

PRESERVING THE LEBANESE HERITAGE TO ENHANCE THE LOCAL IDENTITY

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Lebanon is a country with a complex multitude of historical events, a conflicting built environment and a wide range of specimen architectural projects and memorial structures that only partially reflected the intricate complexity of the country. Recently Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, has undergone several stages of profound transformations and urban expansions between 1840 and 1920, after the civil war (1975-1990) which was generated by many intricate dimensions, a vast rural to urban migration brought to Beirut, a numerous population in search of job opportunities. During the reconstruction, Beirut faced unprecedented economic growth and started to be recognized as an emerging city subjected to all the influences of the world globalization. Recently an evident conflict started to afflict the direction of the country development due to the urgent need to start recognizing the values of the neglected heritage that have been affected by massive demolition and abandonment. The debate between the construction of a contemporary global city with a post-modern identity, represented by innovative architecture and the need to preserve the national architecture and landscape, have generated numerous contrasting opinion in the cultural scene. In the debate between innovation and tradition, this article presents a comparative analysis of two reconstruction projects recently concluded in Lebanon. The aim is to highlight some fundamental problems that need to be considered to enhance processes that affect the urban development of the country.

Keywords: Architecture, Cultural debate, Globalization, Demolition, Public resources, Urban development.

1 INTRODUCTION

Throughout the centuries, Lebanon has been subjected to various transformations and reinventions, due to many trades conquests, migrations, and internal conflicts. Country borders frequently varied in the past years and the Lebanese capital Beirut was part of various empires and systems of government such as Phoenician, Persian, the realm of Alexander the Great, Roman Kingdom, Byzantine, Crusader, Ottoman, and French mandate. In 1943, Beirut became the capital of the Republic of Lebanon. During the XX century, Beirut has been subject to some unique historical events, because of its contested history is currently considered as a city out of the norms. During the past centuries, Beirut faced multiple construction phases, referring mainly to the Ottoman and French urban regeneration, in the after-effects of World War I. Beirut was probably the result of the Ottoman urban reforms, which were responsible for Beirut's most recent modernization. Until 1850 Beirut was mainly a small provincial town Ottoman town, but by the end of the 19th century, Beirut's population and trade overgrew due to a progressive urban re-

organization, which changed its Ottoman configuration. After World War I, Beirut was selected to be the new capital by the French, gaining control over other cities and territories (Davie 2001). Beirut grew from a small medieval city of Arab-Islamic culture to a massive urban expansion and inner transformation between 1840 and 1920, particularly in the 1980s, during the civil war between the Druze and Maronite populations, the urban migration from Mount Lebanon rushed the growth of Beirut. During the centuries, the history of the Lebanese territory was affected by a permanent collision particularly between Lebanese Muslim and Christian, and Beirut was afflicted continuously by negotiations and fights to reach a sort of temporary reconciliation between parties. The modern history of Beirut city must be understood together with its unique social and conflicting political contexts. Due to its fast urbanization, it was recognized as one major regional trade center of the Middle East regions, an international node communication and transport, a prominent historical and touristic place and a new emerging core for banking and professional services in the globalized world economy in recent years. The establishment of Beirut capital and its fast growth, together with its urban transformations, generated some extraordinary economic results as well as unexpected foreign investment. The new condition of the capital was the complex result of complex modernization events, initially promoted by the Ottoman urban reforms and later, by the diffusion of new colonial master plans, applied also to the capital. The need to modernize Beirut as a growing global city in its new status of international economic center met the wish of the Lebanese elites. With the declaration of the new state of Lebanon, many governmental offices building, and institutions were designed according to a new “Levantine” style, to create the first modernization projects of Beirut's city center. One of the first superimposed urban interventions was the master plan of Place de l'Etoile, which started in 1925-26 and completed by the late 1930s, which destroyed the old ottoman urban fabric (Kassir 2011). After the independence of Lebanon state in 1943, and after the end of the World War II (1945), the new governmental institutions promoted the launch of many urban interventions with the aim of modernizing the new capital Beirut and the affirmation of the national state by imposing a new urban asset over the historical layers of traditional urban fabric. However, disputes were always in place between the desire to modernize the city and to preserve the local heritage. In the ‘50s and the ‘60s, the national growth is referred as the golden age period of Lebanon, when the sense of freedom and prosperity, expressed the maturity of modern architectural development and the liberal politics. The reduced attention to the urban planning regulations and architectural impositions and laws allowed the architects and engineers to express freely their modern production between the ‘50s and the ‘60s representing the Lebanese cultural backgrounds, passions, and freedom in interpreting contemporary trends and experimenting with new materials and technologies. The recent Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) was caused by a complex, intricate series of conflicts that included several dimensions of interests such as international, regional, ideological, religious, and political and generated a unique scenario in terms of fighting. After the end of the war, many reconstruction urban and architectural projects were launched, that mainly focused on the modernization of the Lebanese capital, failing to address the social middle classes needs. Beirut overgrew under the pressure of massive private investments that created the new modern structure and the contemporary urban fabric of the capital. A new growing globalized city with the aim of reaching international connections and developments while its local culture and the national heritage face the risk to be forgotten.

This paper describes and compares two reconstructive interventions by analyzing the adopted methodologies for preserving the historic urban fabric and national heritage. The purpose of the research is to highlight some problems in preserving the local culture and identity that should be considered in building up new strategies for future reconstruction projects.

2 METHODOLOGY

The paper presents the comparison between two interventions completed during the country reconstruction, after the war, and highlights some problems that still need to be considered in enhancing the values of the Lebanese heritage and the local identity. The projects have been analyzed, compared, and assessed by re-questioning the perceived values of national identity by the Lebanese society. Interviews were conducted in Beirut to diverse participants with the aim of documenting the current condition and the social perception of the heritage requalification values produced by the urban regeneration projects. Qualitative analyses were adopted to conduct investigations either in the form of interviews, discourse analysis, or oral history, into architectural and values in historical context and environments to local people and residents. A series of semi-structured interviews with students and professors at Lebanese American University, were conducted to collect relevant accounts on heritage preservation in Lebanon in the field of the academic research. Finally, seminal texts describing the historical evolution and the physical transformation of the analyzed sites were consulted to reconstruct the historical preservation approach adopted in the region.

3 BEIRUT AND THE WORLD GLOBALIZATION

As part of the Arab Levant, Lebanon's history has been shaped by several wars, occupations, agreements, and influences. This rich and highly contested history has, in turn, shaped the architecture of the country that can be summarized as a mixture of a broad range of influences. Located at the crossroad of civilizations, Lebanon has witnessed a multidirectional flow of people, ideas, and practices, and it is still considered as a crossroads between the three continents (i.e., Asia, Africa, and Europe). In recent years, after the war, massive private and public investments have been spent on reconstructing the country and the capital flows, have been the center of a financial internationalization process that produced many socio-economic and political consequences throughout the Lebanese territory but mainly on its capital, which is currently growing as a new 'global city.' Recently many cities in the world, for example, New York in the US, Tokyo in Japan, and London in Europe, have imposed their role in international finance (Sassen 1997). Additionally, new important centers are growing in the globalized scene such as Dubai in the Persian Gulf, Shanghai in China, Beirut in Lebanon, by affirming their presence on the world economy, within specific segments of the market. In Beirut during the reconstruction, due to some mechanisms induced by globalization, local and international finances have allocated in the country many capitals, involving multinationals, transportation, entertainment, IT and airline companies, as well as massive urban and real estate projects managed by private investors with particular attention from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The prime minister Rafik Hariri, at the end of the XX century, made his fortune by some business connections with the Saudi Arabia royal family. He invested a lot in Beirut to compete with emerging Gulf cities of Dubai and Doha as tourist attractions and international financial centers. The minister intention was to rebuild the leading status that the city held in the 1960s over in the Middle East area. One of the effects produced by globalization on the reconstruction of Beirut has been the realization of spectacular projects, which have enhanced the city image in the intense competition among the Persian Gulf regions. Being subjected to reconstruction since the end of the war in 1975, Beirut is currently trying to rebuild its central role in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Referring to the success of many large financial and image operations developed in some European cities (Genoa, Barcelona, Lille, Lisbon, and Valencia), many Middle East cities have adopted some integrated procedures for their urban interventions. In Beirut, the search for a substantial media impact at the global level was pursued, as a primary element, in the reconstruction and requalification of many architectural and urban projects. This approach has been possible thanks to the inclusion of

prestigious attractive architectures and with new technologies that served as international attractions for the capitals and investments. In particular, with the intention of promoting, as elements of characterization and commercial interest, the search for “archistar” architectural projects, among the new towers and buildings of Beirut, there are some significant examples of architecture that stand out, boasting high-sounding names in the field of design, such as Beirut Terraces by Herzog & de Meuron completed in 2014, the Beirut Souks New Department Store, designed by Zaha Hadid Architects & Samir Khairallah & Partners, still under construction, Grand Hotel de Beirut plot # 450 Saifi by Bernard Khoury and DW5 located in the northwestern edge of the Beirut Central District, and Zaitunay Bay, with the Yacht Club, located around Beirut Marina, designed by Steven Holl (US) and LEFT (US) with Nabil Gholam et al. completed in 2014, which has also generated critics and discussions about the quality of the project, in relationship with the natural environment, due to the vibrant private economic interests behind the interventions. Finally, the South Souks of Beirut was designed by Raphael Moneo and completed in 2009, with the intent of recall some references to local architecture and the original Greek street plan of the ancient city. In such commercial and visual contexts, Beirut is currently trying to attract investments in international tourism and entertainment, in hosting events of increasing interest, but there is the tendency, as in many cities of Middle East Area, to confuse the ‘strategy of appearance’ with the strategy of urban policies.

Due to the globalization effects, Beirut has attracted international capitals to finance the city’s urban development during the reconstruction. Therefore, the urban planning approach has mainly focused on enhancing Beirut’s image as a safe and geographically strategic location in the Middle East region. The perception of Beirut is still firmly linked with the war memories, fire, and kidnapping of the last civil war of approximately 15 years. After 30 years since the end of the conflicts, although the neighborhood Syria and the massive presence of Syrian refugees are still destabilizing Lebanon’s economy and politics; in recent years, the country has experienced an increasing touristic income and demand. The magnitude of the Lebanese history, in fact, attracts the tourists, and nightlife and attractions in the capital city Beirut has reached a record of about two million visitors in 2018 and is currently hoping for a new record in 2019. The growing income generated by the twentieth-century tourism of many Middle East cities (both rich and poor) has fueled the international investments in attracting more visitors for the recently completed conservation projects on the local cultural and architectural heritage. The rehabilitation of heritage, as a strategy for the cities’ development, has produced many new opportunities for the investments of international capital, especially in the touristic field. Due to its unique millennial culture and history, the Lebanese country boasts an extensive list of cultural heritage included in the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) world heritage site, worth to mention, the archaeological sites of Ballbeek, the Phoenician city (1984), Ouadi Qadisha the monastic settlement (the Holy Valley), the Forest of the Cedars of God (Horsh Arz el-Rab) (1998) Anjar (1984), Tyre (1984) and Byblos (1984) which its history of settlement dated back to the 8800 BC, among the oldest in the world.

4 THE NEED TO ENHANCE THE VALUES OF THE LOCAL HERITAGE

The Lebanese development and the Beirut urban growth of the past years have generated rapid urbanization. Many historic buildings have been demolished to make space to construct new residential towers and shopping centers, leading to the total loss of important historical traces (Hakim 2008). A permanent conflict afflicts the direction of growth of Beirut: from one side, its new postmodern identity, on the other side, the preservation of its local culture and traditions. The search for identity in the contemporary world implies the attainment of both two different objectives: on the one hand, the enhancement of local cultural heritage, on the other hand, the irresistible desire of any emerging city to be a global entity that attracts tourists, workers, and

citizens of all over the world. Due to the renewed interest in the past, the recent interventions to safeguard the architectural and urban heritage have promoted the value of conservation as a possible tool for the construction of Beirut's new identity, enhancing the places' vocation to be preserved, restored, and become new attractions, while generating new economic investments. In the debate between innovation and tradition, some urban reconstruction projects have been concluded in Lebanon, with the aim to create connections with the local history and the cultural tradition of the country. Each project presents a diverse design strategy more or less preservative and highlights essential issues regarding the processes that affect the urban development of the country.

During the reconstruction, one of the main projects was the restoration of Beirut Central District (BCD), also called Downtown Beirut. The city center of Beirut, an area of thousand years old, was destroyed during the last civil war and the governmental authorities officially approved the master plan for reconstruction in 1994. The company Solidere (Société Libanaise pour le Développement et la Reconstruction de Beyrouth) was founded in 1994 to complete the reconstruction of the Central District project and create a unique joint-venture between public and private investment. The Beirut Central District was the most significant redevelopment projects of the 1990s and has currently developed into a business and commercial center. The reconstruction approach for the BCD project was referred to the use of the historical typology, although probably many historical existing buildings were not restored but demolished and reconstructed, with probably the intention of erasing the memory of the war and make space for the new economic investment of BCD reconstruction. The initial plan to restore some facades was replaced by a desire for collective amnesia about the conflict. Beirut Central District reconstruction was part of the vision of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, Solidere Patron, to construct a new leading globalized capital in the Middle East. However, unfortunately, the reconstruction project failed from many points of view, and the Central District is nowadays empty without any public vitality. Urban space is empty, not being able to revitalize the traditional atmosphere of past times and the Lebanese heritage value is not well perceived (Ilyes 2015). Similarly, the reconstruction of the neighborhood Saifi Village, a residential complex completed in 2000 by Solidere, has adopted a reconstruction approach that was inspired by the historical typological use of the Lebanese vernacular heritage. The design by François Spoerry (France) and Erga Group intended to preserve the traditional existing urban fabric. The small scale of the buildings, in proportion with the human scale, similarly to the vernacular architecture, transmits a sense of calm in the residential area, based on the rhythm of what was probably existing before, to preserve the traditional culture, and the public spaces of the city center. The high level of the luxury investments, similarly to the BCD project, has produced the result that Saifi Village is almost used by wealthy people (Gulf and Saudi investors and visitors), and the place becomes very classist and isolated, even because there are some restrictions from the private police for people that are allowed to enter the public spaces (Figure 1). The results of the interviews and research show that in both the two analyzed cases study of Beirut Central District and Saifi Village, the regenerated urban space are not alive, and the aim of enhancing the values of the traditional culture and heritage was not completely achieved after the completion of the projects as illustrated in Table 1.



Figure 1. Al Saifi village: the traditional cultural identity is not well enhanced.

Table 1. Comparisons between urban interventions and highlighted problems that need to be taken into consideration for future projects.

Name	Date/ Agency	Project categories	Project description	Reuse	Problems
Beirut Central District (BCD)	1994 Solidere	Urban conservation, regeneration	Restoration, typological reconstruction	Residential, Commercial	-The space is empty -The heritage values are not properly revitalized
Saifi Village	2000 Solidere	Urban regeneration	Typological reconstruction	Residential, Commercial	-The nature of the place is more private rather than public -The cultural identity of the place is not completely perceived

5 CONCLUSIONS

The fast urbanization of Beirut has recently produced new conflicts of identity and a deep sense of extraneousness of the projects to the place (Mazzetto and Petruccioli 2018). Additionally, the rapid growth has damaged many existing traditional structures and their survival. Recently the globalization effects, strongly characterized by the standardization processes, have highlighted some critical issues concerned with the values of the local Lebanese tradition and the architectural identity which risked disappearing due to many recent massive demolitions. Although some reconstruction projects in Beirut Central District were launched to safeguard the existing traditional urban fabric and enhance the value of the local culture, the private interests have taken advantage of the public needs, not achieving the expected results. Beirut is currently struggling to exalt the value of its local traditions and to defend the identity of its cultural diversities from the conventional standardization of the global economic interests. There are no predefined rules to direct the urban planning choices within the permanent and fascinating conflict between technological innovation and the preservation of tradition declined in the specific field of the city. Only the development of the Lebanese urban planning culture will give answers to the dilemma.

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