

BEIRUT – A CITY WITH SO MANY FACES

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Abstract

Since the 19th century, Beirut has known a spectacular development in its physiognomy as well as its morphology and its space extent. Each era has left its mark on the city, thus constituting territories inside which various visual messages delimited ideological space. Presently, 13 years after the end of the war, Beirut has become a huge agglomeration and offers several faces. What are those faces?

Key words: Lebanon, Beirut - Huge expansion, images

INTRODUCTION

Cities agglomerate and re-agglomerate through times, building new aggregations or social atomization strategies accordingly to individual and collective interests, competition or collaboration.

This process creates in the heart of the city one fragmentation or more. These fragmentation can generate a confrontation phenomena or social duality between the inhabitants, districts, municipalities, politics... leading sometimes to a state of rupture within the urban fabric.

Beirut, Crossroad city in the heart of the East Mediterranean Basin, passage city, has been stigmatized throughout centuries by the multiple successive civilizations weaving and unweaving each time the urban environment.

The 19 religious communities officially recognized by the Sate, being represented, the Pluriconfessional city of Beirut stands among those places the appearance of which changes with each step of its historical, social, economic and political construction.

OTTOMAN BEIRUT

More than any other Eastern city, Beirut has been marked during the 19th century by a westernization process, still ongoing since then, and due to which the first fragmentations appeared in the city.

Bayrut at-Qadimat or the Arab city (18th century – 1860)

Towards the end of the 18th century, Beirut is a small town on the coast counting around 4 000 inhabitants of secondary political and economic importance. Despite its small surface, Beirut had all the characteristics of a real Arab city: ramparts, serail, numerous religious and civil monuments, specialized commercial equipment and a population from various origins and of different confessions. Thus, the urban areas intertwined and made out of Beirut a rich urban city where separations between public and private, civil and confessional, were blurred.

Before 1860, the territorial delimitations were unclear due to the exiguity of the city, because in opposition to Jerusalem, Istanbul or Damascus... where distinct districts allowed religious minorities to have their own administration, Beirut did not have distinct confessional groups and there was no professional segregation between confessions, nor was there any opposition between habitation districts and production activities, all the activities took place in the same surroundings. Nothing in the way they *were* dressed differentiated the various groups, and, in the streets of the city, the white *Izar* covered (from head to toes) all women, Christian and Muslim.

The Wilaja of Beirut or the Mediterranean city (1860 – 1920)

But the unstoppable invading of Industrial Europe changed the urban organization and Beirut was progressively integrated in the new circuits of World economy. Then, it became the main outlet for Damascus, important capital of the Interior and of the Arab *Hinterland*¹.

For a few years, the city witnessed the arrival of industrials², diplomats, contractors³, writers such as De Nerval, Lamartine, but also adventurers and peasants seeking a job... The increasing influence of the West also appears in the development of many Educational Institutions; thus, next to the numerous primary and secondary schools, American Protestant missionaries built in 1866 the first University of Beirut followed by St-Joseph University, established by the Jesuits mission in 1875. These orders also contributed in the development of a rich cultural infrastructure of newspapers and press, mainly run by Christian communities, vectors of Nationalistic Movements and of the opposition to the Ottomans.

The city started changing its physiognomy, and new landmarks which introduced the forthcoming changes, appeared in the streets as well as on signboards⁴, promoting French and English fabrics. Moreover, coffee trade names⁵ appeared in the *infra-muros* bazaar then in the *extra-muros* along Ras Beirut's promenade.

I-1800: 5000 to 6000 inhabitants, II-1850: 40 000 inhabitants, III-1880: 90 000 inhabitants

¹ The demographic explosion of the city is impressive

² Starting in 1860 to 1880, Europeans invest massively into silk economy (more than 200 mechanical spinning mills in the mountains)

³ The construction of infrastructures and communication: the Harbor is widened, a road and then a railroad join Beirut to Damascus; telegraph and gas lighting are installed, the tramway is inaugurated and the streets are paved.

⁴ Appearance of the first sign-boards in 1843

⁵ Pross, Jacob Blaich, Gassemann, Café d'Europe

Since the beginning of the 19th century, Beirut had an introverted habitat structure; towards the end of the century, Beirut adopted an extraverted structure in concordance with the transformation of a number of cultural values. Along old collective habitat Beirut residences, appeared high constructions with three-arch windows and red-tiled roofs. At that period, Beirut the Arab city became what is conveniently called nowadays a "Mediterranean Bourgeoise City." Why?

A certain category of traders, most of them Christians, who had become european trade agents, essentially benefited from the concentration of western interests. An important local bourgeoisie appeared and identified more and more to western cultural values. According to Fernand BRAUDEL, the clothing fashion and then the costume evolution are representative of political and social change. Moreover, in Beirut, the transformation of the costume showed the increasing, impact of the West on the economic, cultural and political levels.

This new bourgeoisie, new territorial definer, took possession of the urban *extra-muros* space and built on the surrounding hills large residences reflecting its new acquired wealth. In the new residential zones, community spaces are not as well defined, but the existence of mosques, churches or schools clearly shows the ascendancy of either one of the confessions.

The local dynamic and business minded bourgeoisie took in charge most of the innovations indispensable to the modernization of a city (transport, lighting, food and public health).

In order to answer the new acquired facts and mechanisms introduced by the West, the Ottoman Empire undertook deep urban reforms (*Tanzimat*) that will result in a mutation of production modes, of urban space control as well as of the State's role.

Keeping in mind public health. Efficiency and aesthetics concerning reforms, the central ottoman authority will, once again, implement a more direct control on the city development by establishing a separation between public and private spaces. New administrative divisions were introduced witnessing the existing opposition between the Turkish power and local Bourgeoisie.

Then huge urban development⁶ projects changed the urban scenery between 1880 and 1900. To finalize this modernization and, at the same time, to disaffect the traditional territorial logistics, the last ottoman Wall, demolished during 1915 the Central District of the old city by dispossessing and driving out, without any indemnity inhabitants and traders.

THE FRENCH MANDATE OR BEIRUT THE COLONIAL CITY (1924-1943)

The dismantling of the Ottoman Empire by the Mandatory⁷ powers gave birth to new states with often arbitrary boundaries. These boundaries divided groups and communities on both

⁶ The new serail, public gardens, the city hall

⁷ Great Britain over Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq. France over Syria and Lebanon.

sides of an artificial line unintentionally or willingly contributing to a mobilization of identities and their projection on the political field.

In Lebanon, muslim notables frustrated at their inability to reunite the Arab provinces and in doing so, be affiliated to Syria will do their best to enter the new local political and constitutional game. These transformations took place with hidden confessional strains because for Muslims, the west represented *the other*. This is how the Lebanese confessionalism was reinforced, exacerbating relations between the different religious communities that tried to take hold of the State.

Once again, the new power will give the city its imprint through a colonial type urbanism... In order to obliterate the old urban order, the mandatory forces took possession of the buildings of the Ottoman administration on which the tricolor flag will wave.

Starting in 1924 major constructions were undertaken: the National Museum of Beirut, the Parliament, the Frenchmen avenue – replica of the Englishmen Promenade in Nice.

During the 1930s, the old Arab core disappeared to be replaced by a modern French centralization set around the Parliament: Place de l'Etoile (the Star Square), radio-concentric urban design, large orthogonal arteries named after the victors: General Allenby, Marechal Foch, *Weygand*...

Other constructions will change the Beirut scenery: military cemeteries, firms signboards in the traditional souks are written in Moliere's language... The khans were transformed into theatres and movie theatres... The Lebanese traditional house increased in height thanks to new building techniques and the ochre color became dominant in the city.

The confessional minorities beneficiating from the support of the mandatory country (Christian, Jewish, a small Sunnite elite as well as the Armenian refugees) visually confirm their presence in the capital by adopting a European way of life: clothes, music, reading, leisure...

The Mandate transformed the capital into a banking and forwarding country. This situation attracted not only the rural population of the interior but also the ethnic refugees such as the Syriacs, Kurds, Melkites, victims of the political ambiguities of the mandatory countries...

The town stretched out, gained in density, embodied old village nucleus... then, urban spaces of a new kind stoned to appear since they were more homogeneous on the religious level... cells of poverty took roots in unhealthy zones such as Karm El-Zeitoun', Hay al-Syrian...

In the new suburbs where social and economic discomfort prevails, youth movements, charities and sports clubs... spring up and in order to beneficiate from a political support will put themselves under the protection of political parties; they will play a tangible role during the political events of 1958 and especially during the civil war.

BEIRUT CAPITAL OF LEBANON AND THE MIDDLE-EAST (1943 -1975)

Lebanon became independent in 1943. Twenty years under the French occupation destructed the core of the city, however, failing to replace it.

But, the national agreement of 1943, leaning on a religious division of the parliamentary seats and of the public responsibilities, strengthened, once again the religious community. The so-called "Lebanese pattern", which is an intercommunity consensus on the "family" functioning of liberal economy, will develop.

After the events of 1958, when Lebanon risked following Egypt, Syria and Iraq on the slopes of Arab socialism, the country wished, through its stake on freedom, to be at the avantgarde of Arab modernity.

This image, drawn with patience and improved by a double western and Arab modernity works as a guaranty for foreign investors. The Banking Secrecy (1956) makes out of the capital a safe for fuel income.

The Arabs from the Gulf come in great number to Beirut which, for them, represents Switzerland (Banking Secrecy), Monaco (Casino) and Paris for its shops and leisure activities. Public place, duty free zone, bridge head, Beirut is now the Middle-East Capital.

The saturated old down-town does not satisfy anymore the new criteria of functionality and modernity. In less than a decade, Beirut built a second down-town, Hamra street. Offices, hotels, cinemas, merchant galleries grow at a frantic rhythm making out of this avenue the Middle-East Champs-Elysees. On the eve of the war, and in order to satisfy the needs of customers totally addicted to a consumers' society, a third urban pole construction was being considered in Sodeco street in Ashrafieh.

During that period, real-estate investments multiplied, it was the boom of construction and the number of new suburbs increased. Urban expansion stretches towards the north and the south, thus occupying a narrow plain on the coast. During the same period, collective habitat areas as well as residential areas reserved to wealthy people grow equally. The capital was named the Greater Beirut (more than one million inhabitants).

Unfortunately, this prosperity concerned only a fraction of the population and ignored the intense confessional split and the underprivileged crowd in Beirut. On the eve of the war, Greater Beirut was constituted of three rings circling the historic core.

1. Beirut, the municipality divided in several districts with a long urban history, but nevertheless, differently divided on each side of Damascus street:
 - To the east, in Ashrafieh. Gemmayzeh with a majority of Greek-Orthodox or Greek-Catholic inhabitants with a few cells of Maronites
 - To the west of this axe, a mixed population constituted of Sunnites, Christians of all rites and foreigners, either Arabs or westerners.

This population came from the high and middle-class bourgeoisie. They invested into associations, building of hospitals, schools and dispensaries.... So, the center was conservative and used to the mixing of confessions and to cohabitation.

2. Starting in 1950, due to the rural exode, old village nucleus, such as Furn-el-Chebbak, Chiyah, etc, have progressively been reattached to the capital; these second generation citizens were essentially wage-earners, officers and craftsmen... They kept strong links with the rural world; they rejected the 1943 agreement and its political compromises.
3. Between this intensifying ring and what could be considered as the middle-suburb of Beirut, we could find the "Misery belt" constituted by the Palestinian camps and the

spontaneous districts generated by the rush of Lebanese fleeing south Lebanon and the Israelis exactions.

Their inhabitants were part of the left out population, forgotten by the posterity and growth enjoyed by the first category citizens. This situation engendered resentment and allowed the militias to recruit among the frustrated youngsters, offering them an ideology based on fighting for their rights and taking their revenge.

BEIRUT AT WAR, THE DIVIDED CITY (1975 - 1990)

The war that started in the middle of 1970, in one of the popular suburbs of Beirut, isolated the country from the rest of the world. The fighters rapidly "squatted" in the old historic core which was looted and progressively destroyed during 15 years. Beirut, then imploded, and was fragmented in a multitude of confessional territories getting more and more segregated.

The population deserted the capital, because of the daily fightings and the city knew an unlimited stretching. Urban morphology is, then, deeply affected:

- To the north of the capital, an urgent and increasing need for lodging accommodation generated an unrestrained real estate speculation which will lead to an invasion of concrete covering the north coastline to Jbeil locality and the first slopes of Mount Lebanon.
- To the south, as a consequence to the multiple waves of war displaced persons coming from south Lebanon or the Bekaa, spontaneous illegal habitat proliferates and engenders what we call today the southern suburb, which remains under the control of Hezbollah, the Chi'ite religious party.

The war seeing no end and the fighting areas growing progressively larger, new residential zones are constituted on the lower slopes of Mount-Lebanon, irremediably deteriorating the pine forest covering them. Concerned by the administration of such a huge coastline agglomeration, the government requests in 1984 from the IAURIF the elaboration of a master plan of the agglomeration, which is known, since then, as the Metropolitan region of Beirut (RMB).

As to the commercial centers, the civil war has disrupted the balance existing within the capital and the poles didn't survive the torment. Replacing poles will know an important development.

PEACE: WHAT IS THE IMAGE OF BEIRUT TODAY?

At the end of the war, the government had several problems to solve:

- Reunite the capital
- Rapidly, reconstruct the down town district, considered the symbol of the coexistence of the 19 confessional communities officially recognized by the Lebanese State.
- Restructure all the infrastructure networks (electricity, sewages, roads, transports, etc...)

In 1992, Lebanon started a reconstruction process in the capital and on the country level.

Privatization of the urban site

In 2003, Beirut Municipality still represents in the western mind, the destroyed cities, but the visitors find now a totally different town and metropolitan region. Once more, it was the private initiative and sometimes the state's that allowed the construction of high standing residential buildings, offices, commercial centers in the capital and the suburbs.

In 2003, the metropolitan region of Beirut, officially covers more than 23 000 ha and counts more than 1.5 million inhabitants (the third of the Lebanese population). Flying over the agglomeration, one can discover a huge mineralized mass, bristled with high towers, climbing the slopes of Mount Lebanon. In the suburbs of the capital *the gated communities* have risen. The high demand on this type of habitation comes from the mutation of the Lebanese society. This doesn't mean social partition, because these persons have at least two residences, one of which is usually located in Beirut in one of the tower buildings that surround the restored down town Beirut.

Multipolar city

The Beirut agglomeration has kept the commercial poles which appeared during the war and which still respond to the needs of the population residing now in the suburbs. But the renovation of the old historic core of the city of Beirut generated a gentrification movement on behalf of the upper classes towards the nearby districts. The downtown area, once more, attracts the banks, insurance companies, jewelers, prestigious fashion names etc. Also one shouldn't forget the multiplicity of street leveled restaurants.

The new trades repartition abides a multipolar logic always structured according to the important roads crossing the capital.

Beirut Downtown

The largest reconstruction site was in downtown Beirut and is administrated by a private society SOLIDERE, which, since 2000, has given back to the heart of city its former animation.

CONCLUSION

But is Beirut really reunited? The different communities live together (cohabit) but do they really mix?

Despite everything, the old militias territories still remain in the city because some of the leaders are former war chiefs, and the religious dignitaries who influence the thoughts and behavior of the relief generation and the old militias even disarmed, use this social and community territorialisation as a weapon to control and deepen, in a better way, the city partitions.

Since 1997, several signs within the city accused this urban fragmentation, in the clothes as well as in the publicity posting, the non-conformity to religious celebrations, even sport has become a new field of confrontation, etc...

Beirut is now, a kaleidoscope city, reflecting a mosaic of different various images but linked together by the strange combination of confessional coexistence going back to several centuries in Lebanon.

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