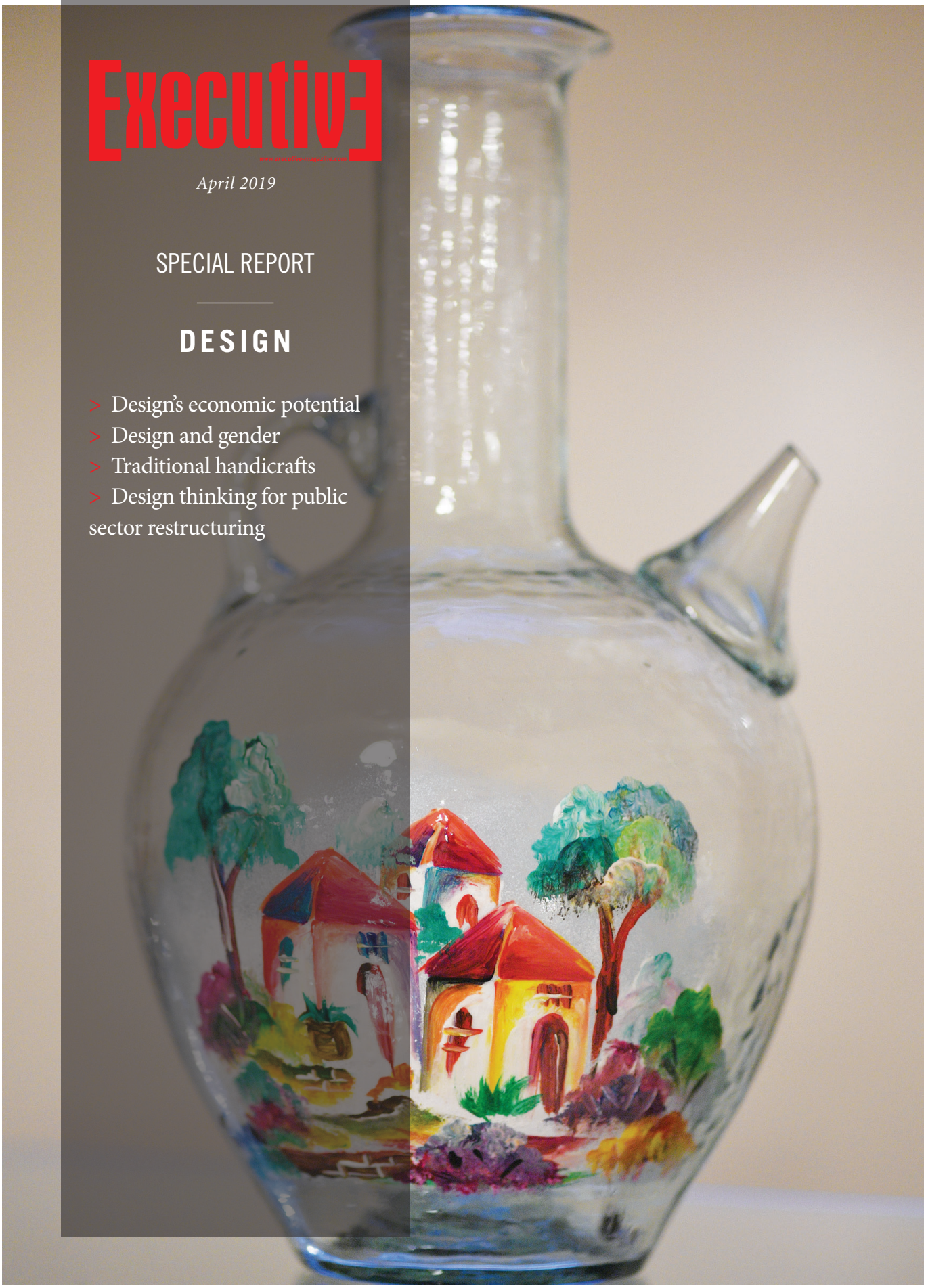
Executive

April 2019

SPECIAL REPORT

DESIGN

- Design's economic potential
- Design and gender
- Traditional handicrafts
- Design thinking for public sector restructuring



By Olga Habre

NURTURING LEBANON'S DESIGN ECOSYSTEM

New initiatives to support designers in Lebanon

On March 28, Fashion Trust Arabia awarded Lebanese designers Krikor Jabotian, Roni Helou, Selim Azzam, and the Mukhi Sisters at a fashion event in Qatar—and the Lebanese rejoiced posting congratulations on social media.

The Lebanese take pride in such success stories of local designers, and boast about a rich national history of creative enterprises. They applaud the fashion designers whose gowns glide down international red carpets draped on celebrities, and talk to non-Lebanese friends about long-standing traditions of craftsmanship in jewelry and furniture. Yet, it is important to note that the Lebanese designers and sectors who have "made it" have mostly themselves to thank for their accomplishments. There has been very little local support for creatives and designers across various disciplines—that there are so many success stories despite so little backing is an indicator that Lebanon has design potential.

In the past, designers that EXECUTIVE spoke with frequently lamented the lack of assistance they have received. A few recent initiatives, most backed by the international community, have zoomed in on the design ecosystem in Lebanon, sparking some hope for the local scene.

IMPACT AND INCOME

Design is one of the fastest growing economic sectors worldwide. According to a study by the United Nations Industrial Development Organi-

zation (UNIDO), the contribution of cultural and creative industries to GDP in Lebanon is estimated to be 4.8 percent, and constitutes 4.5 percent of jobs. The average annual growth between 2003 and 2012 was 8.2 percent—however, this does not include all design disciplines.

If Lebanon helps its designers, those designers can reciprocate on several levels. Given the right strategies and resources, local design industries can become more significant contributors to the economy, employ more people, and elevate the national brand. Through harnessing local talent and providing facilities, programs, and funds, Lebanon can maximize the economic success of its design fields. Design can also have higher level impact; it can be used to optimize processes and systems, make our cities more livable, and solve practical problems related to issues as varied as urban planning and civil service efficiency using design thinking strategies.

Active in the design space since 2009, designer Ghassan Salameh, manager and creative director of last year's Beirut Design Week and head advisor for the FANTASMEEM program (more on that below), says designers themselves need to understand the extent of the impact they can have, and calls on them to help the public understand the value they bring to the table. While many designers may know their own value, others—including decision-makers—still have little awareness about what design can do.

"[The public] doesn't know how to define designers or what the real impact of design is. They don't see that design is important for innovation, or the role of design in the creative economy, they don't know how large design [as a field] is, and so designers are not given the right appreciation," Salameh explains.

Ultimately, designers, like anyone else, must make a living. "Supporting the design ecosystem is important because it gives designers [financial] stability to be able to spend more time solving bigger problems and looking for real solutions, instead of getting stuck in jobs where they do executional work," Salameh says. Designer Karen Chekerdjian echoes this point, saying that there is no support for local designers, which in turn means that very few designers can invest in initiatives to help the industry and the state, without necessarily making money.

STRATEGIC SUPPORT

To move design forward efficiently, stakeholders need to understand what gaps exists and what spaces offer the highest potential. In late 2018, Endeavor Lebanon collaborated with Beirut Digital District to host the IGNITE Fashion and Design event, part of which included a roundtable with leaders in Lebanon's fashion industry—designer Rabih Kayrouz; Christian Daccache, founder of Bureau Des Createurs (BDC); Deliphone Edde, co-founder of Diwanee; and Edward Sabbagh, managing director of Farfetch Middle East. Their discussion was developed into a whitepaper released in February, and though it was fashion-focused, many of its takeaways apply to other disciplines.

> Though some Lebanese designers have pentrated international markets, many are still struggling.

The participants agreed that though some Lebanese fashion designers have penetrated international markets, many are still struggling due to gaps in the supply chain, and lack of funding and support for the fashion industry in general. One of their suggestions was to focus on financial support, urging investors, banks, and Banque du Liban, Lebanon's central bank, to consider the potential of the design sector. They urged further de-

velopment of creativity by encouraging more talent to enter the sector and introducing more programs, as well as leveraging technology and strengthening the ecosystem by building more factories. Salameh noted to EXECUTIVE that in addition to the suggestions of the roundtable, better infrastructure, more educational inclusivity, and the provision of prototyping spaces need to be provided.

Tax incentives and the formation of syndicates would help the sector too, Chekerdjian says. She employs local artisans to craft her hand-made designs, but is classified as a merchant and thus does not get the benefits and incentives that, in other countries, come with sustaining national crafts and creating jobs for artisans.

At the roundtable, Kayrouz was vocal about the state's role in building industrial know-how, arguing that financing and building factories for manufacturing in Lebanon was one way to encourage fashion industrialists. Salameh is more cautious, arguing that this solution may work, but it needs to be well studied. He suggests instead that Lebanon should focus on creation, rather than industrial production on a mass scale.

Most of the designers EXECUTIVE spoke to agreed that focusing on industries that are already well-oiled in Lebanon, such as jewelry or fashion, is a good strategy to move forward. Salameh explains, "It's smarter to support industries that are functional already. It will have a bigger impact because you already have people invested and doing something. But [there is a] need to support design across disciplines."

TEACHING AND CONNECTING CREATIVES

Strengthening educational channels gives designers a better sense of the work they can do. This is the goal of FANTASMEEM, a design program implemented by the Goethe-Institut in Lebanon as part of a German government initiative to support design in developing countries. Launched in early 2019, the one year program aims to support designers through capacity building and networking, and is comprised of several parts, including an artist residency, where 18 local designers were mentored by international and local experts, job-shadowing industry specialists in Lebanon and Germany, and opportunities to apply for grants.

Another design initiative in Lebanon is the Beirut Creative Hub (BCH). Created by UNIDO and

Lebanese co-working space Antwork, BCH is a platform for creatives in Lebanon to meet and learn. The free program, which is funded by the EU and the Italian Agency for Cooperation Development, is a pilot that will run until June. It offers workshops on technical and business development, and on design subjects for anyone that wants to attend.

The idea is not only to teach emerging designers new skills, but also to give visibility to traditional creative industries that are at risk of being lost, and even more importantly, to connect people who would not normally meet. "In the workshops [we have] designers, artisans, students, industrialists. This [combination] could lead to collaborations beyond the time frame of the hub," says Stephanie Khouri, the program's coordinator. She gives the example of a glassmaking workshop with a long-time Syrian artisan living in Lebanon, who will teach his techniques to a crowd comprised of design students. The networking opportunities can create long-lasting connections and give birth to partnerships. "Job creation is a goal—you have to start somewhere," Khouri adds.

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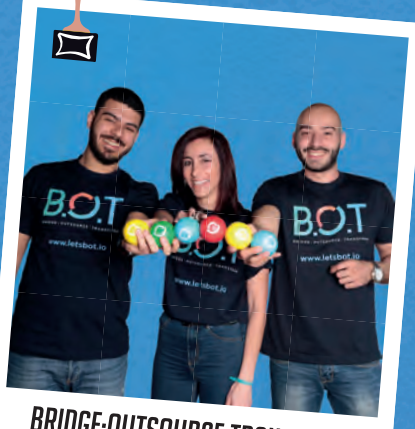

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Traditional institutions that teach design are also keeping up. Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA) is the institutional partner of the BCH. Meanwhile, the Lebanese American University (LAU) recently revamped their curriculum to include more relevant topics for today's designers. Yasmine Taan, associate professor at LAU's art and design department, argues that design is a discipline that changes with society's needs, making it imperative for those teaching design to keep up with these changes. To address this challenge, LAU introduced a first-of-its-kind (for the region) course this semester, on graphic design history in the Middle East, which will provide better context for its students. Other new offerings at LAU include User Experience (UX) and user behavior courses that will help designers across the board.

FOSTERING INNOVATION

Endeavor's whitepaper emphasized the importance of mentorship in developing creativity and giving designers the tools they need. Their recommendation was also to have designers focus on their forte—design—while delegating business aspects of their work to professionals in those fields.

Going beyond that, the experts contributing to the Endeavour whitepaper also encourage leveraging technological disruptions. For fashion but also other types of design, e-commerce and social media can raise brand awareness and boost sales, giving designers more visibility and easier access to international markets that can help more talent bloom into economically-viable businesses.

TOP DOWN AND BOTTOM UP MOVEMENTS

Rabih Kayrouz' incubator-style initiative Starch Foundation has supported designers since 2008, and some alumni like Krikor Jabotian, Rami Kadi, and Hussein Bazaza have gone on to reach great success.

Since 2010, Beirut Design Week has been encouraging designers with a movement that empowers design entrepreneurs, gives them a platform to sell their wares, and offers insightful exhibitions and events for more high-level aspects of design. More recently, Beirut Design Fair, which is held at the same time as sister event Beirut Art Fair, has also stepped in to offer designers access to local buyers, as well as international clients and press that fly in at that time.

These new initiatives are backed by a collaboration of foreign investment and local talent—Beirut Creative Hub is backed by UNIDO, FANTASMEEM backed by Germany, even Endeavor Lebanon is part of the international Endeavor network. BCH's Khouri explains that there is always a risk with a top-down approach to such programs, but is happy that the response to the initiative has so far been positive, and attendance high.

> "I think it is the responsibility of designers to mobilize and raise awareness about what they do so."

Salameh believes that Lebanese designers need to initiate more grassroots movements: "Two years ago this conversation didn't exist in the way it exists today. We are moving in a good direction, but I think it's the responsibility of designers to mobilize and raise awareness about what they do so that people understand how much impact design can have. Designers often don't see the power they have."

The impact of design on Lebanon can be social, economic, and developmental. With so many success stories already, the country, by all accounts, has a lot of potential in this field. Giving Lebanese designers across disciplines a strategic push could positively impact job creation, the economy, and propel the Lebanese into further success. Growing interest in the sector from international agencies is encouraging, but for the design industry to really thrive, public sector initiative is vital.

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By Olga Habre

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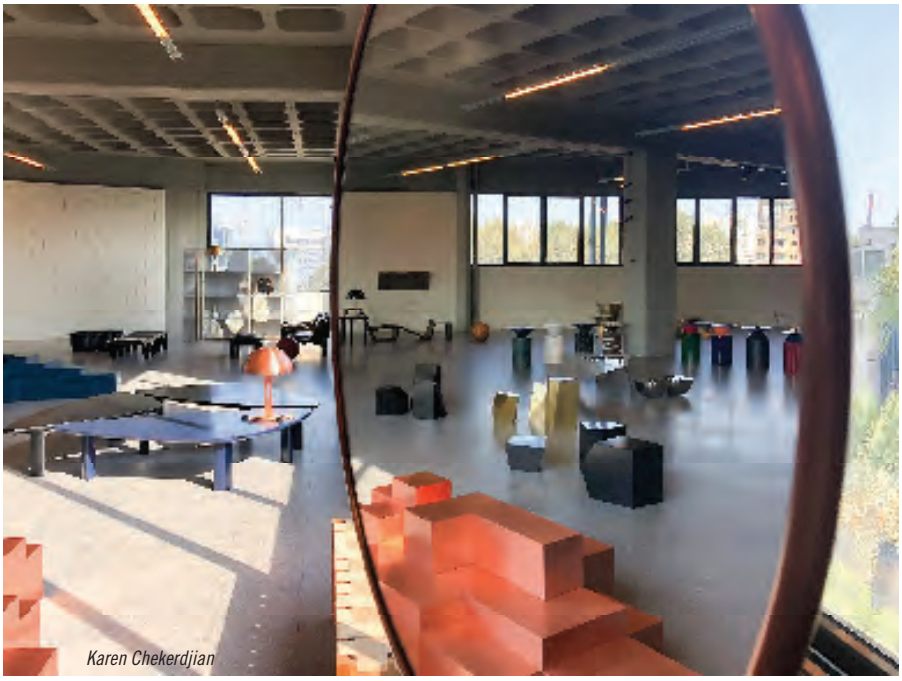
Karen Chekerdjian

Design and gender identity in Lebanon

Design is an essential part of our lives and how we interact with our environments, and it changes with society, catering to shifting needs. Design can also be the agent for change, shaping the way we think about the concept of identity, in particular gender identity.

Many people still use the terms sex and gender interchangeably but gender studies have made an important distinction between biological sex, which is mostly a dichotomy, and gender, which is a culturally imposed identity construct that teaches us what it means to be male or female, and affects the way we see ourselves and how we think and act.

The conversation on gender and design is increasing worldwide, with more and more designers challenging the status quo and changing the way they design. No longer perpetuating gender binary and society's hetero-normative clichés, progressive designers are creating more inclusive design, and helping to spark the conversation on genderfluidity. Genderfluid design is still underestimated, but it is becoming more relevant. This is perhaps most evident in fashion, which has traditionally been associated with the expression of identity, though it also applies to other types of design.

GENDERFLUID FASHION

The Far East, especially Japan, has a long tradition of clothing that is worn by men and women alike, such as the kimono. In recent years international brands from Gucci to Zara have experimented with genderfluid clothing. In Lebanon, the trend is catching on too. Several fashion exhibitions and shows have specifically focused on genderfluidity, notably during by Beirut Pride during Beirut Design Week 2017 and later that year by fashion

Boutique Hub

design students at the Lebanese American University. One early comer into genderfluid design in Lebanon is Cynthia Chamat Debbané, who opened her experimental clothing store Boutique Hub and created the brand Urban Sense back in 2013. She describes her one-size-fits-most line as genderfluid, making the point to avoid using the common alternative, gender neutral, which she argues is a negative term that insinuates removing something from existence.

In her store, in addition to her own customizable pieces, she curates a selection of items from over 40 Lebanese designers, many of whom reflect her gender values, including Roni Helou, Jeux de Main, Bochies, Civvies, and Kinamania. "Most of the time I identify as a woman, but I'm also very masculine in certain moments. I felt like my brand needed to reflect that—it's not feminine or masculine, but genderfluid," she explains. She says most of her clients are women, in addition to men who identify as homosexual, but a growing number of heterosexual men are beginning to buy her styles too.

Debbané never studied fashion, but picked up the trade from her merchant father and began designing to answer her mother's needs as her body type began to change with age. Having herself gone through weight fluctuations, she wanted to create a line that was more inclusive of body shapes, with comfort and functionality at its core. She explains that while some designers create statement pieces with the purpose of putting on a show and getting international attention, others, like herself, focus on function. "Clothes should always serve the body and its movement. They are tools to help us carry on with our activities. Clothes are here to serve us, we don't serve clothes," she says.

There is an economic dimension to this idea too. Debbané explains that the more specific your target audience, the more variety of pieces you have to produce in order to create diversity, which is more costly, especially considering not everything is likely to sell. "If you design something that's functional for any body type, age, gender, you end up selling more and producing less," she says, emphasising the ecological impact this has—in 2018 she was chosen as one of six international designers by the British Council-backed Fashion Revolution movement that aims to transform the fashion industry, including limiting the industry's impact on the environment.

> "Clothes should always serve the body and its movement. They are tools to help us carry on with our activities."

SEX APPEAL

Genderfluid clothing is not supposed to lack sex appeal, "Sexiness is never in the clothes, it's attitude and body language that make you sexy,"


Karen Chekerdjian

"They made it a point to say they only had male designers and wanted to include a woman, which I thought was very strange."

Debbané says. She follows this idea with an alternative example: that rape has nothing to do with the clothing a woman wears. The sexiness of clothing is often the topic of debate when it comes to assault. In 2018, an art exhibition in Brussels challenged the "what were you wearing?" narrative by showcasing the various clothes rape-survivors were wearing during their assault, in order to raise awareness about sexual violence.

Such awareness is part of a wider topic of the objectification of women. Media and advertising often perpetuate this, and blindly follow society's ideas of feminine and masculine. Stereotypes are not completely false because they are part of a social reality, but they emphasize some aspects while de-emphasizing others. Yasmine Taan, associate professor at LAU's art and design department, teaches a gender studies course that looks at women in media and advertising. Since many of her graphic design students end up working in the field, she says it is important to encourage students to stay clear of stereotypes in their most obvious and subtler forms. While in the past it may have been acceptable for ads for household cleaning products to speak directly to women, today this is an unacceptable practice to a growing number of people. If women are to make any progress in society, it is partially the responsibility of advertisers to steer away from messages that confine women to patriarchal constructs.

Some newer advertising campaigns in the region have begun to highlight genderfluid concepts. A recent Dubai campaign for toy brand Lego features a group of mothers who are shown a video skillful child making an airplane. All the mothers assume the child is a boy, only to be told it is in fact a girl, with the ad ending with tagline "Imagination has no gender."

MALE DOMINATION

Ultimately, many of these issues stem from the fact that design is a male dominated industry, like many others. Though more female designers are emerging, the balance of power still favors men.

Designer Karen Chekerdjian points out that there are few celebrated female designers, in Lebanon and abroad. She recounts that she was approached by an international company to sell one of her designs in their space. "They made it a point to say they only had male designers and wanted to include a woman, which I thought was very strange," she says. She adds that they never followed through and today still do not have a single woman designer in their collective. It is not just men that perpetuate this problem. Chekerdjian recalls being approached for a project by a female editor at a European magazine, and when she researched the other designers involved she found they were all men. "Why does she not realize what she's doing? Sometimes women are also part of that system," she says.

She also feels it can be difficult for women to work in male-dominated fields. "When I started it was difficult for me to make my male artisans accept me," Chekerdjian says. "It's a man's world, in all [fields]. Especially in industry and production—women are not welcome in that world." With time, Chekerdjian says she has become comfortable working as a woman in a male-dominat-

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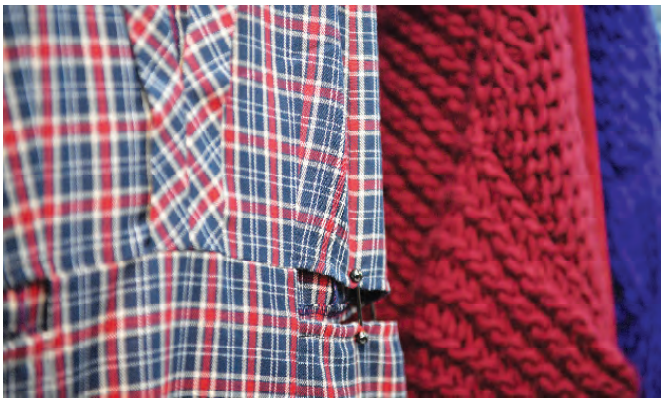

Cinthya Boutique Hub

ed field, and has hope that attitudes are changing and more people are accepting that women are an equal part of the design sector.

INCLUSIVITY AND DESIGN

The problem is that women's underrepresentation also affects the outcome of the designs themselves and their user-friendliness for women. For example, biological differences between the sexes are not always taken into consideration. There has been international criticism recently for design of seatbelts, which were originally designed for a larger male physique, and did not take into account pregnant women at all (motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of fetal death related to maternal trauma, according to research by Stanford University). Other objects receiving this type of criticism include lawnmowers designed for relatively long arms, and strollers made for shorter limbs. As gender roles are changing, such issues become problematic.

Some designers are catering to gender inclusiveness. Facebook is continuing to roll out its more inclusive gender identification system in further countries, where users can now choose from one of 71 gender options. In March, the world's first gender neutral voice technology, Q, was introduced in Denmark as an alternative for distinctly male and female virtual assistants like Siri and Alexa. There's also an ongoing conversation on genderless bathrooms. In the US, a collective of architects, designers, lawyers, and experts called Stalled! advocated to change the International Plumbing Code in favour of all-gender bathrooms, with the expectation these changes will be adopted at the local and state level. In Beirut, some restaurants have begun offering all-gender bathroom facilities—like Kalei Coffee Co.'s "anything works" stall situated between the male and female options.

Some designers are focusing on the specific needs of women. Designed by women, MEMI is a smart bracelet that vibrates to alert of calls and texts for women who store their phone in their purse—a need male designers might not have anticipated. More women in the design fields could mean more of such products that address their specific needs—not least of which is pockets.

One way to encourage more female designers to enter the domain is to highlight their predecessors. Taan wants to see more taught on female designers and is leading this effort with her work with Khatt books, a publishing house on design and visual culture of the Middle East. After having written several books on graphic designers from the region, she came to the realization that her subjects were all men and so began to research what women have done in the regional design field. She discovered that Saloua Raouda Choucair, who is mostly known for her art and sculpture, was in fact also a designer. She also found that artist Mouna Bassili Sehnaoui designed the famous Lebanon logo for the Ministry of Culture in the 1960s, as well as several posters encouraging tourism to the country. Taan says it is important to highlight the value that women designers have brought to our country, and is currently working on books about these female pioneers.

More inclusion of women designers is part of a larger trend of more inclusion in general, in design production and use. Design created by more people with varied identities can cater for a larger pool of needs. The conversation has started, but more designers and users need to see the value in embracing a wider variety of identities and their needs to drive this global design revolution forward.

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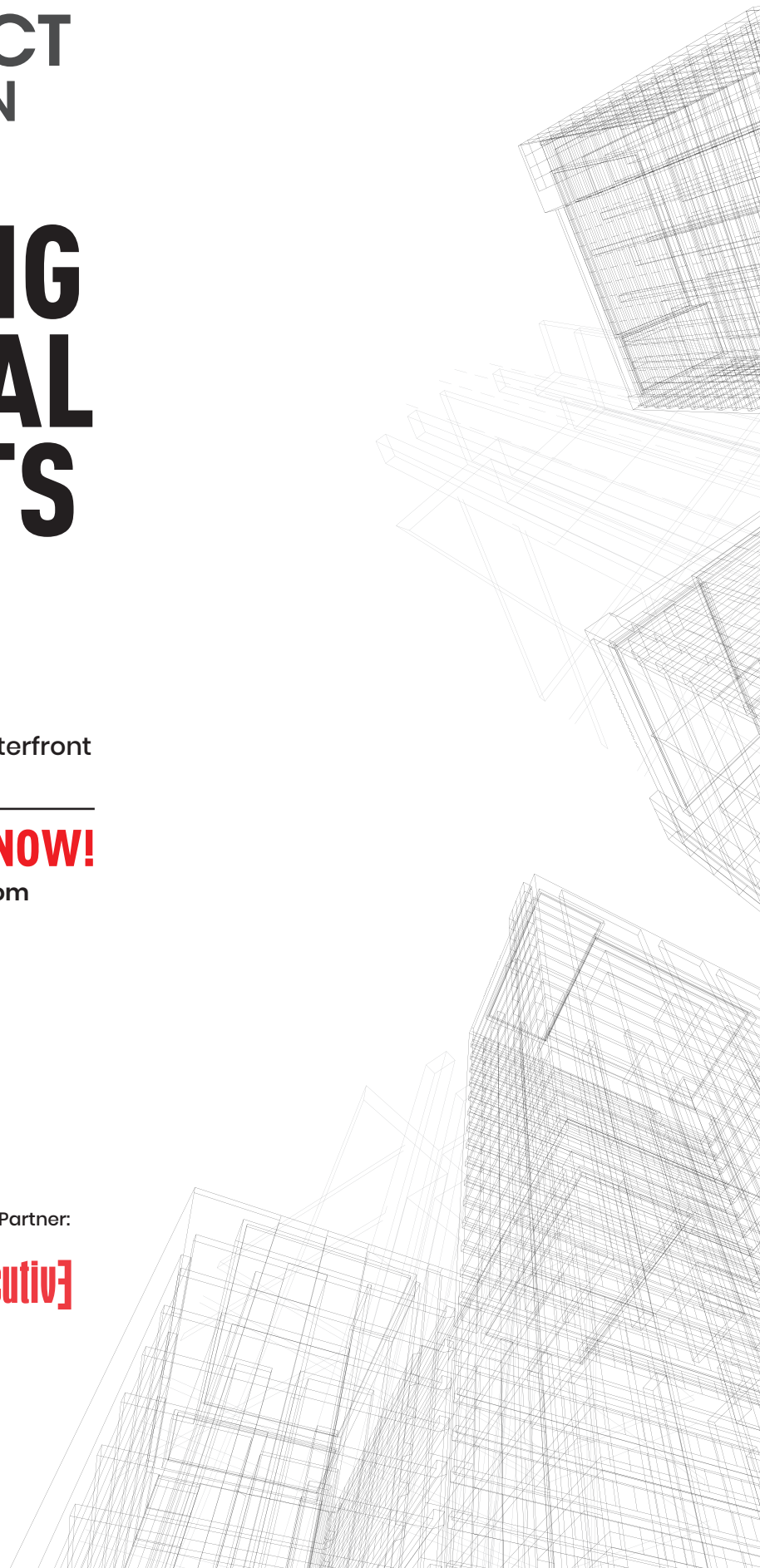


By Lauren Holtmeier

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

Traditional handicrafts in Lebanon

Carpets, cutlery, glass, soap, furniture—these traditional Lebanese crafts have a valued place in the country's—and the region's—history. Industrial development in the last half of the 20th century has, inevitably, affected Lebanon's traditional artisans. One the one hand, it has driven demand down for artisanal crafts that are usually more expensive than mass-produced imports. On the other, for local artisans who have weathered weary economic waters, access to a new global market has been made easier, a result of improved online marketplaces, social media, and internet-based communication. There are also multiple initiatives underway in Lebanon that seek to ensure Lebanese artisans find their place in increasingly crowded local and global markets. For traditional artisan crafts in particular, local and international organizations have worked to improve their sustainability by providing technical, industrial, design, and marketing support, and by providing a place for craftsmen to market their goods.

SUSTAINING MARKETS

The United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and L'artisan du Liban are two organizations that have helped keep Lebanese artisanry alive by providing production support, serving as design catalysts, and offering a place for local craftsmen to market their wares. Established in 1979, L'artisan du Liban was Lebanon's first so-





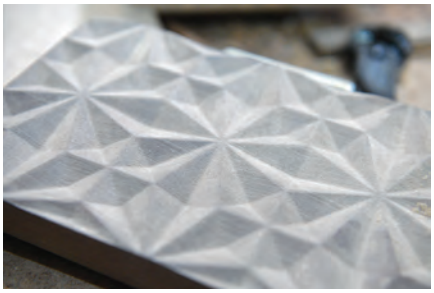

cial enterprise, and it sought to keep artisans active and safekeep artistry and heritage by providing local craftspeople a marketplace for their goods. UNIDO has been active in Lebanon since 1989, and supports sustainable development across multiple sectors, including its work with craftspeople. Both organizations have played similar, but distinct, roles in sustaining local artisanry.

Despite a strong history of design generation and export in Lebanon, recent economic stagnation has made it difficult for some traditional artisans to compete with cheaper imports from places like China. For example, where 10 years ago there were several glassblowers in Lebanon, today only one family, the Khalifehs in Sarafand, remain. The period between 2011 and 2018 marked a 37 percent increase in imported glass and glassware, according to data by Blominvest Bank, with which Lebanese glassblowers had to compete.

Artisans across the handicraft spectrum have had to adjust to shifting market trends and find new ways to make their products attractive to consumers in a modern market. Driven, in part, by shifting market trends and demands, artisans have used several tactics to stay ahead of the game, from introducing subtle, more modern-looking design twists, to adopting new materials and packaging methods to make traditional goods more marketable.

The rapidity of changing trends, a clientele more aware of global trends and buying options, and the combination of rising ease of travel and digital advancements have accounted for the largest market shifts, says Hadi Maktabi, owner and curator of Hadi Maktabi carpets, who holds a PhD in Islamic Art from Oxford. Difficulty in identifying a unified "Lebanese taste" has also made marketing to a local audience challenging. And it is in this climate that producers and artisans must decide which model they want to adopt, whether that be identifying a niche within a larger market and catering to it, or following the "supermarket model," which Maktabi defines as being largely mass-produced, cheaper wares made abroad that appeal to a broad audience (think IKEA).

> Recent economic stagnation has made it difficult for some traditional artisans to compete.



■ Some traditional artisans have needed help finding a viable market for their niche crafts.

"Fifteen years ago, it was the supermarket model, and you had five to 10 big dealers who catered to everything," Maktabi says, referring to the carpet industry. He argues that where trends in the 1990s shifted every 10 years or so, recently they have begun changing every two to five years.

The advent of the internet and improved digital marketplaces have sped up the introduction of new styles over the last 20 years. Rapidly growing global markets also meant the Lebanese market was flooded with more affordable, modern products that were designed in Europe, but were produced in places with cheap labor supply. "Most people working on this [supermarket model] side are dealing with products mass produced in China and India, and then selling them here," Maktabi says. "But what they're selling now is not craft, it's just a product."

CARVE OUT A NICHE

Now, within the last few years, more have tried to carve out a niche in a crowded market—like Maktabi's focus on antique carpets and textiles—specializing in providing a specific product. Complicating the matter, on the local front, he argues, is the rising European influence and the need for the Lebanese to find their place within that trend. Even local geographical considerations play a role in this. "Drive a few kilometers south of Beirut, and it's like entering a different time period," Maktabi says. Torn between the occidental and oriental, this clash of cultures has made designers and artisans alike, who choose to follow the niche market approach, have to define a narrow target audience.

But those specialists, specifically some traditional artisans, have needed help finding a viable market for their niche crafts. A few kilometers south of Beirut, Houssam Outabashi is found in Ouzai with multiple workshops lining the street. Here, Outabashi, a master in traditional marquetry and inlay techniques, can look at a piece of mother of pearl and name its country of origin by its color. Marquetry is a process by which small pieces of different types of wood are bundled to form a pattern, and then shaved in thin layers, while inlay design is a process in which chunks of wood are carved out and replaced with the shimmery pieces cut from sheets of Mother of Pearl to create intricate designs.

Outabashi specializes in the traditional styles of his craft, however, he has started modernizing some of his designs. L'artisan du Liban has provided him with support to help preserve his craft, which goes back as far as the 1800s through generations of his family. Nour Najm, creative director of L'artisan du Liban, says they work with Outabashi, designing objects that Outabashi creates by hand and then are sold in L'artisan du Liban store.

Further south in Sarafand, L'artisan similarly works with the Khalifeh family who create glassware out of recycled glass—which in a country that has an excess of garbage, is remarkable. The Khal-

ifeh's only turn on the oven five to six times a year, but can turn it on up to 10 times when there is an order to be filled—otherwise it is a resource drain. When it is on, six to eight people work in shifts around the clock for 15-20 days to fill an order. Najm says L'artisan makes sure to place a large order with the Khalifeh's each time they turn on the oven.

In the small, run-down warehouse where the Khalifeh family makes their glass, Najm is thinking about what she can do to give the glassware a modern twist—for her, the answer is color. With colored glass she bought from the US, the glassblowers are experimenting with different techniques to potentially incorporate color into their traditional designs. Najm says they have introduced a lot of small details to modernize traditional designs and help make them competitive in today's markets. "Small twists change everything," she says.

RE-IMAGINING THE CRAFT

UNIDO has also worked with local craftsmen to help them update traditional designs and help artisans peddle their crafts. For example, UNIDO worked with Jezzine cutlery craftspeople—as well as local soap makers and *tark el-fouda* (embroidery) craftspeople—to help them modernize designs and industrialize production. Two years ago, UNIDO launched a program in partnership with the Ministry of Industry and funded by the Austrian government to help preserve traditional artisanry and improve livelihoods of artisans in these sectors, says Nada Barakat, national project coordinator at UNIDO.

Jezzine cutlery, for example, was once thought of as a gift that sat in a wooden box unused; the product had to be re-imagined into something people would by to use and enjoy. Barakat stressed the importance of marketing: they did away with the old wood box and started packaging the sets in cardboard, which cut down costs and made the sets more practical. To better market the soap, they did the opposite and introduced an attractive olive wooden box as packaging. Jezzine cutlery, which was traditionally made out of olive wood and featured bird-like motifs on the handles is now sometimes made out of resin, but maintains the older features with a modern edge. Creating the mold for the resin-based handles made the production process and end-product marginally cheaper, but consumers can still buy the cutlery with the traditional wooden handles as well.

Barakat says that while the collection is primarily available to local markets, negotiations are underway with Coincasa, an Italian retail outlet, to market the collection there. L'artisan du Liban has a slightly larger global reach with their online store that opened last year. Najm says that less than 10 percent of their sales are global, but they have clients all over Europe and in the US, and they attend yearly trade fairs in Paris.

Both entities—UNIDO and L'artisan du Liban—have worked to keep Lebanese artisanry alive and are beginning to introduce traditional local crafts in international markets. Though industrial development made traditional crafts more expensive, recent globalizing trends and improved digital markets may help some local artisans find a viable market for their goods abroad. While it is too early to tell what the future holds for Lebanese crafts in the international market, at least here at home some local artisans have found the support needed to keep centuries' old traditions alive.

■ Jezzine cutlery was once thought of as a gift that sat in a wooden box unused; the product had to be re-imagined.

By Thomas Schellen

TO TANGO WITH REFORMS

Design the winning ingredient in tackling Lebanon's public sector restructuring?

At any meeting these days, from academic circles to business and banking conferences, one is likely to hear more than one allusion to Lebanon's reform challenges. Much more. Whether it is the pesky theme of electricity or the issue of fiscal and structural reforms in the public sector, the big questions that matter today are all about how.

Although Lebanon progressed painfully to finding its new government—something that seems to have almost been forgotten in some circles in the relatively short time since the ascension of this new administration—a myriad of problems are now maturing from the worry if reforms will ever happen, to the more pertinent question of how these reforms can be done.

One pressing "how-question" seems to have an underappreciated design answer. This is the question of how to tackle reforming the public sector into a citizen-centric sphere. Is it enough to compel all administrative units in Lebanon to digitize? Will transitioning from paper-based public processes—that sometimes requires days of roaming some of the country's most fascinating corridors and offices with all the appeal of worn-out interiors from the days of the early republic—to electronic databases and files on computers suffice to upgrade public services at ministries to something that deserves the label "e-government"?

If any doubts were to linger in citizens' minds about the feasibility of such a solution, design may be a big part of all more viable answers and provide better approaches, say Lebanese design specialists with expertise on multi-tiered levels of conceptual and specific approaches.

Digitizing the public sector in the sense of implementing electronic networks will not achieve any deep transformation, says Loubna Ibrahim, product and innovation lab lead at Ideatolife, a regional consultancy of developers and designers that is focused on technology-and-people-centered software solutions. From a human-centric design perspective, technology is not the main issue. "We have to focus on end-users and understand problems from a human perspective. This is the core aspect of design thinking and everything follows from this user centric approach. It is all about understanding humans, and then designing for humans," she tells Executive.

THE HUMAN APPROACH

As Ibrahim explains, this prime mandate of understanding the humans involved in any digital transformation of public sector units in Lebanon means that such transformations need to start small and proceed incrementally. "Transformation does not come overnight and one needs to take it one step at a time," she says.

On the reasoning that people are fundamentally afraid of change and often consciously or subconsciously afraid of technology and so hesitant to adopt unfamiliar technology, Ibrahim further advises that not only would the digital transformation of the public sector in Lebanon have to start small, but also that the solution for digitization would have to be different in every public sector organization and heavily involve the persons in every specific organization. "People in the public sector entities will have to co-create the solutions, because they are the ones who know the issues," she says.

While some digitization progress has been made in Lebanon's public sector units over recent months—especially since the new government's arrival—and challenges related to issues such as basic infrastructure and partially wanting digital literacy in the country are on the mend, the obstacles to a complete digital transformation do not end there, says growth strategist Georges Abi Aad.

"If you digitize a flawed process, it will still be flawed."

"We are not convinced that digitization is at the core of digital transformation of the government, because the first thing is to design the process. Processes tend to be outdated and serve agendas more than citizens. Before digitizing them, we need to look at processes and redesign them from scratch, because if you digitize a flawed process, it [still] will be flawed. However, if a successful process is digitized, it has the chance to succeed on larger scale," he tells Executive.

Abi Aad works with Birdhaus, a Lebanon-based agency in the commercial communications sphere that seeks to twin client's marketing and sales efforts through "novel marketing practices." With the statement, Birdhaus hints at its integrated online (coding) and enterprise-engulfing marketing approach that is also described in the business by nine-year old buzzword of 'growth hacking.' In the context of digital transformation, a known focus of growth hacking is on rapid digital-world growth of organizations that are tight on economic resources. In its work, Birdhaus furthermore uses human-centric design concepts for online interaction that have in recent years been promoted in the digital communications media sector as UX and UI (user experience and user interface) design.

When applied to public sector administrations in Lebanon, such design will require a process that takes into account the needs of civil servants as well as be citizen-centric, chimes in Abi Aad's colleague Marilynn Bou Habib, who is a UX/UI designer at Birdhaus. "To provide high-quality services through digitized systems, the public sector needs to have incentives for providing high-quality services and on the other end, the citizen needs to know the problems," she says.

According to these two professionals, barriers to achieving true digital transformation in the Lebanese public sector must be expected in form of resistance and pushbacks because of the same basic human fears that Ibrahim had referenced. They also concur that political buy-ins by stakeholders and participants on different levels of a public sector entity and incentivization of all their involvement will be necessary.

Furthermore, according to Abi Aad it is a paradigm of UX design to boost the transparency of the process that is designed or redesigned. Initiation

of such transparency—which Abi Aad describes as "presently completely absent" from public sector processes in the country—will reveal many layers of opacity that today exist in the public realm, adds Birdhaus Director Karen Abi Saab.

"Processes need to become more transparent as citizens are informed what they need to do throughout the entire process [of interacting with a public entity] whereas today citizens are told from one step to the next [what they have to do] and have no visibility of the whole process. It thus is an important step in digitization of public processes to have the public know the entire process," she says.

THE RIGHT PEOPLE ON BOARD

It is revealed in course of a wide-ranging discussion with the team of Birdhaus and its parent company, Flag M Group, that they had encountered a further barrier of unfavorable mindsets toward its efforts to launch a mobile app with UX design inputs that would have been conducive to public sector digital transformation on the municipal level of in Lebanon. Embarking on the app's development about two years ago (shortly after municipal elections in Lebanon and in parallel with work which the group did for two public sector entities in the United Arab Emirates), Flag M invested into the project on its own initiative under the notion that the mobile app might appeal to municipalities in the area of Keserwan and Metn.

The group approached several municipalities with the app that included features designed to improve communication between municipal authorities and their residents as well as elements such as an emergency connection button to police, but found that the municipalities were more interested in promoting their achievements than in communicating with residents. "The project got stuck because of a big lack of awareness [in the approached municipalities as to] why [they should want to] enhance the user experiences of the people," explains Firas Mghames, the CEO of Flag M Group.

As one lesson of the experience, the team of Flag M and Birdhaus concluded that top-down buy-in will be required in Lebanon to achieve acceptance of digital transformation initiatives and that, moreover, the context for such efforts must be very conducive from political and budgetary angles. Municipalities that struggled to deliver basic services to their residents might not have been the best targets for digital transformation, Abi Aad observes.

However, while there are undeniable barriers that will have to be overcome on all levels when digital transformation of public sector entities is tackled, there are even more compelling upsides. The success of the effort of redesigning, from scratch, the interactions between citizens and their administrations in Lebanon would be likely to unleash significant cost savings in different ministries and administrative units. Examples from private sector experience in the region hint that the size of potential savings, which would range from paper needs to time wastage of citizens and also to more productive use of employee time in the units, will be huge, even as they today cannot even be properly estimated. Moreover, as Ideatolife's Ibrahim points out, employing human-centric design methodologies —also called "design thinking"—will be a sort of dual speed process that can be initiated fast and rapidly show first results, even if years may be needed to produce the full results of the transformation process by design.

"When we work on digital transformation strategies with enterprises, we plan a five-to-seven year strategy but a country like Lebanon might need more like ten years," says Ibrahim, but then emphasizes that, "changes will start to happen after the first six months." As she explains, some six weeks after its start, the process would see the creation of first solutions on basis of user research that would thereafter be user tested and incrementally as well as continuously improved, with tangible outcomes. "If it takes more than three months to implement a solution, something is wrong," she says.

> "What is beautiful about this country is its ability to adapt and adapt very rapidly, because of its huge human capital."

For Maroun Sarrouh, board advisor at Flag M Group, Lebanon today is indeed primed to accomplish fast progress of its reform process and digital transformation. Based on fortuitous ending of regional conflict and economic bust cycles in conjunction with the external pressures and internal determinations of the current time, he sees the course set for reforms. He says, "Historically, when a decision in Lebanon is taken and covered, it is implemented. What is beautiful about this country is its ability to adapt and adapt very rapidly, because of the presence of its huge human capital. With the amelioration of the political/economic environment, I really think that all the ambitious projects that have been left in drawers for so many reasons, will now just pop into existence. Change can happen and it may be slow at first but then grow exponentially."