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#FEMALEFORWARD

**Josiane Adib
Torbey**



Architect

The **WOMEN of LIBYAN**

~~HOW?~~

~~WHY?~~

~~WHO?~~

~~WHAT?~~

~~WHEN?~~

WOMEN

Empowering women and closing gender gaps in the world are key for economies and communities to thrive. Therefore, the aim of our series "Women of Lebanon" is to give women from very different backgrounds in the country a voice, as we believe that it is important to portray strong women and use their impact to inspire future generations. Thus, this series will cover a whole range of different topics and sectors, from human rights, the arts to business and politics and all the women in the series have one thing in common: they are outstanding personalities who believe in change and the importance of individual responsibility to work for a better society. I am particularly grateful to Nicole Hamouche, the author of this series, who has identified and interviewed the ten women in our series and has worked so hard to make this project happen.

Enjoy reading and we hope that you will get inspired too!

Best regards,



Kristof Kleemann

*Project Director
ENF Lebanon and Syria*



Josiane Adib Torbey is Vice-President of Salt of the Earth Association, founded in 2012 together with Jean-Gabriel Eddé (President) and Habib Torbey (President of municipality of Sebeel, caza of Zghorta). The Association aims to promote Development through Education and Culture in Lebanon in general, and the North in particular. Josiane is the initiator and driving force of a Model Public School in Sebeel, Ecole Rachel Eddé. She has been not only the architect and the site executor of the project, but the motor for fund raising, educational rehabilitation, and marketing of this innovative idea among the population of the whole region. Josiane is also the founder of the Sebeel Public Library, the only public library in all the caza of Zghorta, with more than 700 members and 10 000 books in 4 languages, rich and varied cultural activities, book publishing. Through the Library, she launched a yearly intercultural summer camp joining Lebanese and French Youths in partnership with Francophonie Liban, a French association.

Josiane graduated from ALBA (Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts) in 1987, as Master in Architecture, first of her class and was awarded the Prize of the Lebanese Order of Engineers and Architects for the year 1987. After a year completed at Columbia University, NY, Faculty of Architecture, she came back to Beirut and was a professor at ALBA from 1992 until 2012, both in Architecture Design Workshop and in theoretical courses. She was member of the committee of Exterior Relations of the university, organizing conferences and colloquiums with well-known contemporary architects. Meanwhile she also worked as a freelance architect, on different sort of projects, from private houses to hospitals and schools, with a marked preference to public structures.



**Josiane Adib
Torbey**

INTERVIEW SCHOOLWORKS



JOSIANE ADIB TORBEY

The architect and alma mater behind Sebeel's revisited public school investigating the possibility of public private partnerships in education

by

NICOLE HAMOUCHE

Like many architects who are concerned by the meaning of their practice, Josiane Adib Torbey can't limit hers to only designing walls and building structures. She is more interested in the interaction architecture has with people's lives. "Architecture, this book of humanity" said Victor Hugo. And since humans are very much shaped by the environment they evolve in, when Josiane, a professor of architecture, discovered the deprivation and extreme poverty in which the people of Sebeel, a village in North Lebanon, live, her instinct was to contribute in a way or another. Sebeel in the Kaada of Zgharta is Josiane Adib Torbey's husband's native village, where the couple spend a lot of time. Trusting, that contributing to the place would enable her to feel more integrated, in 1994 she initiated a project meant to empower women through crafts. While Josiane was increasingly involved in this endeavor, the 2006 Israeli War on Lebanon shed an even more striking light on the country's realities. Hundreds of displaced found refuge in the public school of the village, many schools had opened their doors across the country receive the displaced. But, they complained about the state of the premises. This came as a wake-up call for the local authorities and bourgeoisie: if they, who were gracefully hosted in the school, were complaining, it meant it was really bad. And that was the "aha" moment for Josiane Adib Torbey. "We are not going to die before we have built a proper school in the village" said the professor of architecture to her husband who was then the president of the municipality. This is where a long journey started that hasn't ended yet.

The architect meant what she said and kept promises she made to herself and others. She took the challenge she gave herself to upgrade the public school of Sebeel, to offer the deprived children in the region the chance of a decent education and the possibilities that go with it. Education is the door opener. Rehabilitating the school couldn't just entail the architectural part, as even "a beautiful school is not enough per se if the teaching and the curricula are not up to standards". So, she decided to also look at the teachers and the curriculum. The process entailed the mobilization of donors and took years, moreover, since it was carried by one person alone, Josiane herself and was dependent

on the availability of funding, which was very volatile. The politicized environment made the task very difficult. The public school, like the entire public sector suffers from political clientelism. Despite the difficulty, Josiane Adib Torbey says she had decided "not to give up" as she was driven by "the rage to arrive to her goal".

The project was completed in 2015 after 8 years of committed work, the number of students increased from 40 to 350, children have joined the school from the entire region. One thousand students are on the waiting list to enroll in the school. The "sacrifices" on which the architect and mother of two insisted "were worth it", even though this initiative "has taken" as she says, "ten years of her life". "No more social life, no more teaching, no other architecture projects", Sebeel absorbed her. Given the success though, Josiane Adib Torbey felt it almost as a duty to propose to the Ministry of Education the replication of this experience with other public schools in vulnerable areas. However, the doors she knocked on more than once, did not open. In the meantime, she is still looking at increasing the hosting capacity of the school - the elementary and complementary school. For the second phase, she is considering the upgrading of the secondary school. Even if disheartened by the Ministry's lack of stamina, she hasn't completely renounced on her dream of bringing this invaluable experience with Sebeel to the public schools in general. Architecture and the life that is created around it stay at the heart of Josiane Adib Torbey's concerns: "a good school, a library, culture and education incentivize the return to the village and create jobs".



Activity Day at Sebeel School. Photograph by Micha's Lens.



Tell us about your journey and where the passion for local engagement stems from?

I think I fell in the cauldron of architecture, I studied architecture at ALBA University and then lived in New York with my husband. Prior to this, I had spent a year in Rome – because of the war - before going to university and Rome is such an inspiration for architecture. We returned to Lebanon in 1991 right after the end of the war when everything was to be done. I taught at ALBA university for twenty years where I gave two courses that I had devised: one called “Of Places and Men” and the other about “Perception of Space”. I was also part of the Committee of External Relations of ALBA and organized travels and trips meant to open the horizons and minds of students.

During those years, we used to spend a lot of time in the North, in Sebeel, my husband’s village to which he is very much attached. I discovered the vulnerability and poverty and wanted then, to reflect on a development project for women. This is how I decided to launch an artisanal activity. There was an important know-how in embroidery in the region, so I proposed to capitalize on this and to provide trainings for the women in the village, about forty women were involved. I conceived most of the designs, the women executed them, and I took them to fairs and exhibitions. The project lasted around fifteen years and gave back pride to the women. However, the difficulty was getting regular orders. Then, I got increasingly involved in Sebeel’s school rehabilitation and chose to devote all my time and attention to that.

I guess my interest in public matters relates somehow to my family history, as many of my ancestors held public offices. I come from Deir El Qamar which was at some stage a major political and cultural hub. Other members of my family who lived in Alexandria had also been part of the Nahda i.e., the Arab Renaissance. But it was my mother really, who transmitted to me the love of the country and of giving something to it. I lost my mother when I was twenty, I think it was this early loss that made me want to perpetuate the heritage.





Can you tell us about your adventure with Sebeel public school?

Students who were attending the public school came from very underprivileged families, they were kids of shepherds for example. Other families sacrificed a lot and begged parliament members to help them get their children into private schools as they knew public schools were not up to the same standards in terms of quality education. Then the war of 2006 happened and the school hosted displaced children from the South of Lebanon, this is when we saw their reaction to the run-down conditions of the premises, and I realized we had to do something about this before we die - at times of war, the possibility of death feels much more real. My husband was at that time, the President of the Municipality and municipalities have the right to oversee public schools. Actually, in Sebeel, the Municipality had offered to the Ministry

of Education in 1970, a 12 000 sqm property to build a school. Nothing was done, nobody had ever engaged in any construction on that land since 1970, presumably because of the absence of funding. So, I decided I had to take the bull by the horns and to engage in the construction of the building, as a first stage. Very quickly however, I realized that architectural work only would have no sense if not complemented by a change on the educational side as well. This course, had to have the Ministry of Education's approval, so we got it. I also felt that I had to do something special to be able to mobilize donors as we had to solicit them for this work. Hence, I opted for sustainable architecture, even though it was 20% more expensive.

How did you carry out this project all those years? Did you have a team, some support?

It was a like a desert crossing as I was working on this alone. The people from the village looked at me as if I were an extra-terrestrial in wanting to undertake such a project. We got funding from the Italian cooperation which was active in the country after the 2006 war. And the Municipality committed to carry on this project though the Ministry of Education said there were no funds available. When we started, we didn't know if we could continue, but we started. We had to stop for a year and a half because of lack of funding until a generous friend, Jean-Gabriel Eddé, one of the founders of Murex - the IT group - who had lost his wife from stroke and who wanted to honor her memory proposed to support us. His only wish was that the school be named after his late wife, Rachel Edde.

In 2010, I stopped teaching at ALBA and devoted myself completely to the construction of the school. The school was inaugurated in 2015, the materials we used come from the site itself and we applied sustainable architecture as much as possible, like: transversal aeration, rainwater evacuation, orientation of the school, plantations in school, raw concrete, no paint, green roof.

Can you tell us about your adventure with Sebeel public school?

We assisted in the selection process of the recruitment of additional teachers and qualified human resource, we helped send teachers to train in France. The grades of the students have improved. We also insisted on languages, languages and human sciences carry with them reflection. It is also key to accessing big universities. Further, we added cultural outings programs and artistic activities around music and arts.

Now there is also a public library at the school- the Ministry of Culture theoretically encourages those. There was a library before the war, but the Ministry had sent books that did not attract much interest. We replenished the library with books and revived it by promoting many activities engaging children with the support of the French Institute in Lebanon and Francophonie Liban, an association that supports French culture in Lebanon.

“In 2006 the school had 40 students, now there are 350 and there is lots of demand.”

Results improved drastically, people came from Tripoli, from the whole region and not only from the village per se. It takes time to build trust: in 2006 the school had 40 students, now there are 350 and there is lots of demand. We have no capacity for all of them, one thousand students are on the waiting list. So now we're planning to triple classes' capacities and to build a theater.



In what sense could Sebeel's success inspire similar public private partnerships?

Many initiatives have been undertaken to cater to the education of the vulnerable, but all those created private schools. We are the only initiative that is working directly with a public school. It is also interesting to note that the parents' committee in public schools has a bigger say than the parents' committee in the private schools and that the municipality has a say. So there is room for a participatory approach. We contacted the Ministry of Education to propose replicating the experience with other schools and contribute our input for other projects, but we couldn't arise any interest. Political clientelism makes it difficult to reshuffle teachers and directors, who are often affiliated to some political leader. Further, it has been three to four years now, that the Ministry is not recruiting since they theoretically have no budget. Many teachers are not even being integrated in the national scheme, they don't even have medical insurance, they have been working for years on a contractual basis with no social protection whatsoever.



Did the fact that you are a woman make a difference?

Yes, I guess so, the fact of carrying through the project through all the years, with high standards and not accepting any compromise because it is about children and about their future. Only a woman would do this.





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