ARCHITECTURE & HERITAGE IN BEIRUT

Elie Haddad & Abdallah Kahil

Lebanese American University

Abstract

This paper will address the problematic relation between architectural developments, and the conservation of archaeological heritage in Beirut, looking at cases studies where the preservation of archaeological sites was compromised by the economic imperatives, which are often looked at as legitimizing factors in the operation of 'development'. This problematic is of course not restricted to the city of Beirut, but applies to all historical cities that are still inhabited and 'operational' as economic centers. But what distinguishes Beirut may be the 'creative' ways through which such operations are marketed as a win-win situation that supposedly preserve heritage sites while allowing growth and development. In the course of this investigation, I will also critically review the architectural projects themselves, and their aesthetic value within the overall construction of the city and its public space.

Introduction

The reconstruction of Beirut has, from its beginnings, been a project with heavy ideological undertones. The project may be looked at as a quasi-utopia, which was aimed not only at the recovery of the original city, as happened in the European cities after World War II, but at the re-fashioning of a new city with a new mission that does not exclude a reform of the citizen himself in the process. In a sense, the reconstruction project promised a recovery of an "original" condition, one that preceded the catastrophe or "fall", in this case the civil war, and further aimed at idealizing this pre-fall condition by substantive urban and social transformations.

Beirut represented and continues to represent a city that resists codification and characterization, a meeting of different worlds, which at its best presents us with a great model of co-existence, while at its worst an example of cultural reification. The line here is very thin, and we must be very vigilant in the process of reading this case. It is compounded by the problematic of "identity", a question that was at the epicenter of the civil war, and which is concentrated in the very idea of Beirut. This city was represented variously by different groups as a beacon of the Arab world, a city with a distinct Mediterranean culture, and yet by others as a point of confrontation between East and West.

The city dates back at the earliest to the Phoenician time, a settlement located between two major hills leaving a fertile plain in the middle which had the added advantage of a proximity to a natural harbor. The scattered remains of Phoenician settlement have been found in various zones along this northern edge of the city, which took a more definite form under Seleucid rule in the 2nd century B.C. Beirut became a Roman Colony in 14 B.C., it was assimilated into the Roman Empire, and Augustus had given the city the name of his daughter, as Colonia Julia Augusta Felix Berytus.. It was considered the most ‘Roman” city in the Eastern Roman Empire. The city Flourished

and its law school which was established any time between the beginning of the Roman Empire after the battle of Actiun in 31 B.C. and the beginning of the 3rd century gained fame and remained active into the Byzantine period. Justinian, in 533 recognized the Beirut Law School as one of the three official law schools in the Byzantine Empire. After the disastrous earthquake of 551, the students were transferred to Sidon.

The Roman city seems to have developed from the traditional Hellenistic city plan, i.e. a military camp plan with rectilinear grid, however many imperial structures were added to the city, it is believed that the city included a theater, a hippodrome, a basilica, and temples.

Apparently the city took a long time to recover from the earthquake. It became provincial in the remainder of the Byzantine period, and it kept this status in the Umayyad and Abbasid periods in the Islamic phase of the history of the city. The re-emergence of the city would take place later in the middle of the 19th century with the interest of the Ottoman of the city's port.

The Ottomans enacted the policy that they already projected for their capital city, in clear emulation to what other European cities had already undertaken: a modernization that was based on the tabula-rasa of old and unsightly quarters. The first step was the demolition of the old city wall, the last vestige of the medieval city, in anticipation of the projected expansion of the city into the neighboring countryside. The wall wrapped the city on three sides, with an opening towards the seaside. Within this enclosure, a mixed population of Muslims and Christians coexisted, living in proximate quarters and working in the Souks, the Arabic term for "market." These Souks are typological derivation of the Greek agora and later Roman streets. This Nineteenth century city was defined, as the maps and the travelers accounts testify, in terms of a classical urban language, i.e. of squares, markets, major roads, fountains and gates. This structure, as

the different accounts show, overlapped different zoning categories, a clear antinomy to the modern city.

Vast areas in the center of the city were cleared by the Ottomans, with the objective of urban improvements, which remained unfulfilled due to the outbreak of the First World War. After the war, and upon these clearings the French, impressed their own design, by urban designers Frères Danger which would later characterize the image of the city in the twentieth century, putting their finishing touches to the broad avenues that replaced the labyrinthine alleys; and completing the star-shaped square at the heart of the city, Place de L'Etoile, which included the Parliament building.

The reconstruction operation came at the end of the civil war of 1975-1990. Beirut Central District or BCD, the official name given to the area that is now the main focus of the reconstruction program, lies at the core of the city and incorporates all of the ancient city of Beirut as it existed until the beginning of the twentieth century.

The war of 1975 left some drastic scars in the city. Yet the city center itself, paradoxically, witnessed much less devastation than the other faultiness, spread along the dividing line which extended from the center to the suburbs along the road known as Damascus Road. Yet the center, including the old souks, were relatively well standing and could have been restored, compared to the devastations that occurred further south along this demarcation line. However, and for economic and political motives, a private company, named SOLIDERE, was founded in order to manage this reconstruction. Under the cover of expediency, a governmental decree allowed the expropriation of all land in the old city, with a large part of the profit in real estate going to the company itself, in return for developing roads, infrastructures and other amenities which would be returned to the state. The excuse for expropriation was the exaggerated extent of destruction due to war and the incapacity of small-owners to handle this large task, compounded by the legal problems of multiple ownership and rental rights that could

well delay the reconstruction process. The company in charge, SOLIDERE, would effectively replace the municipal council in this territory, financing and planning the reconstruction and taking charge of its management after reconstruction. The expropriated landowners, on the other hand, would become mere shareholders in this new arrangement, along with new investors.

A number of controversial political decisions had long preceded and paved the way for the establishment of this corporation namely the abrupt demolitions of the market district near Martyrs Square in 1982; twelve years before establishing this company and nine years before the end of the war. The managers of this operation, who would reappear later as main leaders in the post-war political climate, already foresaw the end of the war and planned ahead of time this ‘real-estate’ operation. Ten years later, in 1992, the second market district including the historic Souk Ayyas was raised, beginning another cycle of wholesale demolitions that cleared up the old city and opened up its space, as if in a rewinding mode to a pre-historic condition, soon to be reconstituted according to a new image that projected a "modern" city, cleansed of all its previous impurities.

In what follows four major cases that witnessed some significant intervention within a context that was of course laden with archaeological content will be presented. The cases are: The Old Souks, Martyrs Square, the Roman Hippodrome, and Beirut Landmark.

Case 1: The Old Souks

The competition for the Souks in 1994 was the first open competition in the city after the war. More than 300 projects were submitted, representing a variety of approaches to the problem of urban reconstruction within a historic city center. The jury did not reach a decision on one winner, therefore declaring the first 3 first projects as equal winners.

Among the more noteworthy entries, which received “mentions”, figured the project of Aldo Rossi, which proposed the resurrection of the old street pattern to allow the city to gradually reconstitute the souks, while inserting a few characteristic Rossian landmarks. Castillo & Gastano’s project, in its restrained order, presented a radical approach by its minimalist reinterpretation of the souks as a series of parallel strips. Luciano Semerani proposed a collage of different elements, where the extension of the buildings along the eastern side creates an impermeable wall that seems to turn the souks into an enclave, reinforced by a large, and fortress-type building at the southeastern corner. Zaha Hadid’s proposal projected a series of sweeping lines translated into horizontal strips running along the north-south axis.

Eventually the winning schemes of this ideas-competition were overlooked, and the site parceled among local and international architects, with Rafael Moneo receiving the commission to redesign the major parcel, the central souks, and Kevin Dash in charge of the adjacent Jewelers Souks.

In the process of digging for the infrastructure of the new souks, including a 4 tier underground parking, a large section of archaeology dating back to the times between the Phoenician to the Seleucid periods, a city was uncovered, but hastily documented and then disposed of.

Moneo Souks scheme.

The plan is based on the old souks, with street baring the exact same locations, but the architecture is entirely contemporary. However the many levels of the structure makes it depart from the all one level old markets. This contemporary rendering makes look more like an outdoor mall. Circulation is almost inadvertent. With staircases appearing between buildings, passages connecting random piazzas, it is nearly impossible not to unintentionally wander into the project. Nevertheless, some passages/streets evokes the old souk. I personally remember the first time visited the new building, as I entered one passage, I thought this must be an emulation of Souk al-Tawileh, I did not know

then that signs of the names of the streets were placed at the entrance of each one, and it turned out that this was really the contemporary replacement of Souk al-Tawileh.

Moneo, with his experience in archaeology and contemporary architecture from his design of the National Museum of Roman Art in Mérida sensed that some archaeological remains should stay exposed, so he left an alley with archaeological structures exposed. He also recommended the restoration of a 15th century domed structure from the Mamluk period that was discovered during the demolition work. However, this structure which functioned as a tomb chamber for an ascetic was turned in its location now as a canopy for the clients of a certain bank. Moneo was also sensitive to leave enough areas which are small piazzas echoing similar ones form the old Souks. In the Antabli Square for example, there once was a small water fountain that functioned as a landmark to frequenters. Since it has been destroyed by the war, a sensitive decision is taken to construct a new fountain out of contemporary materials in the exact same location.

Case 2: Martyrs Square

Martyrs Square, the central square one of the two major squares of the city, was turned after the Civil war into an empty tract of land, and the buildings that bordered it severely damaged, these were demolished under the new construction plan. The recently proposed designs for the square, following an international competition won by the Greek team of Antonis Noukakis and Partners Architect represents a ‘domesticated’ version of a public space, in contrast to all the previous configurations of the square since its evolution under Ottoman and French rules and the period of independence.

The original square was laid during the Ottoman period with an elongated plan. It was an open space to the east of the old city. The eastern wall of the city was demolished, and thus that shifted the center of the city to its eastern side. On the southern side of

the square there started the road to Damascus, and on its northern side the seat of the local Ottoman authorities, the Serail, better known the small Serial. Behind that the road between the city port and the city was paved.

The Sqaure gained attention under the French. The small serial was demolished, and eventually was replaced with an office building which housed a movie theater on its ground floor, the Rivoli, and the name of the building took the name of the movie theater and it became one of the icons of Beirut in the 60's and 70's. On the rest of the sides of the square also there were shops, police headquarter, cafes, hotels, and cabarets, since behind the eastern side of the square there was the red light district. The western side lead to a series of markets most famous of them was the Jewelry market.

The square itself was occupied by a public garden that changed design with time, at one time there was a talking flower clock, evidently in addition to its iconic statue that commemorate the martyrs.

The north eastern corner included a transportation hub for all travelers to the north of the country, and behind the police headquarter in the middle of the eastern side there was another hub for the commuters to the northern suburbs of the city.

Furthermore the square symbolized the martyrs who were executed by the Ottoman authorities for leading a movement of independence from the Ottomans. Paradoxically the al-Amin mosque, constructed on the south western side of the square is fashioned after Ottoman precedence.

The whole site sits on a bed or Phoenician and Roman structures. The western side was excavated quickly after the construction project started, and now construction work for luxury residential buildings is underway. Eastern side of it also is the site of a group of luxury residential buildings.

So this public square is turned with the new design to clusters of luxury residential complexes. The street level of these complexes is absolutely private in function and does not communicate at all with the public square, thus pulling the life from the square. Regardless of the architectural beauty of lack of it, the new scheme does not revive the old square, thus any architectural comparison does not apply.

Furthermore, the new luxury structures are constructed on hastily excavated lots of Roman archaeological structures, none of them was preserved. Only a cluster of Phoenician and perhaps Crusader work structures on the square's northern side remains and they are included in the new design as archaeological promenade.

All in all, the new square does not resemble at all the old one. It is literally a new square, it does not take into consideration neither the function, nor the spirit of the old one. The only common thing in between the two is that it is called a square. Even the statue of the martyrs was removed a little north from its original location.

Case 3: Beirut Landmark

The Landmark, designed by Jean Nouvel, is supposed to be on a site east of Solh Square that extends over 7,700 square meters, and it is marketed as a fully integrated city with mall, residences and a hotel, parts of it rises 43 stories, with a built area of 150,000 square meters. Section of the original square was appropriated and incorporated into the building site.

Before the construction began excavations revealed a long wall structure of 30 meters long and 9 meters wide, and digging proved that the Roman and Byzantine remains extends north and south under existing buildings, such as the ESAKWA building and the Grand Theater. It has been speculated that it may be the site of the infamous Law School.

It includes a basilica from the Byzantine period, and also it is suggested that the church was built before 325 A.D. because it is has a north south axis rather than the adopted east west axis in the Council of Nicaea.

This created some activist work that lead to halting the construction, and it is not clear at this point what the result will be.

Nouvel designed what is marketed as a complete city, which will dwarf all other structures around it. Its design seems a collage of various subjects some of them may be derived from small domestic architecture in Beirut from the 40's and 50's, but the

final synthesis seems alien to anything else in that section of the city. It is a contemporary hybrid design that is overwhelming and almost surreal.

Nouvel, with his new-orientalist inclusion of Islamic elements in his decoration shows one side with 8-pointed star pattern that is derived primarily from medieval Egyptian patterns. Ironically, when the French designers who designed the Place d'Etoile in the 1930's chose similar reference to their architecture, they turned to what was termed as 'art arabe" from Mamluk Cairo in order to give the city an "Arab" identity. That was intended then to eliminate any reference to Ottoman identity of the city.

In distant memeory the site may include important parts of Roman Beirut, and in recent memory the Solh Square's importance goes back to the Ottoman period. Sultan Abdul Hamid chose this location to erect a commemorative fountain in his name. This fountain was removed during the French mandate, and in the 1950's a statue of Riad al-Solh was erected there. Riad al-Solh, along with Bshara el-Khoury were the fathers of the Lebanese pact that drew the formula of power sharing among the Lebanese communities after the independence.

On either three sides of the square there were important monuments and facilities. On its southern side there is a hill which has the Grand Serail, an Ottoman army barrack which was transformed into the seat the Prime Minister after independence. On its western side there are two streets which lead directly to the Place Etoile and the Lebanese Parliament. Another street is the streets of banks, the financial nerve of the country. A major office complex, Ouseili building was very famous and it also housed another well-known movie theater, and a transportation hub in its basement, the cars of which transported citizens from the city enter to all the neighborhood in the western section of the city.

On its eastern sides, several hotels and cafes along with transportation centers that transported citizen to the southern suburb and the south of the country. After the reconstruction plan, except for the seat of the prime minister, the street of banks all lost their function. Again, new structures suggested for sites that are well rooted in ancient

and modern history. The destruction of the civil war was accepted as a destruction not only of the physical buildings but also of their accumulated function during a century.

Case 4: The Roman Hippodrome

The Roman hippodrome has a different story. The Hippodrome of Beirut has been described as the best of the five roman hippodromes in the eastern Mediterranean. It occupies approximately 3500 square meters.

The architectural project over the site which is owned by Beirut Trade, a real-estate company. SOLIDERE originally sold this property to Beirut Trade for construction. The proposed design consists of a luxury residential complex designed by Lebanese architect Ziad Akl. However the question that gained much public attention was whether to build over the site or not. And with all the different points of views about this matter we can have an idea about the ineffectiveness of government in regard to urban planning or to architecture and history.

In the past 4 years, this tract of land was being prepared for construction. The site was recognized as an archaeological site in 2007-2008 when a yearlong excavation was conducted. In 2009 the Minister of Culture listed the site on the “national register of Historic Places.” However the minister did not follow through on governmental appropriation of the site. Another decree by a subsequent minister reiterated this.

The excavations revealed an important section of the old Roman Hippodrome, the location of which was suspected to be in that area, but never before revealed.

Yet, and due to a change of government, a new culture minister released this area for construction, with the condition that the land owner would dis-assemble the Hippodrome remains, and recompose them later into a museum that would be located in the basement or ground level of his private housing project. This decisions created a wave of protest, including a march organized by the Association for the Protection of Lebanese Heritage. Ironically, the march took place near the site of an Ottoman port the site of which was readied for new construction. But apparently the Roman remains

were more important. That was followed by a court decision to keep the project frozen until further notice. In His defense, the minister brought up circulating ideas about archaeology and preservation. One is that the remains on the site of the hippodrome are only pavements and scattered little stones, and thus they cannot be compared to the still standing colonnades of the temples of Roman Baalbek.

He also suggested that the design of the new structure will be done in a way to preserve the archaeological finds.

De Chadrevian, the advisor of the minister Layyoun, suggested that the decision to prevent construction on the site was political since the site is adjacent to the palace of a former prime minister.

Another argument presented by the team of Layyoun, that of Hassan Sarkis, is that the site is not as rich in archaeological finds as many other sites in the city on which contemporary structures were erected.

Layyoun also claimed that the proposed solution is not very different from the recent Museum in Athens by Bernard Tschumi, forgetting of course that in that case, the new museum was completely dedicated to the preservation of the ruins found on site, and not as one-floor, completely covered by the private development. A more apt comparison would have been the Souks by Moneo, where despite the more public and open use of the site, the ruins remain something of a footnote to the commercial project.

The vacillation of the governments of Lebanon has been the norm since the formation of the state. Individual ministers rule on the spot depending on the case and those who are involved in it, even though that the GDA has some guidelines about the question of archaeology and construction. But these guidelines can ve overstepped or manipulated. The question of the Hippodrome point to the obscure relationship between business and government.

The government's policy toward the archaeological finds in the city of Beirut has vacillated between preservation of sites and using the lots for new construction. No archaeological report we have from the French mandate. Whatever was found then during the construction of the Place d'Etoile, was taken somewhere. A good example of the vacillation is the Place d'Etoile itself. According to the original plan, the square included in its center a clock tower offered a gift to the city by a wealthy Lebanese emigrant in Brazil. In the seventies of the last century, the tower was removed, and roman remains, including a small portion of a colonnade was exposed on the like of an open air museum case. After the civil war, and in the scheme of the reconstruction plan, the roman remains were covered and the clock tower returned to its location.

Solidere

Since 1992 archaeological sites have been systematically destroyed after being painted as luxuries that the country cannot afford to preserve. In 1997, the New York Times reported that activism was mounting against Solidere's construction plans.

The defendants of Solidere was Harith al-Boustani, and professor of History of Architecture at the Lebanese, and a Solidere advisor: Civilizations are intertwined, and we do not have the right to cut the link between ourselves and the other civilizations."

Conclusion

In all these new projects that are unveiled for the city, one thing is quite clear: the opposition and balance between public interest and private profit is eliminated in favor of the latter. Is this very idea of "public place" now superseded by the concerns for economy and facility of transport, at the expense of real communication?

The classic definition of the city as a polis seems to be at present largely forgotten by those who believe that urban planning and urban economics are largely a statistical problem in a world of expanding and limitless markets. Are there still any possibilities left for the survival of the polis in this time of celebrated globalization? And does the model of corporate planning, best exemplified by what has happened in Central Beirut, present a better alternative to that of speculative development by individual developers, or are these simply two sides of the same coin, which in both cases negates the fundamental right of citizens in a democracy to debate and decide the form of their city?