

UNLET, UNSOLD, UNUSED BEIRUT.

A RESOURCE FOR THE FUTURE?

Riccardo PEDRAZZOLI

Visiting Faculty, Lebanese American University. riccardo.pedrazzoli@lau.edu.lb

If thrown in the sea, Beirut would float: it is rather unusual, indeed, to find a comparably widespread and varied amount of unlet and unsold spaces condensed in a sole city.

There are vacant skyscrapers and residences with the lights permanently on, as if they were up all night waiting for someone to come home.

Solidère's downtown looks like one of those fake cities in cinema studios, with its actual boutiques and cafes on the ground floors and just backdrops above.

In the new expansion onto the sea there are streets, traffic lights and crosswalks but no buildings, so that the passersby experience the surreal sensation of walking among the ghosts of unborn palaces. However, even though Beirut is definitely an eloquent gallery of the



Figure 1

consequences of a real estate bubble, the peculiarity of its case does not reside in the amount of new vacant buildings, but rather in the amount of old ones.

In all the cities of the world there are a few inexplicably abandoned buildings, since everywhere in the world there are their siblings arguing, property seizures for bankruptcy, refurbishment projects blocked by bureaucracy.

Elsewhere though, vacant buildings are exceptions, isolated deadlocks in an otherwise active and reactive market, instances of folklore that automatically generate legends about ghost hauntings and other creepy stories to justify the ruin.

In Beirut instead, vacant buildings are not only a consistent part of the townscape, especially in some neighborhoods, but they are also so common, and their vision is so rooted in the collective imagination, that they raise almost no curiosity in the inhabitants.

Some of these relics, due to their story, their size, or their oddity, are now renowned landmarks.

Enchanting urban villas whose owners fled the city and never came back, elegant towers under construction at the time that remained frozen in their unfinished state, riddled hotels, never-used stations, boned movie theatres... Decadent icons, symbols of a forgotten civilization, attracting cameras, pens and moleskins since decades.

However, the large majority of this disowned heritage consists, more simply, of decent apartment blocks built between the French mandate years and the beginning of the hostilities.

From a strictly pragmatic perspective, it is impressive to see such an amount of square meters rotting, when they would be easily marketable after an appropriate restoration. From a less prosaic point of view instead, it is heartbreaking to contemplate the state of dilapidation of what should be considered cultural heritage.

Since a few years, a fierce front of keen and conscientious people raised its voice to defend the neglected treasures of Lebanese modern architecture. A commendable uprising, but still too focused, however, on isolated cases.

Many now sing the praises of the buildings by Joseph Philippe Karam, Khalil Khoury or Karol Schayer; fewer seem to have a full awareness of the fact that the modern soul of Beirut is much more. A coherent whole, made of a myriad of fascinating buildings designed by an army of unknown professionals, perhaps less engagés, maybe driven by a shared praxis rather than a conscious architectural poetics, but still capable of a distinctive and often surprisingly high quality design output.

More generally, Beirut is a very peculiar specimen of a twentieth-century city. It grew from town to metropolis in forty years without an urban plan, so that the local

dialects of modern architecture incarnated in a non-modern urban structure, adapting to oddly-shaped lots and steep orographic situations, always in search of a maximum exploitation of the disposable surface.

The result has been a dense and functionally variegated urban fabric encouraging street life, social interaction and cultural integration. Only the almost total absence of public transportation and green spaces (technically not unresolvable problems) compromises what could virtually be a fitting example of the compact city-model, as well as a fascinating synthesis of the Camillo Sitte-theories and the International Style-myths.

Nevertheless, this underrated patrimony is nowadays congenitally threatened by the combination of the irresistible hunger of the bubble and the irresponsible past choices of the public administration.

The progressive increase of the exploitation potentiality granted in the last decades, in fact, made the building typologies of the modern fabric no longer convenient in a maximum payback perspective.

In short, the owners know that, once tenants are evacuated and demolition permit is obtained, they could level the existing edifice and build a considerably bigger volume that is up to ten times more profitable.

It is not unusual that agents of the developers knock at the doors of citizens asking them to give up their apartments in the existing building in exchange for a much bigger one in the skyscraper that will take its place. And that is why, alongside the entirely abandoned buildings, there are many others only partially vacant, revealing ongoing attempts of full evacuation impeded by the obstinacy of some occupants.

Therefore, if a large part of the modern fabric survived intact until today it is thanks to family disputes, recalcitrant tenants and, above all, to the responsible soul of the bureaucratic machine.

Since 2010, indeed, all the demolition permits, also for non-classified buildings, must be approved by the General Directorate for Antiquities, an organ of the Ministry of Culture that patiently strives to obstruct the devastation. The passive resistance though cannot be sustainable in the long term. This disquietingly precarious situation can be cleared up only through a courageous and forward-thinking intervention in the legislative framework and, since the rights granted in the past can not be renegotiated, the only practicable way would be a realistic policy of equalization.

The GDA developed, almost twenty years ago, a feasible and intelligent proposal in this sense: basically, in exchange for not demolishing the existing built mass, the owner could transfer the residual development potentiality to another site, or also to somebody else.

On the basis of a mapping campaign, the buildings of the modern fabric would be subdivided into several categories suitable for differently conservative

approaches. Simultaneously, specific zones of the urban territory would be designated as an intensive exploitation zone, generating the necessary outlet for the relocated potentiality.

The proposal has been submitted to parliament several times and, until now, was always rejected. Recently, though, there have been encouraging signs of openness.

In case it would finally turn into a law, this reform will represent a crucial stance by the Lebanese *res publica* for at least two reasons.

First of all, a tutelage addressed not just at single remarkable objects but rather at a widely distributed heritage would ratify an unprecedented commitment by the state in defense of a shared environmental quality and, even more remarkable, in defense of a shared identity.

Secondly, even if only for the fact of affecting such a vast situation, the new norm will indirectly earn the scale of an urban planning action, creating the premises for a long-awaited programmatic design of Beirut's future evolution.



Figure 2

Notwithstanding this, however, to limit the destructive tendency of the investors on the mere base of a fair counteroffer would still sound somehow as a "gently coercive" action. Private stakeholders would probably hail the initiative positively, just because of the offered compensation, but they would not comprehend (and mind) the intents at its base.

What is intended as an encouragement to refurbish the preexisting buildings could be freely interpreted as a purely quantitative and non-qualitative issue.

Hence, a regimentation of the private initiative "from above", even if virtuous in its intentions, will not be effective in absence of a parallel communicative action aiming to achieve a wide recognition by the public opinion of the cultural, historical and documentary value of this distributed architectural heritage of the twentieth century.

Indeed, what is really singular in way Beirut is perceived by its own inhabitants is the almost unanimous disregard towards the intrinsic historical value of the modern fabric.

Most citizens cry at the demolition of a triple-arched house, mourning the loss of a not well defined romantic past. Many approve with satisfaction the new glass towers, that mushroom on the skyline and strengthen, day after day, the postcard of a third millennium metropolis. Few seem to be proud instead of the architectural vestiges of the true heydays of Beirut.

The iconography of swinging prewar Lebanon implies Sabah, Fayrouz, Don Pepe Abed, some old posters of the Festival of Baalbek and a handful of old photos in Ektachrome depicting crowds of beehive-haired ladies and tarboosh and moustaches-wearing old men roaming among polished trams and flowerbeds in bloom.

The architectural scenery that framed that radiant Lebanon is mostly still in place, but the majority of the population sees it merely as "old dusty stuff".

It is a contradiction, even when seen from a prosaic, profit-oriented point of view. There are old theatres and venues, closed for decades, that in Europe would raise an enthusiastic hysteria, while here they are sadly waiting to be turned into malls or clothes boutiques. And it is not rare to witness the paradoxical scene of marvelous shops that seem to have emerged from a time machine being obliterated to make room for fake-old hipster bars.

If public opinion is not made cognizant of the goldmine it is sitting on, any attempt to preserve this patrimony will be a frustrating effort that has to go against the current.

In light of this all, the case of unused buildings could and should be seen as a precious opportunity to instigate, in one fell swoop, a wider process of reevaluating modern heritage within a coherent and aware framework.

If the law proposed by the GDA were to be approved, plenty of impasse situations would witness a sudden breakthrough, resulting in an impromptu wave of renovation works.

It would be fundamental to supervise and influence this delicate phase through an awareness campaign and an advising service, promoting coherent restoration as a good practice and popularizing its results to encourage a process of emulation.

This is a ponderous operation, one that would require the involvement of universities and associations fielding their know-how and their scientific interest, in addition to a necessary and committed patronage by the government.



Figure 3

However, the key factor for the success of the whole initiative would be the prefiguration, and then the promotion, of the marketability of restored modern heritage. The contextualization of single architectural objects in an official and certified listing and their recognition as part of a valuable heritage should be strongly advertised to the public, from potential investors to future customers, making the restoration an economically attractive option, worth an adequate investment.

There should be media coverage, involvement in touristic promotion, visibility and support from abroad.

In short, the redevelopment plan should be envisioned as an authentic urban marketing operation. It might appear trivial, but the catchphrase should sound like "modern Beirut is cool", or something similar.

The gentrification hazard will be, unavoidably, present, but it could be outflanked by including historical commercial activities in the intrinsic value of the buildings, as well as by granting the residual old tenants the right to stay, since restoration works would not necessarily imply their evacuation.

Past experience, in this case, should have taught us a lot.

Not necessarily, though, only in a negative sense. Indeed, paradoxically, the hopefully imminent rediscovery of modern heritage could also treasure the

most controversial project of postwar Lebanon. While it is awkward to say, Solidère has been the sole large project of the postwar era to deal with the theme of publicly accessible space, the only one (unbelievably) to include pedestrian areas and the sole project, that is the issue, centered on the communicative power of heritage intended as an environment, rather than as a catalogue.

Solidère has been, as is widely acknowledged, a failure from many points of view, but there is the risk that the vivid memory of its failure ostracizes tout court the crucial aspect of commercial sustainability from the debate on the rescue of the modern heritage.

The Lebanese are smart, modern Beirut is a treasure.

It is just an issue of matching the two factors.

FIGURES

Figure 1. An empty building in Ain el Tineh

Figure 2. An evacuated building in Hamra

Figure 3. An uncommon example of recently restored modern building, side by side with a completely vacant one in Snoubra

CREDITS

Precious contributions to this article have come from conversations I have had with Sarkis Khoury (General Director) and Khaled Rifai (Architect-in-Chief of the Department of Monuments) of the General Directorate for Antiquities, who explained to me the mission, the philosophy and the recent initiatives of the organ they represent, and Walid Moussa, President of the Real Estate Syndicate of Lebanon, who offered me an overview of the Beirut market and gave me, at the beginning of my path, crucial advice on how to go forward with my research.

AUTHOR

Riccardo PEDRAZZOLI is an Italian architect and interior designer. He studied at the Department of Architecture of Ferrara University, and at the Chalmers Tekniska Högskola of Gothenburg (Sweden). He graduated in 2004 and worked as a freelance designer prior to founding the Bologna-based studio MIRO in 2009. The office, which is also active in China and the Middle East, combines a solid experience in the field of interior design with wider-range interests, attested by its constant participation in architectural competitions. From 2005 to 2015 he taught Architectural Design at Ferrara University. He has also tutored and lectured in several architecture and urban planning workshops in Italy, Austria, Turkey, India, and Iran. Since 2016 he is a visiting professor at the Lebanese American University.