas in Jordan it is the other way round: we have to be economical on the materials but are supposed to enlarge the labour intensiveness with our design. As a result, we can do completely different things than in the Netherlands. We can ask people to carpenter benches, to weld things together, to weave beautiful canvasses, to create stacking walls. This makes you look at your design in a completely different way: you have to know how things are being constructed in order to design them. Although we, as designers at LODEWIJK BALJON landscape architects, find craftsmanship very important in all the work, we particularly need it in the projects in Jordan.

Can you see differences between the Netherlands and Jordan in the vision on what 'good' landscape architecture is?

In Jordan, except for streets, you can find few spaces that are truly 'public'. I have noticed that people in Jordan sometimes find it a bit scary to create public space, people are used to surround spaces with fences. Some local governments are anxious for being responsible for incidents that may occur in the public space. It takes a lot of effort to convince local governments that it will be all right, that the result is going to look nice.



Design of the park in Sarhan as a meeting place, including sport and play facilities

How would you describe the relationship between the government and citizens in Jordan? Is community participation an established concept?

As far as I have experienced it, participation in the design process is a completely new thing in Jordan. For our commissioner of the projects, the German NGO GIZ, community participation is an integral part of the design process. For the Jordan municipalities, this is new. Some find it interesting, some difficult. In the Netherlands, we have developed formal instruments to guide participatory processes, but those don't exist in Jordan. So how our participatory approach is being responded to, depends a lot on the local mayor. I have experienced situations in which the mayor in one city thinks community participation is fantastic, but the mayor in the other city responds in a way like "what on earth is happening here?". In the cases where the mayor had a defensive attitude, we saw that citizens waited for the mayor to respond at first and copied his ideas. But we have also experienced very pleasant situations in which the mayor had a facilitating attitude and in which we held lively discussions with a diverse group of citizens.

Have you experienced situations in which you were convinced of a good design yourself, but that the design was appreciated totally differently by the local people?

Not so much in the design itself, but rather in the usage of the design. In Jordan, people are used to the fact that separate places exist for women. We oppose to this idea: we design a park and this park is for everybody. Yet, I have not figured out yet what is the best way of acting. There are two ways of looking at this issue. If you design a separate place for women, women are not allowed to be in the other places of the park. On the other hand, if you decide to not design that place, women might not come to the park at all. I find this a very difficult dilemma.

Another example: in the Islamic tradition, water must be free. Consequently, we see that dealing with water in a careful way is not in line with the Jordanian tradition. If we want to design in a sustainable way, you would wish that people have a hydrometer at home and have to pay a price per liter, especially in a country where water is scarce. But this is just not the way it goes. These kind of cultural differences really matter when designing in another country.



Simple but effective sport- and play facilities in the park of Sarhan

I imagine that there is an ethical aspect involved when working on projects in another country. Do you sometimes end up in situations in which you feel like: “I have an opinion about this, but who am I to decide?”

This is a quest each time. In Za’atari, the refugee camp on which I had been working before, a female soccer team was established at some point. The girls play soccer on a separate field that is shielded with canvasses. I am quite sure that we, as formal designers, could never have come up with the idea and said: “this piece of land is going to be a soccer place for girls”. Apparently, however, some people in the camp shared the opinion that girls should be able to play as well and have somehow been able to realise it.

This is the dilemma: on the one hand, you want to show a sense of respect for local cultures and habits, but on the other hand, you have a desire to show people other possibilities. In all of our designs, we question ourselves: how can we stretch the range of possibilities for all inhabitants? In one of the projects we are going to construct simple, concrete tables to play table tennis: a game that is easily accessible for both boys and girls. In this way we hope to the enlargement of possibilities for girls in Jordan.

You work on projects in Jordan while you are based in the Netherlands yourself. How do you see the role of the ‘outsider’ in this international collaboration?

As an outsider, you have a good position on providing examples of how things can be done in a different way. Since you are well-familiar with your own context, which is less familiar to local people, you have some kind of authority on this knowledge. You have a possibility to say: “In the Netherlands we do it like this, and we can see that it works.” This is particularly relevant for knowledge on water management, because the Netherlands has developed a positive image of its profession in water management. Nevertheless, if you look into the history of Jordan, you can see that water was managed in a very clever way in the past. Cisterns were built, topography was taken into account and people held water tanks underneath their house. So in the project, we are looking at old techniques that were used in the past in order to see if we can apply them again and to inspire Jordanians to re-apply these techniques.



Sarhan, a village at the border of Jordan and Syria that shelters a high number of refugees

What have you learnt about your work in Jordan that we can apply in the Dutch context?

I like the labour-intensive aspect in the projects a lot. Having the opportunity to construct the things that you design yourself, makes the project unique and specific to the context. However, this way of working is not easy in the Netherlands: a design quickly becomes expensive if you decide to make your own production. Another aspect that I find valuable and that we can learn from in the Netherlands, is the way of collaboration. I have learnt that it is very important to listen well before forming an opinion, whereas Dutch people usually form opinions quickly. Working in groups in an international environment, I have noticed that language proficiency can be a barrier for people to speak openly in groups, although they certainly have an opinion. In these situations, I learnt to approach people after the meeting in person with a cup of coffee and to continue the conversation in a more personal setting. In fact, the same situations occur in Dutch projects without language barriers: some people feel more comfortable to speak in groups than others. Yet, you have to make sure that you have heard everyone's ideas, because their input might be really important for the project. Listening well to others ideas before developing your own opinion, will make the project more successful.