

# A NEW PARLIAMENT IN ROJAVA, KURDISTAN

MERVE BEDIR

Architect, researcher, PhD candidate (TUDelft), Parter at Land+Civiliation Compositions.



Public Parliament of Derîk in Rojava / Photograph by Ernie Buts, courtesy of New World Summit (2015).

A public parliament is being built in the city of Derîk, Cezîre Canton, in East Rojava, Kurdistan. At first glance, the steel trusses that form the skeleton of the parliament structure seem foreign to the local context. People are more familiar with adobe, brick and stone in the region. The pavilion appears strong, permanent, durable. Each truss has a concrete base revealed over the floor level, showing how the structure firmly holds onto the ground. Considering that War has been ever present in the region, and especially after 1990s, it wouldn't be completely wrong to claim that peoples of the region are being forced to go back to the

nomadic life of the Bedouins. Therefore, if 'tent' has become the conventional architecture of the region by now, this structure could show how persistence might look like. On the truss, one can read 'Gender Equality' written in four languages: Kurdish, Arabic, Syriac and English. The first three are the official languages of the Confederation of Rojava mentioned in the Social Contract, the agreement of self-government, written communally by the peoples of the region that declared autonomy in 2012. The parliament has six foundational principles, derived from the texts of Kurdish leaders Abdullah Öcalan, Sakine Cansız, and the Social

Contract: Democratic Confederalism, Gender Equality, Secularism, Self-Defense, Communalism and Social Ecology. Each of these is written on a truss of the structure.

The second thing I pay attention is the half-sphere form. Not a finished, perfect one, but formed of layers and circles, which, together with the trusses seem like one can add to it or change it continuously. Patterns of stars, and yellows, greens and reds create the surfaces. The projection of the spheres on the ground composes the circular seating: there is no hierarchy. Photographs of the construction show us women dancing *halay*, people running around, watching the construction work, talking among themselves, having their photographs taken in front of the site. I wish that it was possible to ask them how they feel about this process, while they are surrounded by war and destruction.

The founding ideals of the Kurdish struggle of freedom were established around 1970s, and it started to evolve from that of a nation state to the notion of "democratic confederalism" in 2005. This ideal rejected the model of the nation state, and based itself on the egalitarian structures of power that links the principles of co-existence, free association, anti-capitalism, and cultural diversity to the questions of economy, education, politics and women's liberation. Murray Bookchin's democratic confederalism holds the basis of this ideal, around the concepts of 'communalism,' that is a de-centralized stateless self-administration, and 'social ecology,' that is an ecology of nature and an ecology of life. In both Bookchin and Öcalan's thoughts the idea of 'acting through practice' is widely explicit. In 2012, peoples of Rojava declared autonomy.

Following this line of thought, the Parliament of Rojava, as a public space is designed to facilitate assemblies from the local to the trans-cantonal level, to be used by local councils, cooperatives and communes for their assemblies, to function as a point of departure and/or end of mass demonstrations, as well as to host international conferences and gatherings. The concept and principles of the design of the parliament were developed by Dutch artist Jonas Staal in conversation with Amina Osse, co-Minister of Foreign Affairs and representative of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and Sheruan Hassan, the Dutch representative of the party in December 2014. The design was developed through meetings with the city council of Derîk,

as well as the local communes with the help of the co-mayors Delje Hamo and Hussein Adam. The design ideas were direct interpretations and expressions of the ideological architecture that has been developed over decades of Kurdish struggle. The work of Abdullah Öcalan and Sakine Cansız are inscribed on the benches around the parliament. In an email conversation that I had with him, Jonas Staal emphasizes that during the collaboration with Osse and Hassan, he realized that Ideology is equal to Form: "Ideological substructures of a given society and the way that these form specific ecologies of power and political awareness, are rooted deeply in a specific morphology: a genealogy of forms through which power expresses itself or, in the case of Rojava, is collectively performed through communes, councils and cooperatives."

Jonas Staal's collaboration with architect Paul Kuipers in the New World Summit, continued in April 2015 for the parliament in Rojava. The New World Summit was founded by Jonas Staal in 2012 as an artistic and political organization, providing "alternative parliaments" to organizations that currently find themselves excluded from democracy. In opposition to the misuse of the notion of democracy for expansionist, military and colonial gains, the New World Summit explores the field of art as a space to re-imagine and act upon a fundamental practice of democracy: "There is not such a thing as a 'limit' to democracy, for democracy is either limitless or it does not exist at all." New World Summit claims that the current political order is not able to act upon this principle, because of its geopolitical economic and political interests. "The New World Summit thus claims art as a radical imaginative space 'more political than politics itself,' as a space where the promise of an emancipatory, fundamental democracy can take shape." In 2013, the New World Summit founded its own academy in collaboration with Base for Contemporary Art (BAK): the New World Academy. The academy invites organizations invested in the progressive political project to collaborate with artists and students to develop projects together that explore the role of art at the center of political struggle, to which the Kurdish Women's Movement also participated.

Jonas and Paul have based a lot of their work in the New World Summit and other projects on Russian constructivist art and architecture, as well as on a significant inspiration from Brazilian architects: Oscar Niemeyer, Lúcio Costa, Roberto Burle Marx, and Lina Bo Bardi, who further translated the European modernist paradigm of CIAM into the specific context of contemporary Brazilian society. Jonas refers to Bo Bardi for her particular contribution to a modernism that, in many ways, ran against to the European administrative and formalist paradigm, by investing far more in the sociabilities of architecture and its relations to other cultural domains, such as art, music and theater: "The public parliament that we are developing is both a political and social space, but also an artwork: a public sculpture or monument that is shaped after the principles of the Rojava Revolution. Around it we're developing a public park as well. This cross-disciplinary approach to the space takes a lot from Bo Bardi's work."





Amina Osse, Jonas Staal, Younes Bouadi and Renée In der Maur welcome the public on the construction site of the new public parliament  
 Photograph by Ruben Hamelink, courtesy of New World Summit (2015).

My questions to Jonas were focused on a couple of points, the first being about the spectacle of revolution. In this case, what I mean is the monuments or monumentality erected after revolution that actually places a distance between the event and the people. Jonas and his team deals with the question in the search for an aesthetics of hybridity: "to create a permanent construction that somehow feels as if it's continuously under construction. The parliament from all sides looks very different, because of the fact that the six arches do not completely connect: they are not a unified shape, but a confederal shape — to stay in the discourse of Rojava. The principles of the revolution seek for connection and mutually strengthen each other, but also differ." **As such, they approached the idea of the parliament also as a conflictuous shape and space: "a moment of crystallization of something that is in process of being constructed, a monument that is never finished, but functions as a point of orientation in furthering the complex day to day struggle of shaping a new society."**

Secondly, the position of art(ist) and/or design(er) becomes crucial, especially in politically engaged art and in this case a colonized territory. Here, Jonas refers to Ekaterina Degot's "artist-director" function where the role of the artist becomes that of a conceptualizer and an organizer, but also director in the dual sense of the word: director of an organization, but also 'directing' a specific trajectory in the way that a theater-director would.

Jonas says "In that light, I feel that this project is a crystallization of a lot of my work from the past decade where I collaborated with political parties, organizations and social movements. For politically engaged art to become of relevance, it needs to ally with progressive and emancipatory political forces. The imaginary of art and the imaginary of emancipatory politics need to meet, in order to strengthen and liberate one another from their dogmas and blind spots. This intimate meeting of art and revolution I believe has come to being in this process in Rojava. The ideals of Rojava revolution shaped this public parliament, and the parliament further shapes the imaginary of the revolution."

My last question concerned the issues of land ownership in Kurdistan. In different parts of Kurdistan, Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran apply different ownership and representation rights for Kurdish people. For instance in Turkey, modernity seemingly meant a land reformation process in Bakûr, however this only assured the continuity of the existing power structures, which are still feudal. 4% of the people owned all the land in Bakûr (North Kurdistan), in 1990. The election threshold of 10% has made it very difficult for the Kurdish citizens to be represented in the parliament, until the recent success of Peoples Democracy Party (HDP). In Syria, Kurdish ethnicities aren't allowed to be citizens, or own land. The article 40 of the Rojava's Social Contract mentions the following:

"All buildings and land in the Autonomous Regions are owned by the Transitional Administration and are public property. The use and distribution shall be determined by law." In addition to the conflict between the disputed Syrian law and the Social Contract, the recent warnings of Amnesty International (AI) report and the Christian community that have risen from the region point to the importance and necessity to deal with the issue. The fact that the Democratic Self-Administration submits to the Geneva Conventions, and that it invited international organizations to get full disclosure in visiting the region, investigating the infrastructures and political bodies of the self-administration is an effective response to the doubts on AI report so far. On the other hand, it seems that the ideals of the democratic confederation would not go for a capitalist-modernistic method of reforming/redistributing the rights to land use, and the existing cooperatives are good mediums to work on. All in all these realities, combined with the ongoing war, makes it difficult to deal with (sensitive) land ownership issues.

The initiative of Jonas Staal and New World Summit in Derik makes us question the role and position of artists (and also designers in this case) in colonized territories

— in this case, a territory colonized by no less than four nation-states. The complexity of the context considering the history of colonization; conflict; politics; economical and social structures; power structures; participation and decision making mechanisms; land ownership and land use issues define a difficult field on which to act for socially and politically engaged artists. How should artists and designers be involved in such contexts, if, architects are allowed to intervene as long as they do not challenge the power structures? As Jonas puts it, we are being told that "the artist's role is to 'ask questions,' 'hold up mirrors to society,' 'confront' and 'name paradox and ambiguity'." Are designers and artists allowed to challenge everything, but not to change anything?

**The Parliament in Rojava requires us to think about the notions of democracy, self-governance in opposition to nation-state, (gender) equality, public space, communalism and social ecology.** Is it possible to imagine art and design evolving from form to discourse; facilitating decolonizing practices, (resistance and) struggle for human rights, direct participation of rounded citizens in a rounded environment? If democracy is indeed more than the hegemonic narrative of the nation-state, we have to take its practice beyond the limitations of it. As Jean Baudrillard puts it, utopia doesn't have to be postponed to a perfect future, but should be practiced here and now. It seems that we need this more and more today considering the current context of politics of austerity, massive refugee displacements, the so-called "war on terror," and raising radical nationalist tendencies.