

Postdoc Appreciation Week 2021

Anwar Jaber

What brought you to UWaterloo?

Three things: the University, the School of Architecture, and the expertise of my postdoctoral supervisor.

Waterloo engineering is one of the top faculties of engineering in Canada. The university is also strategically located in the Waterloo Region, close to hustle and bustle of Toronto yet offering a quiet and peaceful environment to work, research and raise a family. The university also has amazing facilities and diverse body of students, staff, and faculty. The overall atmosphere is very encouraging to excel.

The School of Architecture at Waterloo is known for its reputation and the high calibre of its students. Under the leadership of Professor Anne Anne Bordeleau, the school is interested in breaking the boundaries of traditional architectural teaching – which has mostly centred on Western theories – by looking to address other contexts from around the globe to bring in more diverse voices. My research on architecture and urbanism in the global south, particularly the socio-politics of architecture in the Middle East, contributes to the school's efforts and brings in a new research area to the school.

My postdoctoral supervisor, Professor Robert van Jan Pelt, is a renowned and award-winning architect and historian, best known for his work in two key areas: Auschwitz and Holocaust denial. His internationally recognized research is essential for my own as he addresses the role of architecture in sensitive contexts that deal with human tragedies and violence.

What kind of work do you do? Why is it interesting and/or important?

I am an architect and urban scholar. My research interests lie in exploring the cultural and socio-political aspects of architecture and urbanism. I particularly focus on researching cities facing political transitions and extreme conditions, such as violent political and ethno-national conflicts. In my work, I investigate the role of architecture in these cities, their urban forms, the conditions of their creation and how the built environment becomes an active contributor in shaping and absorbing urban conflicts instead of merely reflecting them. Architecture and the built environment have been constantly used in conflicts to lay territorial claim and manifest the power of one group over another – buildings destroyed, cities bombed, memorials constructed, and heritage sites attacked. In fact, we interact with our cities and they shape us as much as we shape them. It is also in our cities that conflicts take place, wars erupt and people revolt. The physical design of our cities thus participates in these events and allows them to happen. Therefore, understanding the interplay of politics, power and the built environment becomes essential to learning how people live during and after conflicts and how numerous socio-political, cultural and other tensions figure in our cities. More importantly, this understanding becomes crucial if we are to design better and more inclusive cities as architects, planners and spatial experts to contribute to decision-making in planning and broader public policy.

What else would you like people to know about the work that you do?

My interest in researching cities gripped by conflict and extreme violence came from the fact that I grew up, studied and practised architecture and urban planning in the Middle East under the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

My work is incredibly interdisciplinary and geographically diverse. Unfortunately, themes such as destruction, violence, war and conflicts are common themes all around the world that directly related to the built environment, especially our cities. In my teaching and research, I look at these themes particularly in divided and contested cities in Europe, the Middle East and Africa that have faced extreme levels of conflict and division, such as Berlin, Beirut, Cape Town, Belfast and others.

I am a Jerusalem-born and raised Palestinian. I bring an international academic and professional experience from the Middle East, Europe and Canada. I practiced as a licensed architect and urban planner in Jerusalem and worked as a professor at the University of Waterloo and the University of Toronto in Canada. I also supervised architectural courses at the University of Cambridge in England.

I completed my bachelor's degree in Architectural Engineering from Birzeit University in Palestine. I hold an MPhil in Architecture and Urban Studies and a PhD in Architecture from the University of Cambridge in England. My research interests include: the interplay between politics and architecture, cities and conflicts, urban memory and war, Islamic architecture and urbanism in the Middle East and North Africa, especially in Palestine/Israel. In addition, I co-edited Scroope 25 (the Cambridge Architecture Journal) and served as an editor for the Arab Urbanism Magazine in both Arabic and English.