

OPINION

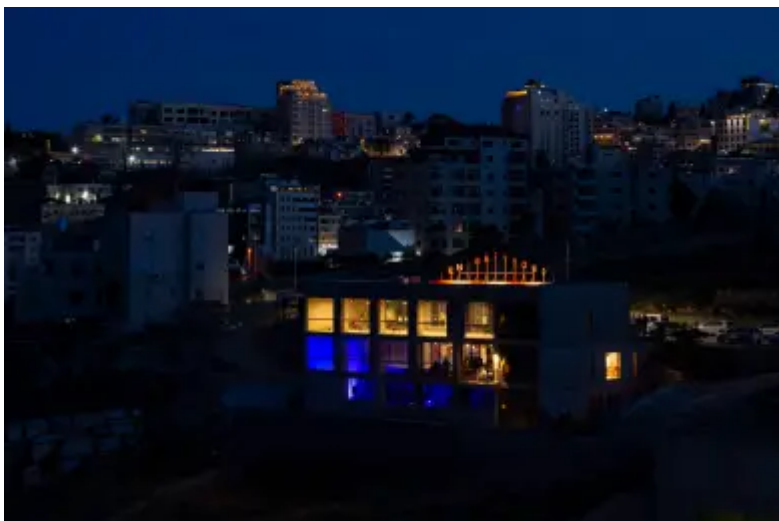
# Wonder Cabinet in Bethlehem brings art to the West Bank

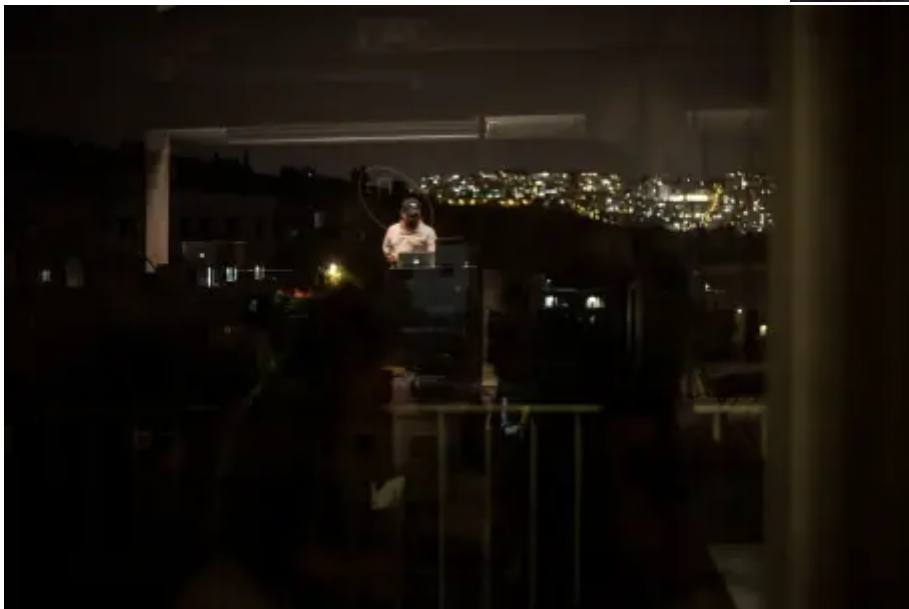
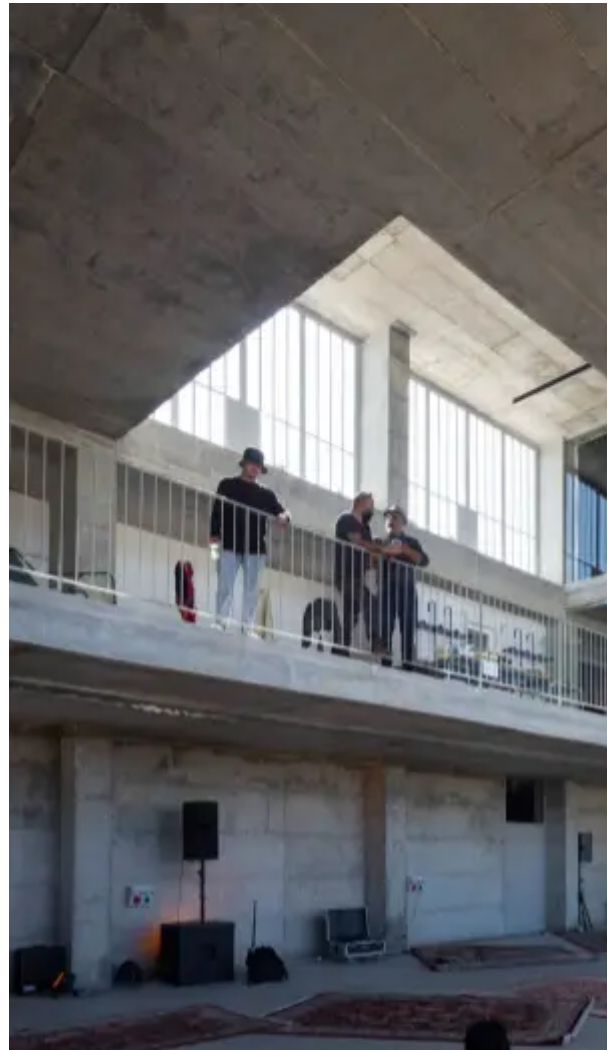


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Sometimes art centres are not so different from Coca Cola billboards on a highway. They appear, they take little notice of what's around them and impose their presence through cultural discourses far removed from the interests and needs of the population. But then what happens to the genius loci, the spirit of the place?

It's precisely this genius loci that Palestinian architects Elias and Yousef Anastas, founders of the Wonder Cabinet in Bethlehem, are looking at, recovering, treasuring and expanding. The kind of impact that the art space is hoping to have is twofold: encouraging the Palestinian art scene to grow beyond Ramallah, while also attracting creatives from around the world to the West Bank.

Their project developed organically. From the very inception of their architecture practice, AAU Anastas, the brothers Elias and Yousef looked at architecture as a process, rather than the final result of constructing a building. "We think a lot about technique and how we can transmit inherited knowledge by combining it with contemporary means of production," Elias explained. "We embedded the idea of research in our work, from the early stages of thinking about the space or territory, a building, a piece of furniture."

Since 2012, the Anastas brothers have been engaged on different public projects, which gradually started getting entangled with the art world, getting commissions from museums and galleries. In this phase, they were still touching on themes related to architecture, but they started bringing together different disciplines.

## **A polyfunctional centre**

Indeed, the intermingling of different disciplines is the main tenet for Wonder Cabinet. The name itself signals the experimental nature of the space. Elias again: "We are trying to provoke new forms of encounters across different realms. There is this openness to wonder, to be surprised. Also, in many parts of the Middle East, the Arabic name for Wonder Cabinet means a communal space for people to gather, a kind of semi-public living room."

The brutalist building designed by the Anastas, includes multiple multipurpose areas: a small exhibition space, a lab for designers and artists, and the first physical home for Radio Alhara, the popular Bethlehem-based online radio station that launched in March 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic. There's also a restaurant run by chefs in residence; a small store; a shop; a cinema; and a showroom for Local Industries, the architects' product design studio; and, of course the Anastas' own architecture studio.

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A restaurant with visiting chefs is meant to make Wonder Cabinet economically sustainable. However, this is no regular restaurant; the food is an integral part of the mission of the space. For example, visiting self-taught baker Alessandro Iacobino inaugurated the oven by conducting on-site research in Bethlehem, and prepared baking-based plates with raw materials sourced from local farmers and producers, and original dishes inspired and prepared with end-of-day leftovers from the city's general market.

Deep research connected to the spirit of the place is pervasive. The current main project, which started almost ten years ago, is about stone. "In Palestine, the majority of buildings have been covered with stone, following a rule of homogeneity, to create a stronger link to the landscape," Elias told me. "During the past 40-50 years, though, stone has been pushed back to become only an ornamental envelope for concrete structures, losing its fundamental function. We started this research in order to bring together the knowledge about stone architecture that is embodied by the artisans in the southern part of the West Bank."

## **Challenges of being in the Israeli-occupied West Bank**

The main challenge of being based in the West Bank is, of course, the ongoing Israeli occupation. However, the Anastas brothers are determined to raise interest by having artists come and spend time there to produce and to get to know what Palestine can offer in terms of knowledge and experimental forms of production.

The way Wonder Cabinet situates itself within the Palestinian art environment — which is mostly concentrated in Ramallah — is by complementing what is already existing within the social fabric of Palestine. "Wonder Cabinet is a reaction to Palestine. We invite people to come and produce out of Palestine instead of just constantly looking at Palestine."

In other words, they want artists to comprehend what Palestine is by being on the ground, rather than trying to project a certain encapsulated vision of what it could be. "For us it is this idea of creating connections between different people which is something that is embedded in the culture of people."

Transmitting knowledge to future generations is central for them. "Since 2018," said Elias, "we have thought about how our way of working as a firm could be



expanded into a public space as a cultural platform. We have Wonder Cabinet now, and for the future we aim to create a school of experimental architecture.”

## **Public space as an alternative form**

And speaking of public engagement and experimentation, Wonder Cabinet’s building embraces both in a unique way. Yousef and Elias thought about the space as a series of platforms stacked on top of each other, and this resulted in floors that communicate through vertical voids, which allows people to see what’s happening on the other floors. The building was also thought to be totally transparent in the city, and in the neighbourhood, to showcase to the neighbour, the passer-by or the visitor what is going on inside. “The architecture becomes the function itself, in the way that is used by our residents, artisans, artists, designers, researchers, chefs, cooks and artists. Their activities become the architecture of the space.”

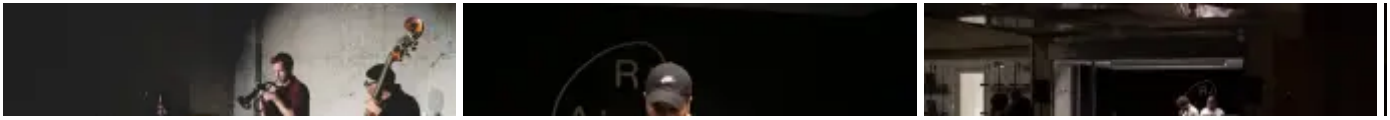
This aspect of being open and public is also central in their new neighbourhood project, based on the creation of a network around the space, which is located in a residential area in the Karkafeh Valley. While this is only 15 minutes’ walk to the centre of Bethlehem, it is an area that is still underdeveloped, and with no urban planning in sight. “This is why we decided to create a neighbours’ committee. We want to discuss and think collectively about the common spaces to be allocated to the elderly, to greenery, to collect water and to cater for the community.”

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Public spaces are tools for the authorities to exercise power; this is why all things public have started to be seen with suspicion, Elias added. “Our idea is to restore this idea of common and public spaces, and use this neighbourhood as an experimental framework for what could be an alternative to the official.”

In this sense, a key concept for the Anastas is solidarity. One of the strong examples of this is what happened with the radio station in July 2020, at a time when Israel decided to annex some of the land that is in an area called Area C. “It was a project supported by the Trump administration in Washington, entirely illegal according to international law,” Elias pointed out, “so we decided to use the radio as a space to protest.” The brothers duly opened the station to artists, DJs and anyone else interested in contributing their voice. “It caught the attention of an incredible number of people worldwide. It was really powerful for us to see the solidarity that was coming towards Palestine. People from all backgrounds came

to speak live on the radio daily or about the form of oppression they faced, no matter where they were coming from. This is where we draw our belief in solidarity as a tool of production, a tool of developing ourselves and a tool for developing our future.”



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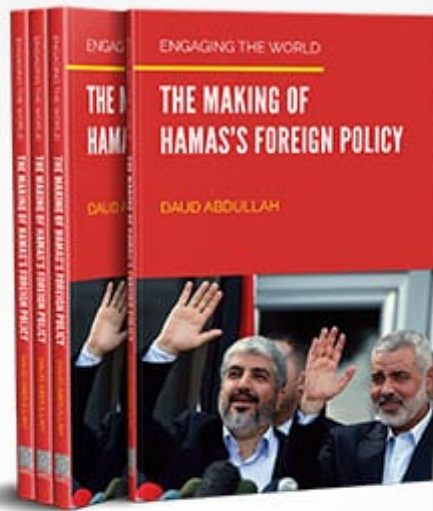
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