Karen Lee Bar-Sinai

Defusing Conflict with Design

Karen Lee Bar-Sinai is the co-founder and Design Director at SAYA/Design for Change, an architectural practice based in Israel. She specialises in "Resolution Planning", which is the use of architectural and design tools in aid of conflict resolution processes. This is a missing aspect in the Israeli–Palestinian territorial disputes, which Karen is fighting to fill.

The World Cities Summit Young Leaders is a select group of change-makers from diverse sectors who shape the global urban agenda at the annual World Cities Summit Young Leaders Symposium.

Karen Lee Bar-Sinai on…

🗩 Your biggest takeaway from your advocacy for the use of design for conflict resolution in Israel

Urban design can be used as a strategic tool in envisioning and shaping conflict resolution processes. A few years ago, *The New York Times* ("The Plan for Peace that Still Could Be", 7 February 2011) reported that the 2008 Annapolis negotiations included visions and concepts for the future Jerusalem. The set of plans mentioned were produced by SAYA/Design for Change. These drawings showed how an urban border could be situated in Jerusalem: appearing familiar, rather than intimidating; providing connections as well as separation; enabling security as well as permeability; and establishing hitherto inexistent bridges between the two sides. The article also reported that these designs served the two leaders in their direct talks. A leader-to-leader meeting during negotiations is very rare. When they occur, they are of pure strategic nature. They outline principles, broad strokes, leaving the details to be further developed by the negotiation teams. To me, the presence of an architectural concept in such a key meeting was noteworthy. It showed that design is not merely complementary to peace processes, but can become substantial in them. Design can go beyond the shaping of the built environment— it can also inform and inspire decision-making on territorial-political issues.

🗩 An example of an innovation that inspires you

I have always been inspired by the leaders of the Modern Movement in architecture. Practitioners such as Alison and Peter Smithson, Aldo Van Eyck, and Le Corbusier, as well as new movements such as Team 10 have expanded the boundaries of the architectural profession. Architecture is no longer only the practice of designing the built environment but a way to influence society and shape a new future for it.

🗩 The most exciting thing that you are working on now

We are now about to launch a large and interactive database of the Israeli–Palestinian peace process which we have been developing for the Economic Cooperation Foundation in Tel Aviv. It will feature historical terms and maps pertaining to the conflict and its potential resolution, and allow anyone— with little or deep knowledge—to learn how peace can become possible. This project represents how we have expanded our practice: from envisioning peace to helping to democratise spatial–political issues by making them easily accessible and understandable to everyone.

🗩 A typical day in your shoes

The biggest challenge I face every day is the increasing violence, growing extremism, and the lack of political leadership. What I do is to remind myself that change is not only possible, but also within reach. That vision won't be found in the harsh reality surrounding us; it has to be dreamed up in the minds and hearts of those who won't accept it. It is our responsibility to get it delivered and spoken out to the world. In essence, this is what architects do—they use their skills to portray a better reality that could take form in space. We have a duty not to limit our visions to the challenges that come to our doorsteps, but also to respond to spatial challenges that surround us, and design for change.

🗩 Your ideal city

Jerusalem's Old City is a paradoxical notion. It is the heart of the conflict in our region where all political and religious interests and sensitivities peak to an unimaginable level. Yet, we have been seeing far less violence within the Old City than around it. In a paradoxical way, there is equilibrium within that one square mile that exceeds anywhere else in the Middle East. What is the source of this equilibrium? I believe it stems from the fact that what unites us as human beings, is far greater than what divides us. This sentiment crosses boundaries and exists in any city. We need to find ways to capture it, transform it into a paradigm, translate it into infrastructure and embody it in our designs. ⬡