



From the Nation-State to the Failed-State: The Question of Architectural Representation

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In July 2014, the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (or ISIS) announced itself as a new Islamist “caliphate” while unilaterally declaring statehood across vast territories of the Middle East. The day after their announcement, its members proceeded to demolish religious shrines and mosques of other Islamic sects, seeing them as a threat to their orthodox religious views. Their brutal and ruthless propaganda videos are usually set either against a background of a bare, empty desert (an appeal to the Arabian landscape of the prophet Muhammad’s era) or in a religious setting—in front of the Grand Mosque of Mosul, for example. The Grand Mosque and other backdrops like it were obviously not built by ISIS, but in them they found a properly religious representation. In short, everything is wrong with this picture. What we witness here is what the theologian Mohammad Arkoun has described as the religious ideological confusions of the modern time, where nihilistic (extremist) groups, driven by distorted nostalgia of an identity from distant past, are filling the void created by failed secular nation-states. The architecture of this mosque is, critically, part of this construct.

NATION-STATE

By the mid-twentieth century, the newly liberated and formed states of the Middle East had witnessed a surge in architectural production that was deeply rooted in modernist ideology. Architecture at the time, in the eyes of the State, was meant to construct a national identity for these young nations, with the aim of providing identifiable forms and building types associated with a supposedly unifying and a modernizing society. The nation-states that were carved out of former colonial territories embarked on a political journey, stitching together (within newly established borders) communities and ethnic groups that had loosely coexisted under the decentralized and relatively stable Ottoman Empire. Almost a century later, this project of nation-building has proved to be faulty at best. Far from being a smooth continuum, the process of modernization and secularization of the region was deeply fragmented and incomplete.

In 1928, in Beirut, the Place de l’Etoile became an allegory of this encounter with modernism. As described by the sociologist Samir Khalaf, the radial star

was the most visible instance of grandiose French urban planning superimposed on the old city. The parliament building was located in the square, projecting its legitimacy and instilling a sense of civic identity. However, the star-shaped French urbanism, which was in tension with the religious reality of Lebanon, was amputated at birth. The two eastern arms were obstructed by the presence of three prominent historical religious buildings: a Greek Orthodox Church, a Greek Catholic church, and a historic Islamic shrine. The religious plurality of the newly formed nation, and its architectural representation, stood in the face of the singular, didactic, colonial form of the star.

Almost a century later, the dysfunction of the Lebanese government is mirrored by the political decline of countries throughout the region. Internal conflicts and Western interventionism have instigated failure in civic institutions in many Arab states, undermining the legitimacy of their governments in the eyes of their citizens. The architectural history of this new period remains to be written. With this in mind, the long-standing aspiration for architecture and urbanism to represent a place or a single identity becomes ever more problematic. Yet in the midst of this upheaval, international and local architects in the Arab world continue to be obsessed with the question of identity while simultaneously producing a self-effacing architecture. Typically, the *mashrabiya* screen and other regional architectural clichés are employed as an expedient and convenient representation of what is in fact a complex and dynamic culture. The façade articulation of Jean Nouvel's L'Institut du monde arabe in Paris was perhaps one of the earliest example of this attitude, fixing an Orientalized signifier—the screen, now mechanized and modernized—to a whole culture.

In Lebanon, the reconstruction of downtown Beirut after the end of the civil war in 1990, along with other, similar, large-scale urban developments in the region (namely in the Arab Gulf), exacerbated this condition. For instance, Nouvel's proposed residential tower, with what looks like simulated shrapnel holes scarring its façades (with the random fenestration composition), reinvigorates the cliché image of destroyed buildings during the war. It invokes a catastrophic time all too familiar and mundane to Beirutis. Nearby is the heavily damaged but still-standing Holiday Inn building, a never-occupied modernist slab structure designed by Andre Wongenscky and Maurice Hindie, built in 1975 when the war started. A real relic of the Lebanese war, the building is within walking distance of Nouvel's tower.

The proximity and uncanny visual resemblance between the two structures belies the extreme disparity in what they signify. While one stands as a ghostly carcass of the wonder and potential of the city of Beirut, the other will represent the sure future of the city under a neoliberal, all-exclusive urban agenda dressed to blend in with a still war-riddled context.

Although Nouvel's project is still unrealized, this kind of symbolically charged aesthetics is adopted in the design approach of local architects. The Université Saint-Joseph campus (designed by Youssef Tohme and 109architectes) is located in another area that witnessed fierce battles during the Lebanese war, the Al Mathaf intersection. The project itself has many urban merits in the way it carves out a public space within the campus and organizes the different schools around that void. This, however, became overshadowed by the buildings' obsessive façades' fenestration and fragmentation (supposedly meant to represent the schizophrenic psyche of the Lebanese people in the time of war).

The project that may best epitomize the problematic of contemporary architectural practices in Lebanon in the last decade is Giancarlo de Carlo's residential complex, currently under construction in Beirut. Here, the architect, who seems to have overcompensated for Modernism's perceived anonymity, started his design by sampling and selectively collecting and combining façade elements from Beirut's architectural "heritage." This neoclassical visual bricolage of the façade features of the French Mandate building typology is peculiarly assumed to best represent the diverse communities of the nation today. This typology mushroomed across the city under the French influence of the 1930s, housing the emerging elite class that was installed by the colonizer and long benefited from its domination over the rest of the population.

In all these examples, we see the craving for contemporary practice either to fetishize the recent past through the lens of the supposed permanent trauma of the war or to ignore it altogether in favor of the idealized glory of colonial Lebanon. Both attitudes gloss over the relevance of the modern period, when architecture was believed to carry an agenda of social change and betterment for a state still in the making.

FAILED-STATE

In the 1950s, Lebanon witnessed a boom in well-regulated construction and modernist architectural sensibilities. From the 1960s until the outbreak of civil war in 1975, several canonic modernist buildings were added to the Beirut skyline. The period's modernist optimism is exemplified by the EDL (Electricité du Liban) headquarters by the architect Pierre Nema and CETA, built in the mid-1960s. Towering above a sunken courtyard, the architecture affirmed the political will of the central state to supply power to the nation far into its rural territory. Today, the dilapidated façade, its rundown service systems, and archaic office spaces embody the woeful inadequacies of the electric sector in Lebanon, where power shortages are the norm. Instead, an informal economy of private generators is growing around the city to compensate for power rationing.



Electricité du Liban, CETA, 1962.



Makeshift balcony enclosures on the Yacoubian Building in Beirut.

The weakened central state was supplanted by community-based spatial practices over the years, each responding to specific needs at specific moments. Filling voids in power and governance, these community groups continuously transformed the generic modernist slab building. The face of the city clearly demonstrates this evolution. Water tanks have been added atop apartment buildings (fed by private water trucks, compensating for city water shortages), and balconies have been enclosed with makeshift walls, accommodating the transforming needs of families. With each of these episodes, the state tried to catch up. Futilely, the government has attempted to regulate informal construction, producing unintended negative consequences with a new patchwork of laws. In an attempt to regulate balcony enclosures, for instance, an amendment to the building code in 2004 finally legalized this practice, with the use of one specific folding-glass system. Apartment blocks today, if designed carefully, plan a balcony that is ready to receive the installation of that glass system and internalize forever that outdoor space. The once organic and enriching transformation of the city's façades, made by the initiatives of individuals based on their needs, became an orderly erasure of the city balconies conceived by policy makers and carried out by architects. Now, one of the last remaining semi-public zones in the city may be regulated out of existence.

Left alone, these spatial practices generate a more complex picture (failed-state architecture?), a representation that does not flatten the concept of identity or freeze it in time; instead, they tell the story of the rise and decline of the city of Beirut and the resilience and resourcefulness of its residents during times of war. While contemporary architects continue to fetishize identity (is it Islamic, Arabian, French, Middle-Eastern, Mediterranean, Phoenician?), the city of Beirut (as well as other Arab cities with precarious governments), driven by the lived reality of its spaces, is writing an alternative urban tale, one that perhaps does not ask the question of representation but almost always answers it.

BEIRUT EXHIBITION CENTER

How does one negotiate this environment? How does the architect build in a context in which representation is so overdetermined and the space of the city so wracked with politics? These are questions that, as architects, we have thought much about and have tried to resolve in our office work in Beirut. The civil war created a fracture in Lebanese society between two very different political visions. One territory, however, remained common and shared in use between the two. The trash mountain—a pile of rubble created by both sides at the border of their territories—was located in the sea by the no-man's-land of downtown Beirut, an area that witnessed the fiercest battles. With the end



Beirut Exhibition Center, L.E.F.T, 2014.

of the conflicts in 1990s, the (premodern-era) buildings of supposed historical importance in downtown Beirut were preserved; the rest was destroyed and dumped into the sea, creating a landfill and expanding the growth of the city into the water. The trash-and-rubble island became not only a prime piece of real estate but also a common metaphor among the Lebanese. The destruction of the war literally became the foundation for the new city. Its development, like all development in the city center after the war, was administered by the real estate company Solidere.

A few years ago, Solidere approached our office to design a temporary exhibition center on the landfill. We hoped that there, on this settling rubble pile, we could create architecture in an ever-dynamic state; architecture that would reflect the constantly shifting context at the urban scale, creating a new skyline for the city and housing constantly shifting exhibitions on the inside. In response, we designed a hangar structure wrapped with a custom corrugated mirror aluminum skin. As a reflection, the building becomes the index for the growth of the city in the making around it.

The exhibition center suspends judgment and becomes a placeholder that derives its identity from the broken image of the ever-changing urban context and environment. The mirror cladding refuses shadows in order to accentuate the placeless nature of the building. Working with the topography, the building sits in a pool of water that reflects both building and context into an immaterial state, just like the city that will “become” but “is” not yet.

