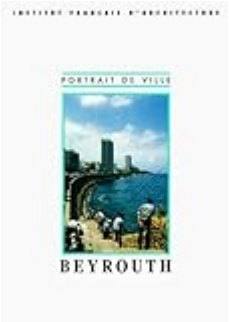
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jade Tabet, with MarlÖ¨ne Ghorayeb, Eric Huybrechts, Eric Verdeil. *Beyrouth.* Paris: Institut Francais d'Architecture, 2001. 64 pp. EUR 20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-2-904448-59-1.

Reviewed by Jens Hanssen (University of Toronto)

Published on H-Urban (August, 2002)

This concise survey of almost two hundred years of urban atmosphere and architectural history appears to belong to the growing category of sophisticated coffee-table books on Beirut. At first sight, the format of the oeuvre resembles that of the familiar real estate brochures of Solidere, the postwar real estate company charged with the reconstruction of the city center. But appearances are deceptive. Commendable for its overdue comprehensive perspective, the present volume provides a rare account of the modern history of Beirut that is neither limited to a particular historical epoch nor partisan to Solidere. Significantly, the authors have relativized the centrality of the company that since its inception in 1991 has monopolized debates between critics and optimists about the future of the city. What makes the weighting of the book so interesting is that the decentering of Solidere's role in the narrative is itself a subtle form of criticism.

Less subtle, perhaps, is the penultimate chapter, entitled "Strategies from the War to the Reconstruction," which provocatively insinuates that Solidere's reconstruction could be seen as the continuation of the civil war by other means. The chapter contrasts a string of master plans from 1977 to 1991 with photos of the physical destruction of Beirut during these years of war. But the authors flinch from the more radical views that circulated in Beirut at the height of the popular protest in the 1990s against the take-over by the real estate company. The time seems a long ago now when Solidere's large-scale erasures of dilapidated but landmark buildings in the downtown area elicited strong opposition from heritage campaigners.[1] At the time, the multi-millionaire Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri was accused of having high-jacked both the economy and the state of Lebanon in a public-private botch-up that was identified as the source of cultural and economic globalization and a concealed form of *tatisme*.

Instead, the authors turn to aesthetic remnants that have survived both the destructions of the war and the postwar. The most authentic and beautiful parts of historical and today's Beirut, we are told, are neither museumized palaces of old, nor Solidere's pastiche facades in the revamped "French Modern" Beirut Central District, but the lively street atmosphere and the unsung buildings of local architects during early independence and Chehabisme, "the golden age of modernism" in Lebanon. The book culminates in a chapter that takes the reader for strolls through the pericentral quarters by way of site maps and photos. Here, the authors argue, reside what Henri Lefebvre would have considered the social spaces of unexpected "encounter, assembly and simultaneity ... not fragmented but differential in character,"

of harmony without homogeneity, of difference without segregation.[2]

The authors view the 1930s as a historical decade of rupture. New urban poles emerged that restructured and integrated the outlying districts and "agricultural suburbs" (p. 16). During this time, the construction of the Lebanese National Museum, for example, with its fashionable neo-pharaonic facade, became a major traffic junction for Beirut's north-south and east-west axis. Urbanization accelerated, construction intensified along the arterial and ring roads. Moreover, "another architectural type was born there, the result of an adaptation and transformation of the traditional house of the previous century: the three- to four-story buildings." New building materials such as reinforced concrete allowed cheaper and faster construction while the spatial organization of the living quarters was adapted to the new possibilities.

The arrival on the scene of a generation of new local architects during this time marked perhaps most clearly the stylistic departure from the previous order. In particular Farid Trad and Antoine Tabet (the principal author's father) spearheaded the move of domesticating international architecture. On the one hand, this generation developed out of the tradition of their Ottoman-trained predecessors, like Yusuf Aftimos; on the other hand they worked closely with French architects who used the partnerships and the colonial situation to experiment their way out of the previous Beaux Arts tradition in France.

Unfortunately, the volume is less original when treating the important and much-debated earlier transition from Ottoman to French rule. Did the political power of the French Mandate bring about a radical change in approach to, and structure of, the urban fabric of Beirut from Ottoman times, or was there a greater continuity than has been assumed? After an atmospheric introductory chapter replete with untenable stereotypes that echo early traveling Orientalists about the "vitality of a city which was detached from an Arab interior divided between the authoritarianism of military regimes and the rigors of religious fundamentalism" (p. 4), the present volume identifies the destruction of large sections of the old city during world War I as an incomplete Ottoman heritage which arguably facilitated later French clean-slate designs for Beirut.

The authors admit Beirut's Ottoman heritage, in particular the way Tanzimat reforms affected urban design and public health (pp. 8-9). The imperial barracks, the clock tower and the former military hospital still dominate Beirut's center today, and while the former serves as the Prime Minister's offices, the latter houses the very Council for Development and Reconstruction that oversees the operations of Solidere. An Ottoman school of industry houses a law faculty and until recently the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The garden opposite, completed in 1909, is one of the only public parks in Beirut today.

Much more research on the details of the destruction of large sections of the old city between 1915 and 1917 is required. The volume relies on Mesnil du Buisson's much-quoted assessment at the beginning of the French Mandate in 1921 that "le gouverneur turc entreprit de detruire les vieux quartiers, n'hesitant pas jeter dehors, sans indemnit, des centaines de malheureux que les maladies de la famine devaient bientot decimer" (p. 11). This quote does not suffice as evidence for the exact procedures and interests at work during the expropriation process. Like other historical city maps, the first Mandate map of Beirut dating from the same year–a rare coloured excerpt of which is published on p. 14–would contain future urban projections as much as traces of past destructions. Arthur Ruppin's *Syria as an Economic Region* may open the inquiry in this regard. A wartime traveler exploring the practices of real estate politics in Palestine for the Zionist Fund, he observed a

"systematic piercing of streets in Aleppo, Damascus, Beirut, Jerusalem and Jaffa. The method was always the following: The residents were forced to cede as much of their land as was deemed necessary to achieve a certain normal street width. In cases where houses had to be partly or fully demolished, their value was estimated and the proprietor received a promissory note ['bon'] by the municipality.... Now, those plots the municipality acquired in this way, she would then sell in auctions and she took in part exchange those 'bons' she had issued. This created a demand for the 'bons' by the property speculators, so that the 'bons' were deemed financially attractive without too much capital flow incurred."[3]

Arthur Ruppin showed that, contrary to du Buisson's account, indemnities were actually paid to residents under the Ottomans, and he opined that "this method has to be judged as very successful because it enabled the cities–despite the cash shortage–to execute major and expensive urban development schemes, without damaging private interests too much." Solidere would have agreed with late Ottoman construction efforts in principle but taking no risks, it eliminated the Beirut municipality as intermediary when it embarked on its destruction of the city center some eighty years after World War I.

[1]. For a critical account of the reconstruction and memory discourses, see Jens Hanssen and Daniel Genberg, "Beirut in Memoriam: A Kaleidoscopic Space out of Focus," in *Crisis and Memory: Dimensions of their Relationship in Islam and adjacent Cultures*, edited by A. Pflitsch and A. Neuwirth (Beirut: Orient Institut, 2002).

[2]. Henri Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, with an afterword by David Harvey (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 303, 379.

[3]. Arthur Ruppin, *Syrien als Wirtschaftsgebiet* (Berlin: Mittler in Komm., 1917), p. 517.

Citation: Jens Hanssen. Review of Tabet, Jade; Ghorayeb, with MarlÖ¨ne; Huybrechts, Eric; Verdeil, Eric, *Beyrouth*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. August, 2002.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6674