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## Intelligent Design Beirut

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### What's new

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Launch of its Ramadan activities

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The Hamra branch is the fifteenth store in the Middle East

By MacKenzie Lewis

Posted: Apr 30 2012



Desmeem director **Doreen Toutikian** believes her team of young architects and designers can solve Lebanon's social woes. In fact she's so convinced, she had them write award acceptance speeches before the project even began.

#### What is Desmeem?

It's an international and multidisciplinary design project that involves 40 designers from Europe and Lebanon. They'll be working in 10 teams, each one taking on a theme determined by an NGO. In June we'll hold Design Week, plus conferences and lectures to raise awareness for how design can affect social change.

#### There are ten themes?

Yes, 'creative education', 'public transportation', 'energy and water', 'sustainable consumerism', 'democracy', 'healthcare experience', 'migrant integration', 'gender', 'personal finance' and 'urban space'.

#### And how would design fit into something like the health care experience?

Hospital patients aren't in control of the journey – doctors don't explain what's happening or you don't understand, that dress they put on you is awkward. So it's finding ways to empower the patient and also the family. The waiting room can drive someone insane. How can we make it more relaxing? How can we make them spend their time in a way that they're not constantly thinking, oh my God, is she alive or dead in there?

#### How are NGOs involved?

Because the project is multidisciplinary, architects and interior, industrial and graphic designers mix with NGO workers, who know more about things like lobbying and policy. The designers might have brilliant design solutions, but you can't move them forward without the right tools. They'll also occupy the same office space as the NGO, so they can ask questions and share pre-existing research and resources.

#### Do NGOs guide the designers?

We tried to make sure it's not directed that way. An NGO might be stuck on a solution that's not working, but if you get someone completely left field who says, 'hey, what if we try this?', it becomes a co-design, participatory method.

#### What types of solutions are you expecting?

You have to stop thinking in terms of the end result. Design isn't what it was 30 years ago, when it was still so related to art: you're in the shower and suddenly you have this eureka idea. Good design – what's functional – doesn't come that way. That eureka moment only comes when it's based on really good, qualitative research.

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#### How did you choose the teams?

The age range is 21 to 29, so everyone has about the same level of experience. With the Europeans, we did our first selection and then asked them to send a video of an acceptance speech they'd give for an award received 20 years after Desmeem. It was a way for us to get to know their characters and see if they had a sense of humour, or how imaginative they could be about what they'd created. Some of them are really funny and others seriously prepared, like it's a White House speech! With the Lebanese, they presented the speeches in person.

#### Do you see the European participants as mentors to the Lebanese, or as peers?

That's tricky because they're neither. My thesis work compared Middle Eastern and European design education, and most of my work has been in that field. When you teach systematic design in a multidisciplinary format like they do in most of the European design schools now, students tend to have a richer knowledge. I'll be completely honest, you can tell from the applications and portfolios. Here, a designer will send me a few illustrations. But you can see the thought and research that goes into just one of the European projects; there's a clear concept, a process of research and analysis. But I don't want to judge. I want to understand how the project is working, the dynamics, who's learning what from whom. For me, this is qualitative research.

#### How optimistic are you about the end results?

I'm very optimistic, in general. I want all of the projects to be implemented. We got a lot of funding for this so I want something great to come out of it. I'd hate to think that all this work was just some project that happened and everyone forgot about.

*Desmeem*, initiated by the [MENA Design Research Center](#) (01 980089 ex. 117) Design Week dates TBC.

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