

The Politics of Traditional Contemporary Buildings

MARWAN GHANDOUR

American University of Beirut

This paper surveys contemporary Buildings in Lebanon that incorporate traditional Elements, as a way to deconstruct possible meanings of this dominant practice in contemporary Lebanese Architecture. I will start by discussing what is meant by “traditional” in relationship to building activity in Lebanon and what issues do these buildings engage. Then I will move to discuss the production of the Traditional in architectural practice. I will conclude by looking at “traditional” Contemporary buildings as things around which social relations are problematized.

TRADITIONAL

“Tradition” and “traditional” are two terms that are closely related but present different timeframes. Tradition refers to products of the past, but at the same time it is selectively defined by the present. Tradition is historically situated even if what it refers to, at any specific period, does not cover all the historical. May Davie argues that the invention of the concept of *patrimoine* was done during the French mandate period in an attempt to construct a Phoenician Lebanese identity that is different from the Aramean Syrian one.¹ In many ways the subsequent definitions of Lebanese tradition became an endless debate, violently manifested during the Lebanese civil war, which plays a major political role in bringing together or setting apart the diverse socio-religious groups of the Lebanese population. This association between identity and tradition is what makes the discussion on the definition and interpretation of tradition specifically important. Architecture, as a medium, makes these definitions and interpretations ‘permanently’ visible in concrete and stone, thereby, establishing itself as a primary site of manifestation of these debates.

“Traditional”², as compared to “tradition”, is a much more encompassing term as it can refer to historical products as well as contemporary products as long as these products relate to tradition. Its temporal ambiguity confuses—at least through popular terminology—the traditional historical building with the traditional contemporary building. The scope of this paper is to investigate the traditional contemporary buildings, which are selective on two levels—first, they are selective of what to relate to from tradition; second, they are selective of the processes and methodologies of interpretation of tradition. If the definition of tradition is a contemporary reduction of history, the traditional through the process of selection and interpretation of tradition is a reductive contemporary re-presentation of history. In that sense the selection/interpretation process can be seen as a politically mobilized process, actualized in the traditional contemporary buildings—hence, dynamically webbed into the Lebanese social condition.

THE TRADITIONAL CONTEMPORARY BUILDING



Fig. 1. Beirut National Sports Stadium, partial view of ring wall.



Fig. 2. Grand Serail of Beirut, interior court.

In Lebanon, numerous contemporary buildings of different scales and typologies are referred to as Traditional. Buildings commissioned by the state illustrate this attitude; such as the Beirut National Sports Stadium and the celebrated Grand Serail in downtown Beirut. The stadium is contained within a ring of massive stone arcade, mixing "Roman" and "Regional" architectural features. The reconstruction of the Grand Serail was accomplished by 'preserving' the external Late Ottoman façade and constructing the new building within, which includes a court with façades in the "Lebanese" style with a 'touch' of "French landscape". Other examples reflect an attempt to 'recover' buildings of the 1960's and 1970's into the Traditional style, thereby acquiring a better competitive market value; as in the two buildings in Beirut that are recently renovated: a residential block in Jal el Bahr area and the Artisanat building in Ain al Mreisseh area. The modernist concrete façade of the residential block was 'dressed' with pink stone and segmented arches. This transformation proved worthwhile as the 1800 m² duplex in the building was sold shortly after construction for five million U.S. dollars. The Artisanat building, was remodeled by enclosing the open slabs with a massive arcade and covering the original steel structure with gypsum cross vaults. This phenomenon is not restricted to Beirut, but encompasses all of Lebanon even as far as 'irsal—a town in north Beqaa that incorporates buildings with concrete arched cutouts and painted stone simulations.

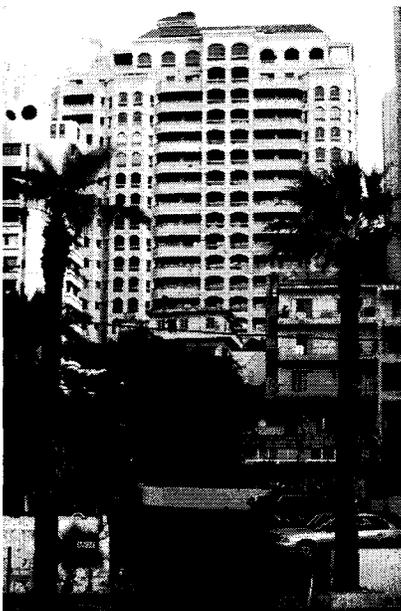


Fig. 3. The renovated residential block in Jal el Bahr..



Fig. 4. Artisanat Libanaise Building, now Café d'Orient, interior during construction.

These buildings, which are spread all over Lebanon, reflect a general interest in architectural motifs that are considered Traditional. The interest encompasses a variety of social groups including local and international intellectuals. Tradition has been internationally acclaimed as a main concern for the unfolding of the *authentic* in local architecture of postcolonial societies. These societies are considered to be stylistically contaminated and overshadowed by Westernized 'modern and international' structures. Such a condition reveals a very strong trend, which is intellectually supported even though its architectural manifestations might not be intellectually approved. I will argue later in this paper that the trend is more alarming than its 'demeaning' manifestations.

THE ARCHITECT AND THE DESIGN PROCESS

Even though buildings generate their own discourse as objects in the social landscape, their forms are largely conditioned by factors existing at the time of their making—namely, the design and construction period. Buildings are already conceived with the production of construction documents where form is codified in drawings, numbers, and text format. The exclusive association of buildings to their architects is a misrepresentation of the process of contemporary architectural practice and is largely the result of the historical (mis)conception of an intimate and personal relationship between the architect as an artist and his/her 'work of art'. The ideas, interests, abstract interpretations, power relationships, and representations that indulge a group of professionals, investors, and users during the design period, are formative aspects of the final designed product.

For the sake of discussion, I will restrict the analysis of the design process to architectural offices that are primarily indulged in commercial building projects. The overwhelming number of these buildings makes them dominant in the built environment with which the general public interacts. Coping with a highly competitive profession with the abundance of architects and engineers, the Lebanese architectural office strives to keep the design cost minimal specifically in commercial building enterprises. The legislative agency determines the initial challenge for the architect and developer, after which any challenge is self-imposed by any of the parties involved in the project development. Given the working conditions of the commercial project in practice, the project team is more likely to privilege the legislative challenge, thus making it a major determinant of the building design process.

The intentions or strategies of the legislative agencies are translated into building laws and codes, which are embodied in the building-permit document submitted by the architectural office. My concern here is in the medium through which the building-permit document ensures the application of laws and codes, and its consequent effect on the built product. The building-permit document consists of drawings and texts that provide a checklist of building law items in the following order: plans ensure proper setbacks, surface exploitation, provision of proper facilities, ventilation and natural lighting; sections ensure minimum floor height and maximum building height; elevation drawings hardly receive any checking as the laws that relate to them are minimal. This document being the only required source of control over the designed building makes it the minimum requirement the design should fulfill. This shifts the concern in a commercial building enterprise from the building to its representations. It is these representations (drawings and texts) that have to make it through the legislative barrier. The design of buildings is eventually the design of a particular set of drawings, each in its own terms, fulfilling its own legally stipulated rules. Given that the building-permit requirements have been relatively consistent and unchanged for decades, it has become typical of the user and client to think in terms of these legal drawings and numbers and expect little more from the architectural office. Thus in the practice of design, buildings can be

considered as representations of their drawings. Drawings are the 'real' physical (also legal) medium around which desires, aspirations and negotiations are performed.

The minimal laws that pertain to the elevation drawing make that drawing a relatively liberal space for two-dimensional experimentation even after the permit is issued and construction starts. Elevation drawings are considered to be the architect's major 'field of expertise'. The façades of Sultan Mohammad al Fateh Mosque and office building—built in Mar Elias area in Beirut in 1992—were developed by the client's representative by using the architect's elevation drawing and sticking photocopies of partial façades taken from Islamic architecture history books, which were either reduced or enlarged to the appropriate scale of the drawing. The photocopies were of buildings, religious and secular, in Cordoba, Damascus, Cairo, and Istanbul.



Fig. 5. Sultan Mohammad al Fateh Mosque and Office Building in Beirut, main façade.

This exercise was done after the concrete structure and floor partitions were finished. This example reflects many aspects of the profession: first, the extent of power that the client might have over the design unless the architect is willing to compromise his/her fees. Second, the extent of liberty that the designer has in altering the elevation as long as that process is two-dimensional, i.e., specific to the elevation drawing and does not affect the plan and the section drawings. Third are the resources that are more likely to be used in such a process, which consist of books that include two-dimensional representations of buildings, be it photographic or drawing representations.

I want to elaborate here on the resources of the architectural office used to design a traditional building. The rising interest among architects of the 1960's in Lebanon to introduce traditional characteristics into modern buildings was paralleled with the introduction of courses in the academic institutions that survey traditional buildings and document them. "Architecture in Lebanon" by Friedrich Raggette, as one of the main references, compiles surveys of traditional residences of the nineteenth century built in stone (and few in mud brick) in the local tradition.³ Even though the book is stylistic in its approach, it was done to bring attention to undocumented buildings that were rapidly vanishing in Lebanon.

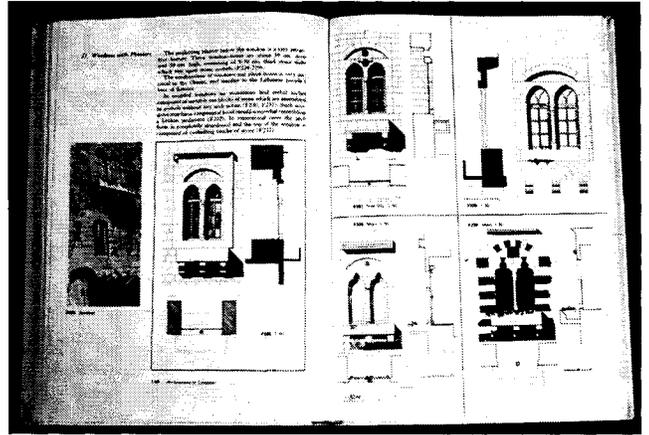


Fig. 6. Pages from Raggette's book "Architecture in Lebanon."

However, restricting the study to the buildings with a complete absence of traditional environments that contained them reduced the understanding of those buildings into autonomous objects. Buildings are represented as plans, complete and partial elevations, sections, and details of openings and special architectural motifs. This study was purely and exclusively concerned with building form. This book and other similar written works usually developed by academic institutions have been very 'useful' in transforming the modernist building block to acquire a traditional elevation. The disintegration of the traditional building into a series of drawings has made it easy for architectural offices to incorporate motifs, elements, and different parts of the traditional building into the modern elevation, thereby ignoring the system that guided their assembly in traditional buildings. While the section and the plan drawing are hardly altered, adhering to the building law requirements, the elevation drawing becomes primarily and exclusively the site of intervention of the Traditional. 'The process is essentially visual'.



Fig. 7. Libano-Francaise Bank in Tripoli.

THE MAKING OF HISTORY

Ray Chow wrote "Watching is theoretically defined as the primary agency of violence, an act that pierces the other, who inhabits the place of the passive victim on display". Based on Fredric Jameson's statement, "The visual is *essentially* pornographic", Chow argues that the "image is what has been devastated, left bare, and left behind by aggression."⁴ Tradition as represented in memory, drawings, and the photograph, is stripped by the visual process into its "naked" image. In that sense, the visual reconstruction of tradition is a construction of its image that has the potential to 'aggressively devastate' tradition as 'other'. Buildings under display in the environment of daily life exhibit those sites of devastation as the contemporary image of the other. Furthermore, tradition as constructed in building, is not only reduced to its image (memory, drawing, and photograph), but it is reproduced as a copy of that image reassembled in the architectural office. Ackbar Abbas argues that the preservation of historical architecture brings forth the disappearance of that architecture. Preservation is seen here as "selective and [an act that] tends to exclude the dirt and pain". In his analysis of the Hong Kong Cultural Center, which he describes as "one of those modernist placeless structures", Abbas refers to an already existing historical clock tower that was incorporated in the design.

*"...the clock tower is seen too easily, and is too quickly assimilated into the overall spatial ensemble (as an instance of "Hong Kong history"). Space is homogenized as "old" and "new", modern and "traditional" are placed together in contiguity and continuity. There is here also a spatial programming and socializing of desire, but it operates through inclusion, and it consists of making us accept, without shock or protest, the most blatant discontinuities as continuities.... Thus it is preservation-as-history, as instant history or as a substitute for history, that brings about the disappearance of history. The function of the clock tower is to make us forget."*⁵

In traditional contemporary buildings, tradition is not only being replaced by its image but by the image's copy, which announces the disappearance of the 'original' image. The new building and the image of tradition are put in continuity through the accommodating surface of the architect's drawing board and unified in the reality of building. Disappearance here is doubled, as the image announces the disappearance of tradition, the architectural office is producing copies that announce the image's disappearance. In such a state of confusion between tradition, its image, and the copy, the associations are wide open where images of local traditions are mixed with images of other traditions on the elevations of modern building blocks. The implication of these architectural objects goes beyond the dynamics of the profession and the scope of the people concerned, it involves the public, the people who are interacting with these buildings as part of their daily life environment.

Contemporary buildings that incorporate traditional elements acquire authority as 'public monuments' that speak of history. Images of these 'monuments' occupy the public visual memory; thus their reproduction becomes part of the quest for the 'authentic' local tradition. The old and new are placed within one discourse on history; they are also placed within one time frame, the contemporary one. The traditional contemporary building gains further advantage over the historical one as it responds to contemporary needs and life standards at the same time keeps the "traditional looks". It is only from this angle that one can understand the public lack of appreciation of the actual traditional environments coupled with a continuous regeneration of historical architectural images in contemporary buildings. In July 1996, the ministry of Culture has frozen 1060 sites of traditional historical buildings to be preserved as the last evidence of the traditional built environments of Beirut. This freezing of sites was confronted with a public uproar that trivialized the importance of those traditional buildings and a refusal of

the property owners to seek solutions that might compensate for their projected financial loss. In effect, the number of frozen sites was reduced to 500, still at the dismay of the property owners.⁶

The existing traditional historical building has lost its status as the exclusive architectural evidence of history among the various new "traditions" that are being constructed. History is disappearing "where disappearance is not a matter of effacement but replacement and substitution, where the perceived change is re-contained through representations that are familiar and plausible."⁷ Traditional contemporary buildings, which are products shaped by private endeavors of professionals and investors, are constructing a history whose products replace historical references. While the architect consumes the image of tradition from memory, drawing, and the photograph to produce a copy, it is the copy that is seen as history. Through the copy "history" is being made now.

TRADITIONAL BUILDINGS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

The Traditional burdens the architectural office with a requirement that goes beyond allowable built up areas and heights, thus, it exceeds the minimum competitive services the average architectural office provides in commercial buildings. Traditional is a requirement that distinguishes the building from the norm, demanding additional monetary investment that translates into a marketable product for the social elite. For the developer, the Traditional is an investment, similar to expensive finishes and imported construction systems that should translate into an elevated market value. The Traditional can be found in buildings commissioned or bought by socially affluent families, politicians, corporations, and the state signifying social status. Within the current working parameters of the architectural office, the revival of tradition in architecture has become an agent of class signification.

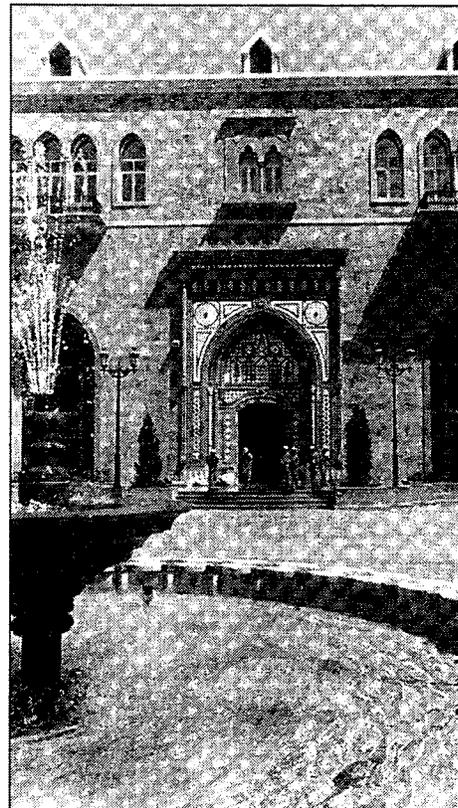


Fig. 8. One of the first published images of the newly constructed Grand Serail in Beirut, the building was described as "Architecture that carries the character of its Age." *An-Nahar* Newspaper, issue no. 20129, 22Aug1998.

While the social elite is demanding traditional forms to signify status, local and western intellectuals are looking for the indigenous in architecture as part of their quest for the 'lost identity' in postcolonial societies. It is a quest that is seen as resisting the increasing normalization of cultures by trying to locate and bring into focus an identity that is blurred. The issue is reduced to "traditionalism" against "Westernism", a polarity that has been existing in the Arab World since the nineteenth century⁸. However, while this polarity remained as part of the local discourse, "traditionalism" gained tremendous energy with the rising international interest in the victimized local as part of the agenda of the postmodern styles and discourse. This is translated in an attitude in which the resurrection of the virgin identity, untouched by modern and colonial discourse, is considered a process of recovery of the local. Architectural discourse of postcolonial societies is predominantly attempting different ways of interpreting or identifying the 'authentic' local identity by positioning the historical building and its images as the principal narrators of that identity. Chow discusses the futility of such attempts when the image remains the subject of the "different kind" of discourse. She writes:

"... one of the most important enterprises nowadays is that of investigating the "subjectivity" of the other-as-oppressed-victim. "Subjectivity" becomes a way to change the defiled image, the stripped image, the image-reduced-to-nakedness, by showing the truth behind/beneath/around it. The problem with reinvention of subjectivity as such is that it tries to combat the politics of the image, a politics that is conducted on surfaces, by a politics of depths, hidden truths, and inner voices. The most important aspect of the image—its power precisely as image and nothing else—is thus bypassed and left untouched."

While tradition is being replaced by its image, it is being discussed and publicized as a national and cultural goal that works to undo the harm done by modernization and colonization. The local individual is tagged by public intellectuals with a deformed identity: an identity that 'lost' its 'original' meaning through historical mutations. Within this context, the discourse on the deformed identity is prioritized over all other issues in public social discourse. Salvation is sought in the past, the home of the traditional, where identity is 'pure'—or rather getting purified through contemporary discourse that transforms it and makes it absolute, "naked". In effect, history is constructed as two opposite poles, 'pre' and 'post' modernization, with a break that is usually attributed to ambiguous forces of modernization—where modernization collapses to colonization and Westernization. Robert Saliba, through his study of the modernization process in colonial architecture in Beirut, shows a variety of attitudes existing among the different sectors of the society that resulted from demographic, intellectual, economic and social changes¹⁰. Such studies, and many others, reflect continuity between the 'pre' and the 'post' where local attitudes of acceptance, compliance, or resistance are formative aspects of the contemporary mentality and identity. Ignoring those aspects from the understanding of history is drawing another image of the individual who is represented, and thus absented, through the various constructions of tradition.

The reduction of identity to the "naked" truth of tradition is, I believe, a comforting way of escaping the complex cultural situation where the 'authentic' (historical, Eastern) and the 'non-authentic' (modern, Western) are inseparable constituents of the individual. Tradition, as such, becomes a constructed myth manifested in images that are correctional in nature that work on repositioning the individual in fabricated (theoretical, historical, cultural, physical) contexts. The individual is the "subject" of the correction process. It is a process that rejects the individual's current social condition and modes of identification

and visualizes him/her as a "subject" to heal rather than to explore. Consequently, the contemporary individual is impaired with a sense of guilt as her identity is seen as a mutation of an identity that was in the distant and 'glorious past'. Contemporary practices, preoccupied with the myth of tradition, are producing environments that alienate the individual as her needs and problems are constructed within a discourse on identity and burdened with an obligation to rectify history. Even though this debate was initiated by intellectual discourse, its complications are actualized as it is adopted in mainstream public social and political discourse. Traditional contemporary buildings which are initiated by significant capital, monitored by Power (be it the state or the wealthy) accessible to a minority, are visible propaganda tools of the indulgence and care of power institutions to the individual and the public. Such a condition is internalized by the public in deferring their needs to allow for the acknowledged urgency of the reformation of their history. A fact that further distances institutions of power from the social subjects who situate their daily concerns as marginal and outside the state current affairs. A condition that is not necessarily triggered by the architectural discourse on the Traditional—but that discourse is definitely one of its principal tools.

NOTES

¹May Davie, "Enjeux et Identités dans la Genèse du Patrimoine Libanais", (paper presented at the Journée d'études; Le Patrimoine Architectural et Urbain au Liban: Pour Qui, Pourquoi, Comment Faire?; Université de Balamand, Institut d'Urbanisme de l'ALBA, Beirut, and Université Française-Rabelais, UMR 6592 du CNRS "URBAMA", Tour).

²As my interest is to understand popular classification of buildings, I use of the word "traditional" in this paper in accordance with Lebanese popular use of the term, rather than its proper linguistic meaning.

³Friedrich Ragette, *Architecture in Lebanon* (New York: Caravan Books, 1980; Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1974). Drawings in the book were done by architecture students at the American University of Beirut as part of the requirements of the course "Regional Architecture".

⁴Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 29.

⁵Akbar Abbas. "Building Hong Kong: From Migrancy to Disappearance"; 3rd "Other Connections" Conference, Building, Dwelling, Drifting: Migrancy and the Limits of Architecture. The same issue is discussed in A. Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

⁶Events and discussions on this subject are found in numerous articles published in Lebanese newspapers and magazines from February '96 to January '98.

⁷Akbar Abbas, *Hong Kong*, p. 8.

⁸Saree Makdisi, "The Empire Renarrated: Season of Migration to the North and the Reinvention of the Present" in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed., P. Williams and L. Chrisman, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). Makdisi wrote that "the debate [between traditionalism and Westernism in the Arab World] has its origins in the nineteenth century, when the ideology of modernity (which sustained the emerging European empires) began to be imposed on Arab social formations, in many cases long before the actual arrival of the European armies." He then mentions Arab intellectuals like Jamal al-Din Afghani and Mohammad Abduh representing "Traditionalism" and, on the other hand, Rifaah al-Tahtawi representing "Westernism".

⁹Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, p. 29.

¹⁰Robert Saliba, *Beirut 1920-1940: Domestic Architecture between Tradition and Modernity* (Beirut: Order of Engineers & Architects, 1998).