Towards and Ecology of Desire: The Charles Hostler Student Center

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Abstract

Architects have the ethical responsibility of designing in and for Otherness, while contributing to the better good. It seems fair to propose that an ethical practice, in our current state, requires sustainability. In The three Ecologies, Felix Guattari called for an ecological revolution in which the ethical, sustainable perspective should also be concerned with sensibility and desire. The questions raised by Guattari were concerned with finding ways to reinvent our relationships to body, fantasy, pleasure and desire, where technical practices could work along sensitive ones. While 20 years have now past, sustainability is still largely approached without engaging the body, nor has it acknowledged the necessities of desire and pleasure in our experience of the built environment.

Using the Charles Hostler Student Center as an example, this article demonstrates that an architecture of desire is possible within the realm of a sustainable architecture. If the paradigm of sustainability has largely neglected the dimensions of body, pleasure and desire, there exist, nonetheless, buildings that branch out from their complex systems towards a sensitive architectural phenomenology, where the humane experience of architecture is understood through an active role of the body. This article shows that the sustainable qualities of the building are, above and beyond its necessary systems, intricately woven with the understanding of one's moving across and around spaces, with renewed transactions between body and imagination, and with the desire for an architecture that is fundamentally ethical.

Keywords: *Desire, Architectural Phenomenology, Ethics, Charles Hostler Student Center, Education*

1 Ecology of Desire

"The Earth is undergoing a period of intense techno-scientific transformations. If no remedy is found, the ecological disequilibrium this has generated will ultimately threaten the continuation of life on the planet's surface. Alongside these upheavals, human modes of life, both individual and collective, are progressively deteriorating. Kinship networks tend to be reduced to a bare minimum; domestic life is being poisoned by the gangrene of mass-media consumption; family and married life are frequently "ossified" by a sort of standardization of behavior; and neighborhood relations are generally reduced to their meanest expression...it is the relationship between subjectivity and its exteriority –be it social, animal, vegetable or Cosmic- that is compromised in this way, in a sort of general movement of implosion and regressive infantalization. Otherness tends to lose its asperity." (Guattari, 1989, p.19)

This description of the contemporary situation was written 20 years ago by the French philosopher Felix Guattari, in a book entitled The Three Ecologies, where he claimed, as a few before him and as many after, that we have "challenged the Earth more than we should have and that we are now on the verge of an ecocide" (1989, p.2). Though many advances have obviously been made since Guattari's publication, and though the growing literature produced on the subject and the punctual "wake-up calls" have incrementally transformed practices and shaped a new paradigm in architecture, there is still a global need for discourses where the ecological responsiveness reaches beyond the technical and technological challenges. Independently of the nature of a project, and despite our will or not, we need to face our ethical responsibility of designing in and for Otherness, while contributing to the better good. It seems only fair to believe that an ethical practice of architecture, in our current state, requires sustainability. But as Ted Toadvine (Brown & Toadvine, 2003) declares, environmental problems do have ethical dimensions though are often ignored in favour of empirical or scientific inquiry. If ethics in architecture have often been addressed through aesthetical judgement (Lagueux, 2004), environmental or sustainable ethics need to address the interrelationship between organisms and the world (Marietta, 2003), between us and the built environment, because, as Karsten Harries states: "To build is to help decide how man is to dwell on earth or indeed whether he is to dwell on it at all, rather than drift aimlessly across it." (1975, p.396) Architecture should not merely depict the aesthetical sensibilities of a given time, but ideally, should set a positive course of action for it as well (Levine, 2004).

Our discipline now engages, with a certain amount of success, the sustainable question through economics and policy making along with technical and technological approaches, but it has yet to acknowledge the necessities of desire and pleasure in our built environment. If the former are without a doubt necessary to a better future, the latter pursue a sensitive architectural phenomenology where renewed transactions between body and imagination can

trigger the desire for an architecture that is fundamentally ethical. To think of architecture and the city in their full consideration necessitates that we consider them, to borrow Foucault's expression, as true "ethical substances", or as Benoit Goetz says, as means by which to tune the ways of being between man and the space where he dwells (Goetz, 1997). To consider the ethical stance of architecture, it seems necessary not to consider the problematic exclusively through sustainable constructions, but to consider it, as well, in terms of sustainable practices, where the demands of Otherness (altérité requérante) as proposed by Chris Younès (2000), that is to say our openness to the Other in the making of built space, is placed at the heart of the question.

This article is thus three folds. It first establishes, through a factual description of a case study built in Beirut in 2008, that though it is still in its infancy, sustainable construction is now emerging in Lebanon. A second reading of this case study depicts a phenomenological concrete description where beyond the advanced techniques used to build this climate responsive building, the notion of intersubjectivity participates in constructing one's relation to the built environment. And lastly, the article argues that understanding the lived experience can work hand-in-hand with the educational challenges as a way to pursue sustainable practices.

2 The Charles Hostler Student Center: first account

If it is now current for various parts of the world to have climate responsive buildings and sustainably sound practices, Lebanon, and especially Beirut, is an exemplary case where infrastructure, governance and environmental regulations, not to mention building codes remain largely behind the environmental challenges. Though there is a growing awareness of sustainable issues and

Figure 1: CHSC. View from middle campus.

discourses amongst professionals, and a will to instill regulations, the rapid growth of the city of Beirut has thus far made no attempt at greening the city, nor at greening its buildings. The numerous buildings damaged or abandoned during the civil war or during the 2006 34-day bombardments are now being taken

down one after the other, regardless of their actual state, to make room for large plate, condominium towers, drastically changing the skyline, of course, but also the scale of urban blocks and domestic architecture. What used to be a city of intricate passageways, of terraces looking out at each other, of tightly knit social fabric is slowly being turned into series of gated private towers, not unlike other cities with either growing demographics or growing economy and real estate speculation. But as stated previously, there is an awareness and a will to engage with issues of sustainability despite the lack of regulations for urban development and climate responsive building codes. An example of this will is the Charles Hostler Student Center at the American University of Beirut, built in 2008 and designed by Vincent James Associate Architects, a firm from Minneapolis, Minnesota, along with Samir, Khairallah and Partners as their local counterpart.

The AUB campus is located on a 73 acre property, divided into two parts, lower and upper campus, because of the important shift in topography, from the sea going towards the inland. The campus is overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, and is also often referred to as the lung of Beirut for its green open spaces. In the late 1990s, a master plan for the campus was drawn where long-ranged strategies were recommended in order to upgrade the then existing conditions to more sustainable developments. The upper campus was to remain the historic center of campus, while the lower campus, with fewer buildings and more available land, would welcome a series of new buildings that could be linked together by new plazas and pedestrian promenades. The steep hill dividing both zones, middle campus, would be witness of an active landscape management.

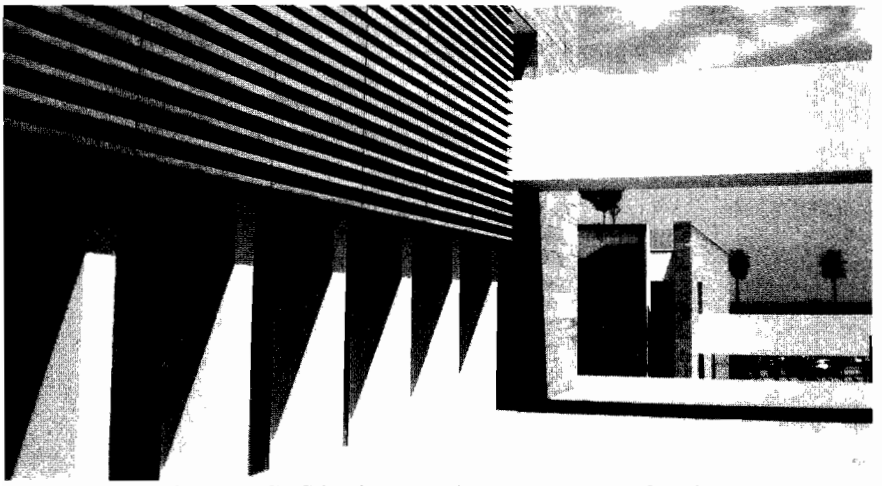

Figure 2: CHSC. Concrete louvers over east facade.

As the first building of this master plan to be built, the Charles Hostler Student Center needed to be a model for climate responsive architecture, for both AUB and the city, and needed to set the pace for the implementation of the

master plan. Where the latter called for one large fitness and recreation center, along with a proportionally scaled plaza, the architects, after studying wind flows moving from the sea towards upper campus and back, decided on breaking up the required program into five, much smaller buildings, and a series of small plazas.

Thus the program is divided according to the various activities required by the Center. The north-east building houses a 25 meter pool, along with amenities such as changing rooms, toilets, administration offices, and access to the AUB private beach. A multi-use gymnasium, two squash courts and student activity rooms are located in the north-west building. The south-east building, of a smaller size, houses a cafeteria and eating area, as well as a study/computer room. In the south–west building is a 280 seat auditorium and meeting rooms, under which is an exercise and weight training fitness room. The fifth building, somewhat in the center, provides a direct connection to the 200 cars parking below. The Center has a total area of 204 000 square foot, half of this area being taken over by underground parking. The Center is generally used by 3 500 visitors per week.

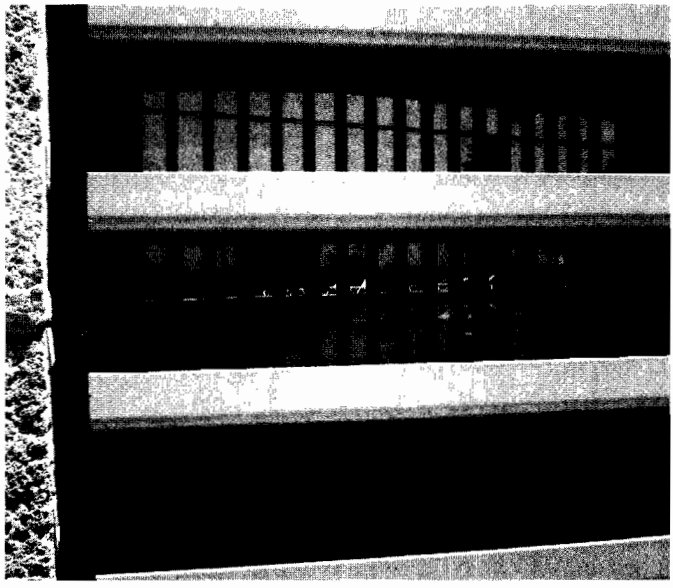

Figure 3: CHSC. Aluminium louvers over south facade.

Because of the dramatic shift in topography and the shaded areas provided by the plantation in middle campus, the wind, naturally flowing from upper to lower campus during the day, brings cooled air in a constant flowing movement from the shaded areas and flushes the warmer air away from the buildings, while at night, the wind flow is reversed, bringing air to the buildings from the sea. Rather than designing one large east-west oriented building as originally planned, this layout allows for two thirds of the complex to be naturally

ventilated. Atop this natural flow of fresh air running between the buildings, strategically placed windows on either side of the pool allow the air to flow through the interior, while skylights over the gymnasium let the hot air flow out. Also, because of the north-south axis on which the buildings are positioned, each plaza receives a fair amount of shade at different times of the day, minimizes the southern exposure of the main facades and allows for 70% of the interior spaces to be day-lit.

Adapting the Lebanese traditional exterior wall fabrication, each building is made of a double shell where an interior layer of locally produced concrete is clad with Syrian sand stone, leaving an insulated cavity in-between, considerably reducing the u-value of a traditional envelope. Louvers, either of pre-cast concrete or locally crafted aluminium, shade the interior spaces where needed. The locally produced concrete pavers covering the pathways in-between the buildings sit over a drainage system which collects rain water, also collected from the roof tops, which can be used for irrigating the native plants around the complex. Potable water being an issue in itself for Lebanon, the Hostler Center brings gray water from showers and lavatories to be treated in a gray water plant. Toilets can be flushed with this clarified gray water while the waste goes to the municipal sewer system. In this way, potable water can be strictly used for kitchen, lavatories, and showers.

While potable water is scarce, electricity is also an issue in Lebanon, where every building in the city is cut off the grid for three hours per day, making the cooling of large buildings an added challenge to the overwhelmed grid. In order to insure the buildings' autonomy for cooling itself, as well as for all of lower campus buildings, a geothermal system was integrated underneath the green field adjacent to the Center, where water from the deep cool sea runs through a closed loop heat exchanger to radiantly cool the interior spaces. When coming back at the end of the loop, the water returns to the sea in a temperature-compatible area, in order not to endanger marine life. The energy required to run the low energy pumps in this innovative solution is considerably reduced compared to traditional cooling systems, relieving the city's grid while eliminating the use of fresh water normally used for roof top chillers, and leaving those same rooftops available for either green terraces or privileged points for solar panels to heat the water of the pool and the showers.

As for heating air within the interior spaces, the buildings rely on a radiant heating system, where heat is exclusively provided from steam produced by the physical plant of the university and wasted heat produced by other AUB buildings.

While installing all these systems in the belly of the Center, tunnels were dug towards the existing and planned buildings on the lower campus so that the Hostler Center could act as an energy and cooling provider to those buildings, while making all pipes and equipment easily accessible. The new Olayan School of Business is now connected to the Hostler, and the new Engineering building shall also be after its completion in 2012.

The climate responsive merits of the Charles Hostler Center are, without a doubt, a great contribution to sustainable architecture and an example for others to follow in Lebanon, as well as anywhere abroad for that matter. But there is more to it.

3 Architectural Eco-Phenomenology

If we go back to the argument presented by Felix Guattari in his Three Ecologies, one can see that atop the usual environmental claims that are generally central to any sustainably friendly discourse, such as the overuse of the earth's resources, global warming and so forth, Guattari argues that the human subjectivity is as endangered as are the disappearing species around the globe and that though an ecological revolution is desperately needed, there needs to also be a revolution encompassing subjectivity and social ecologies. An ecology of subjectivity, for both individuals and buildings, should seek to "reinvent the relation of the subject to the body, to phantasm, to the passage of time, to the "mysteries" of life and death. It [should] lead us to search for

Figure 4: CHSC. Main entrance.

antidotes of mass-media and telematic standardization, the conformism of fashion, [etc]." (Guattari, 1989, p.24) In other words, an ecology of subjectivity should encourage and welcome a multitude of levels of differentiation. While the ecology of subjectivity addresses the individual in all its uniqueness, a social ecology is about "reconstructing the modalities of "group-being" [l'être en groupe], not only through "communicational" interventions but through existential mutations driven by the motor of subjectivity." (Guattari, 1989, p.24)

A social ecology would therefore be concerned with developing the affective and pragmatic investments of human groups with each other, an intersubjectivity of sorts. Rather than embracing the traditional philosophical perspective where a dualistic separation between cultural and natural systems is maintained, Guattari proposes to look at the three ecologies, that is of the environment, of subjectivity and a social ecology, as three components of a single entity he calls "ecosophy", in which the interdependency of the constituents is irrevocable. In a similar way as the heideggerian "first law of phenomenology" where what is closest to us in our everyday environment is, in fact, the furthest from us in terms of our ability to "see" it, an ecosophy holds the promise of bringing about a shift in our ways of understanding our place within our environment, to re-imagine our relation to it and to find ways of reinventing our relationships to pleasure and desire, where technical practices are allowed and encouraged to work along with sensitive ones. Whilst the phenomenological method proposes that "our reasoning takes place in the real

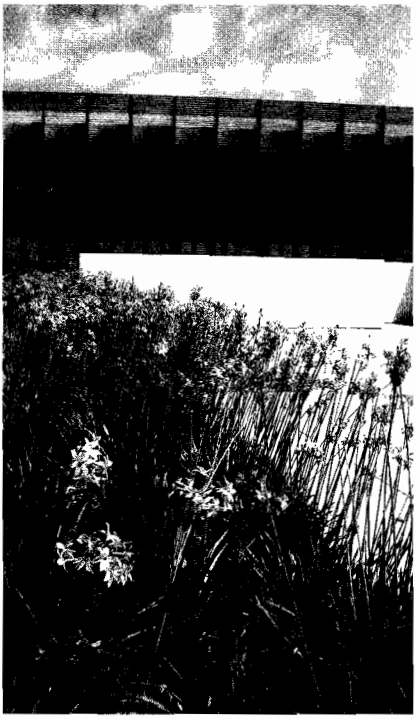

Figure 5: CHSC. Roof garden.

world, with and toward others, (...) and uses language to direct our attention to something in our worldly experience, to show us something, to help us notice and see it" (Hass, 2008, p.6), a phenomenological ecosophy proposes that if we are indeed beings-in-the-world, that our full bodily spectrum is in fact actively involved, rather than being within a mere spatial inclusion (Thompson, 2004).

In this complex understating of ecology, our challenge, as architects and urban designers, becomes a question of creating devices that go beyond their technologies and embed in their physical responses to climatic responsibility a sense of collective desire and pleasure. Because "the built environment within which we live sets an important backdrop to what we are and what we do" (Frascari, 2007, p.6), an phenomenological architectural ecosophy requires, to borrow the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, that the humane experience of architecture be understood through an active role of the body and that its premises be rooted in an ethical practice. In this sense, pleasure and desire are not to be seen as superfluous objectives. To the contrary, pleasure and desire should be seen as motivations for action, as the "sources for a blessed sustainable architecture, which [is] capable of giving mental and physical sustenance to real human happiness." (Frascari, 2007, p.4) At the turn of the 16th century, the Italian renaissance architect Alvise Cornaro wrote A Treatise on Sober Life in which he explains how to achieve a satisfying longevity, i.e. in the duration of both time and quality. In a recent assessment of this work, Marco Frascari states that "[s]ustainable happiness can be viewed as the foundational condition for an alternative approach to architectural sustainability that is presently dominated by a narrowly techno-scientific view, an instrumentalized circumstance that considers Green Architecture an innovation without historical, and above all without human dimensions. Happily conceived and built edifices make human edification possible and edified human beings can only be involved in cosmopoietic acts. Consequently, they can accept only durable and sustainable constructions." (Frascari, 2007, p.7)

4 The Charles Hostler Student Center: Second Account

While the technological merits of the Charles Hostler Student Center have been demonstrated, the demonstration of the human dimensions of this happily conceived edifice remains. A brief alternative, concrete description of the building may run like this:

Adjacent to the sea, the Hostler Center sits on a privileged location, connected to both natural elements and student life on campus. The passageways and bridges linking the five volumes reveal and connect the complexity of the organization while opening possibilities of small gathering spaces, each inhabited through a daily sequence from east to west, following the shaded spaces under the path of the sun. The cool breeze coming from the south along with water slowly falling down the façades create cool outdoor spaces on hot summer days, while creating a cascading soundscape where time comes to a still. These delicate and comfortable outdoor spaces slide through into the interior spaces, uninterrupted, adding yet another level of connection between the various users. The intricacy of circulation, sometimes indoors, sometimes outdoors, but most times in-between, reveal, as one walks about, a sense of connectedness with both natural and built environment, with oneself and with other occupants. As in a communal game, of being seen and unseen, of observer and observed, of above and below, the delicacy of human relations

insures a being together that is knit through one's bodily movements. The roof top terraces provide opportunities for these mingling movements to gather and become one in unexpected events.

The openness and fluidity flowing through the building, where one can sit in the shade or in the sun, close to earth or close to sky, on a hard or green surface, by one self or as a group, hidden or in complete view, in the shade of a wall or in the shade of a tree, in quietude or within the reverberation of sounds, gives the opportunity for a number of appropriations to take place, for one to be in a dialogue with architecture, where architecture accommodates our desires. As appropriations are confirmed and the subjectivity of the user revealed, architecture is understood as a means through which to expose oneself and to affirm one's differentiation.

In a similar understanding of one's subjectivity being supported by the edifice, the edifice itself has found its own subjectivity within the cityscape. The Charles Hostler Student Center, while being an important contribution to the university's campus in fulfilling a social role through the connection of schools and students, demonstrates that its differentiation in both scale and dialogue with the sea front, in adapting local traditions and materials, in synchronizing users, architecture and environment, is meaningful to the scale of the user but also, as a counterpoint to the city's frenzy. If the edifice helps to build the edification of the user by permitting desires to be fulfilled and pleasure to be felt, one can only hope that this ecology of desire will transpire across the

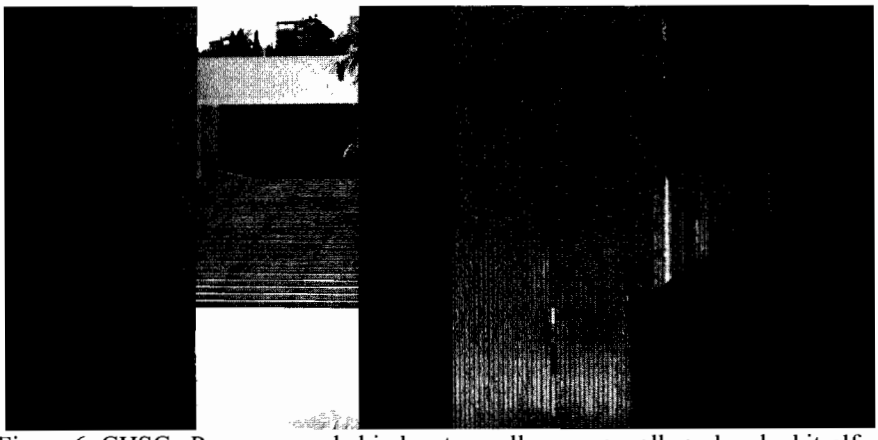

Figure 6: CHSC. Passage way behind water wall.campus walls and embed itself in other locations in Beirut.

5 Conclusion: Lived Experience in Architectural Education

In his article Ecology, Phenomenology and Culture: Developing a Language for Sustainability, Patrick Howard argues that the international effort to re-orient architectural education is at heart a phenomenological task. (2008) Indeed,

helping students understand the value of lived experience, of intersubjectivity, of the relationship between subjects and spaces should be the starting point for developing a language able to work alongside and challenge the dominant technological asperities of our current practices. It is not to say, as Françoise-Hélène Jourda claims, that an architect bears more responsibility than other citizens, (Contal & Revedin, 2009) but certainly that the "program of a new city, [of a new practice of architecture], is born from the architect's responsible, personal imagination, through compassion for the other, as a project for the common good." (Perez-Gomez, 2007, p.47)

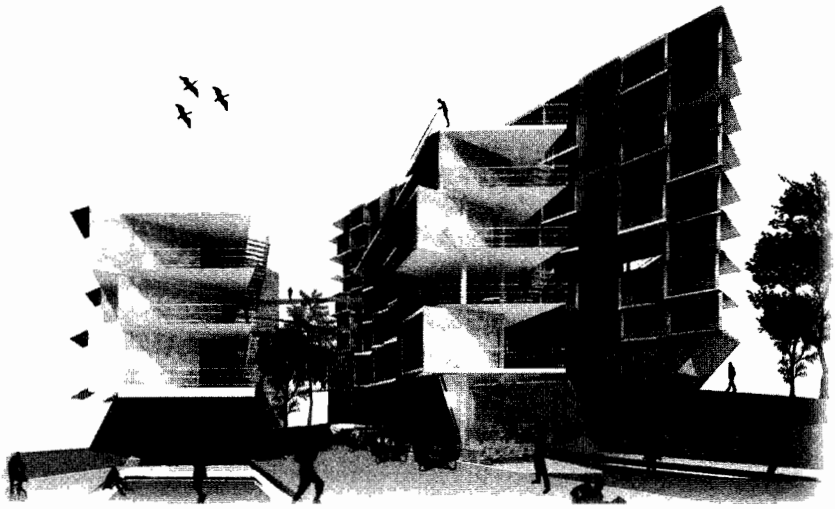

Figure 7: Danny Arakji, Wassef Dabouccy, AUB student project, Fall 09, 1st prize.

In the fall of 2009, 17 AUB students enrolled in a national sustainable architecture competition, the first of its kind in Lebanon. Through the semester, they engaged in a method of designing where a large emphasis was put towards imagining a better community, alternative ways of living in Beirut, shared experiences as well as thorough descriptions of envisioned phenomenological events, along, of course, with appropriate technologies. Of the 5 prizes awarded amongst the 75 submitted projects from 7 participating schools, four were awarded to these students. This national recognition, in a country where sustainability is engaged in its first steps, is telling of the added value brought by

an architectural phenomenology and demonstrates that engaging sustainability through the understanding of one's perception of the environment, of one's relation to tne Other and to the city, produces an architecture that is telling to others and engages a mutual relation weaved through common desires.

If pleasurable and happy architectural phenomenology can find its place in current architectural education as well as amongst the current sustainable discourses and help in generating systems, structures, spaces and functions, perhaps it will deflect the technological dominance within the field of sustainable architecture and make way for an ethos based on an ecology of desire. If phenomenological events might be seen by some as exceptional occurrences, one might respond that as in the proverb "the exception proves the rule", (...) the exception can just as well deflect the rule, or even recreate it."

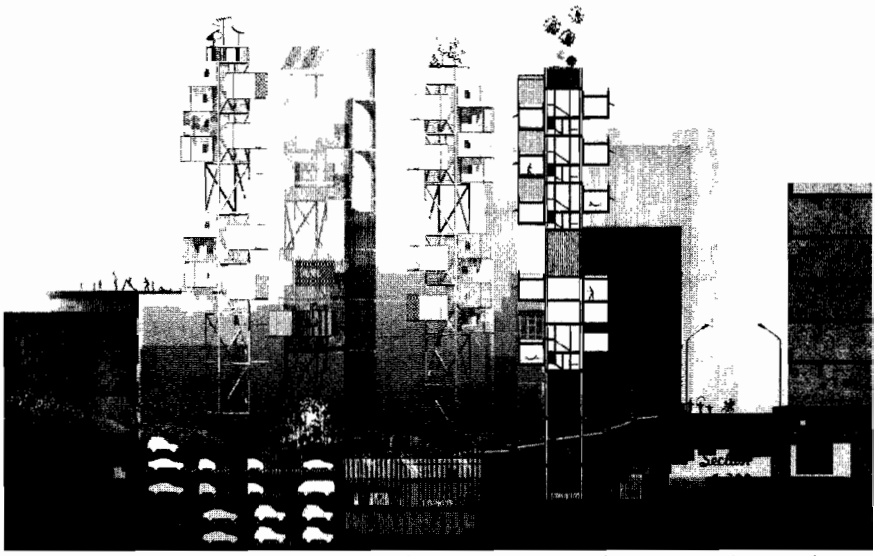

Figure 8: Rana Haddad, Zeina Koreitem, Joanne Hayek, AUB student project, Fall 09, 2nd prize.

(Guattari, 1989, p.35) Both students' prized work and the Charles Hostler Student Center are examples of just how this ecology of desire can both respond to our environmental challenges all the while creating a desire for meaningful architecture, for an ecology which desires to sustain real human happiness.

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