

BEIRUT: THE FUTURE OF THE PAST

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Based on a talk given in London and organised by the British Lebanese Association on 23 April 1993.

In 1993, I was asked by the British Lebanese Association in London if I would address them on the subject of Beirut. I had recently returned to the city for the first time since I left in 1976, and like all returning friends was shocked, indeed amazed by what I saw. What also struck me was the resilience of those who had remained and their determination to put the past behind them and built a new Beirut, indeed a new and better society. What was also clear was that there were many different and conflicting ideas of what this should be.

In accepting the invitation to talk, I could not help but reflect on my own personal experiences of the city, where I had spent most of my young life. My first visit was in 1951, when I arrived on a Greek boat from Marseille, to take up my first job, as an archaeological draughtsman working on the excavations at Jericho, then in Jordan. In order to take a service taxi to Amman, my initial experience of downtown Beirut was the Bourj, little knowing then that it was to become part of my daily life for the next twenty-five years. It presented an extraordinary spectacle of chaotic traffic, crowded streets, taxis, buses and clanking trams, hustlers and street peddlers. I think it was Sacheverill Sittwell in one of his early travel-books who observed that one never saw anyone in the main square who was not interestingly dressed - indeed, it presented a microcosm of Lebanese society on the move. I will never forget (and indeed in the recesses of my memory I can still hear them) the plaintive cries of the *service* drivers, *as-Sham, as-Sham! Trablus! Jebail!* and the most plaintive of them all, *Bologna! Bologna!* in the early evening dusk.

When I finally came to live in Beirut permanently in 1956, teaching at the American University of Beirut as a young instructor in the Art Department, I lived first of all in an old apartment overlooking the bay at Ain Mreissi. But very early on I decided I didn't like the city very much and moved to

Tabarja, a fishing-village fifteen miles north of Beirut. I rented a typical three-arched old Lebanese house on the beach; in those days there was no electricity in the village and I lived by candlelight and paraffin lamps. To get into Beirut, I would take a bus or perhaps a service, which meant I would then get dumped in the Bourg and take the tram or another taxi to Ras Beirut. This meant that for the next twenty years I was traversing downtown Beirut twice a day and some times many times more. I really did get to know it very well and this is my only excuse for what I have to say now.

I suppose my most vivid memory of this part of Beirut was the startling vibrancy of the street life. It was quite unlike the fashionable hum of Hamra, or the cloistered calm of Ashrafieh, or even the vitality of lower-class Basta. It was in a way the centre of the spider's web, indeed the still centre of the wheel - except that it was far from still. Although I was obliged to travel through it to get to work and back home again, yet there were many things I could do on the way. For instance, almost every day I would have lunch at Bab Idris, in the tiny back room of Massoud's; there was a terrific cook whom I never met and a waiter who became a good friend, M. Jean, who was the spitting image of Oscar Wilde. The nearby markets, the *Suq al-Franj*, were stacked with every conceivable kind of fruit and vegetables, flowers, meat, chickens, cream, hand-made chocolates and fish. There was practically nothing you could think of that you couldn't buy in that area, hand-woven cotton by the metre, *cigales de mer* from a fisherman's basket, Chivas Regal, even an Alpha Romeo sports car. My bank was there; so were all sorts of craftsmen, where you could get shirts made, metal chrome-plated, furniture constructed and jewellery fabricated. I did all of these things. You could eat in the best French restaurant in Lebanon, or for fifty piastres in a hole in the wall in the thieves' market. There were book-stores to browse in, newspapers to buy, cinemas to entertain and even foreign currency for sale at the *sarraf* when you had had enough of Beirut and wanted to travel.

Although most of the downtown area was fairly

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static, buildings went up and down on vacant lots. This part of the city had become the urban centre in the early part of the century. It was basically a jigsaw of older 19th century Lebanese houses locked into a network of neo-oriental arcades and streets, all substantially built, with a few modern blocks inserted. I would guess that the high-density use of downtown Beirut prevented the extensive development of any one sector. This took place in other parts of the city, on the fringes. It should also be noted that Beirut also followed the classic pattern in the location of its *bidonvilles*, those agglomerates of squatters and the underprivileged living in makeshift huts, who provided the cheap labour force. These of necessity have to be as close as possible to the workplace, as the inhabitants have little surplus income for transportation. In the case of Beirut, this was Quarantina, on the main road north and convenient both for the port and downtown Beirut, as well as the industrial suburbs.

Here I should make it clear that although I made vigorous use of downtown Beirut, I didn't like the city as a whole nor the way that it was developing in the 60's and 70's, largely a pastiche on the international modern style; hence my predilection for a fishing-village, my youthful, romantic alternative. The trouble with Beirut was that there was no comprehensive urban plan. The city grew organically, with a singular lack of concern for open space. This was fine for the traditional Islamic city, with its focus on the courtyard house and private space. But it didn't work for a modern town, with other kinds of contemporary infrastructures such as hotels, banks, hospitals, universities, cinemas and business premises. Most significant of all there was literally no-where for the rapidly expanding population to breathe.

When war came, downtown Beirut became the major battleground, and after thirteen years although not totally destroyed was almost irreparably scarred. There was also now the dreadful legacy of city-wide destruction. Perversely, this presented Beirut with an undreamed-of opportunity, to redevelop the town along more harmonious and humane lines. The fighting furnished great tracts of open space which never existed before, threading their way through the town. There was also an unparalleled social mix, because the large squatting

population who had taken over the abandoned apartment blocks now lived in close proximity with those with whom they had only previously had a servile relationship. Everyone stole their electricity from the same poles, now festooned and draped with thousands of wires. Everyone alike suffered from the same deprivation of water, urban services such as garbage disposal, and communications. You could, of course, buy your way out of this dilemma, but this was not a common option. You could also detach yourself geographically, and this led to the massive development of areas in the mountains and towns like Jounieh, which were largely untouched by the fighting and destruction. For the vast majority of the remaining population neither of these solutions was viable.

In the early nineties, there were simply two alternatives. The first was to raze the whole downtown area, and begin again; this was the essence and attraction of the Hariri plan. But it had a fatal flaw, for the *tabula rasa*, or clean slate approach did not take into account the legacy of the sociological factors of the downtown area. This somewhat Zionist tactic pays no heed to the past and could only result in the massive disruption of the human and physical elements which made up the palimpsest that gave Beirut its distinctive character.

The second alternative (and much harder to achieve) would be to re-plan downtown Beirut in such a way that the sociological balance is not only preserved but improved upon. This was the objective of the minority who opposed Mr Hariri's visionary approach. Besides incorporating many of the virtues of downtown Beirut, a few of which I have already indicated, it would also take advantage of those new open spaces. I was very struck on my return in 1983 that the thirst for space, somewhere to breathe, had been accidentally realised. Of all places, the ghastly ruin of the Bourj had become one such space, a place to visit, to sit and take refreshment. So had the Corniche, now packed with pedestrians. One had to remember that apart from the gardens besides the *Arts et Métiers* building, and the more private spaces of the AUB campus, there simply hadn't been anywhere before to fulfil this function.

There were actually two distinct problems to be solved in the redevelopment of downtown Beirut, interrelated but quite separate. The first was the problem of the past- the future of the past, one might say. It was well known that the downtown

area contained the richest deposits of Phoenician, Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Islamic material in the city, quite apart from the surviving monuments such as mosques and churches, and an important legacy of

eighteenth century and later architecture. Initially, the Hariri plan called for the total removal of the earlier phases of the city down to bedrock and below to provide the foundation for the new town. It is eternally to Mr Hariri's credit that when confronted with the historical consequences of his plan, he ordered a moratorium on whole sale clearance and more to the point provided a million dollars for rescue archaeology, so at least to secure some idea of what lay below the ruins.

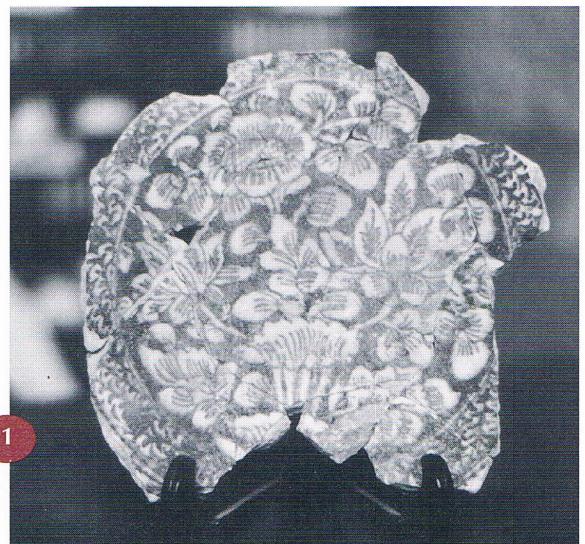
As a number of local and foreign teams were assembled to do this another problem arose, which was how to integrate the information that was unearthed, and provide an overall concept of the history of the city. One solution might have been to grid the entire area, and initiate sondages down to bedrock so as to identify which areas were particularly important at different historical periods. This would then allow the intensive excavation of the most important of them, and perhaps more enticing to the anxious developers make clear which areas were of little or no consequence. The division of interests between archaeologists and developers is a well-known feature of rescue archaeology anywhere in the world, and compromise is the only practical solution. Here again Mr Hariri must be congratulated for having stayed the planners' hand

and provided a magnificent opportunity for scholars of the past.

A recent article in *National Museum News* (7; Spring 1998) by Chris Cumberpatch indicates that even so in the event there ensued a conflict on the different approaches to excavation. As I understand it, it contrasted the preservation of actual structures *in situ* as tokens of particular cultural milestones in Beirut's past (with the consequent blocking of access to earlier remains), with their removal and the subsequent excavation of an area down to bedrock, linked to an exhaustive record and storage of information for future interpretation. It is obvious that Cumberpatch is for the latter, whilst conceding the viability of a multiplicity of approaches. The salient point is made by a fellow-excavator (Reuben Thorpe) "there is a desperate need for a much fuller and more open discussion of the objectives of archaeological research in the city", and as a preliminary, the archaeologists themselves should at least have a clear idea of their individual goals. He sounds an alarm bell when he points a finger at what is happening in Beirut and its consequences for the redevelopment of other Lebanese towns such as Tyre and Sidon (and to which one might add Byblos and Tripoli, for starters). Of course there is room for a plurality of approaches, but someone needs to exercise a firm hand. The leading question is, who?

The solution of the archaeological problem is primary, because nothing can proceed successfully until all the interested parties are in agreement. Certainly methodological squabbles are redundant under the present circumstances. Having decided

1. A 14/15th century blue-and-white Syrian dish copying a 14th century Chinese porcelain original. It dates from the time of Timur's devastation of Syria, including Baalbeck and Damascus, and is proof of Beirut's commercial prosperity at that time. (photo courtesy of John Hayes) (1996)



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how to deal most effectively with the preservation of the past, whether materially or archivally, then the second problem has to be addressed. This is the subsequent development of the city. There again there obviously must be a master plan and a firm but sensitive controlling hand. This is where the Hariri plan came in, but here the flaw is that it attempts to impose a single architectural style on a complex sociological problem, leading to an overall and quickly dated sterility and blandness, the exact antithesis of Beirut's rich and diverse past. The solution here might be the allocation of different sectors to different architects; this has worked well, for instance, in the recent and highly successful rejuvenation of the port city of Bilbao, in Spain.

But how to evolve that master plan? When I considered this in 1993, I thought it might be instructive to ask the Lebanese themselves who attended my talk to list what they thought was good - and bad - about the downtown area they remembered from pre-war days. After an initial shyness (only broken when someone suggested under the first

category, the Patisserie Suisse), the answers came fast and furious:

GOOD

Patisserie Suisse
The suqs
Police
Roman remains
Transportation
Sursock quarter
The port
Restaurants:
Ajami, Bahri
Foul merchants
Jewellery
Library
Grand Theatre
Maarad
Fountains
St. Georges,

Normandie,
Bhassoul
Red light district
Parliament
Rivoli cinema
Signboards
Banks
People
Crowds
Whole place

BAD

Traffic jams
Chaos
Lack of green space
No parking
Noise
Everything

So where is the master plan? It would seem to me that the responses provided it. All you have to do is to solve the problems on the right hand side (BAD) and add the solutions to the left hand side (GOOD) and hand the whole list over to the architects.



2. The area partially excavated east of the Capuchin Church, which produced whole sequences of medieval and earlier material (1996)



3. The problem; Classical remains now revealed, amidst 19c. buildings, with layers of earlier material below them. What to preserve? (1994)