

THE UN-BUILT LEBANON

FROM A ROMANTIC GAZE TO JUST DEFERRED URBANIZATION (AND BACK AGAIN)?

Michael F. DAVIE

Department of Geography, University of Tours (France)
and CNRS-UMR « Espace, Nature et Culture », Paris

From the moment Lebanon comes into view through the plane's window, the visitor cannot but wonder, or shudder, at the very high density of the country's urban spaces. Everything seems to be built up, with hardly a plot of land left open; open space is rare, usually in a very sorry state of abandonment—even the seafront is almost everywhere visually absent. While this urban filling-in is commonplace elsewhere in the World, it does pose a series of questions in a country, which was lauded as an island of greenery and natural beauty nestled in the vast, barren, and monotonous Middle East, to the point of becoming a tourist cliché. One could expect that natural landscapes would be ingrained in the country's identity, and that its citizens would relate to views with intense pride.

After all, the Cedars of Lebanon are mentioned 12 times in the Bible, and in the 64 times the word 'Lebanon' is used, many verses refer to its beauty, while the country's very name is claimed to be linked to the snow-capped mountains. 'Lebanon' and 'unspoilt nature' seem to go together and the metaphorical visitor expects to see 'pure' scenery everywhere, from the deep-blue Mediterranean through the dark green pine forests up to the immaculate white snow-clad mountain summits (Brown J.P. 1969; Freyha A. 1972; Wardini É. 2001). 'Lebanon' and 'unspoilt nature' seem to go together and the metaphorical visitor expects to see 'pure' scenery everywhere, from the deep-blue Mediterranean through the dark green pine forests up to the immaculate white snow-clad mountain summits. Everywhere, only faint signs of the built-up should be seen, ideally limited to quaint villages placed in improbable places in steep valleys. Human activity, such as agriculture, would be almost indistinguishable from the natural landscape; the country's population would be the manifestation of this special relationship between Nature and the spiritual, or even with the divine, a 'message' (Hager A. 2017). The un-built, the 'natural' would be a central topos, an obvious synonym of Lebanon.

'BUILT', 'UN-BUILT', SPACE AND PLACE

But identifying, conceptualising and locating the 'un-built' is no easy task in the Social sciences, as all the words or notions used, from 'space' to 'built', 'territory' or 'landscape' are semantically polymorph and chaotic (Bertrand G. 1978). The 'un-built' is quintessentially inseparable from the built, as one side of a sheet of paper cannot be detached from the other. The word says nothing about the fact itself; it just states its negation—that this particular space is not built, with the latter apparently being the norm—while nothing is known about its current physical state, function or future. The only clear statement is that the un-built can be located, as it's a different objective reality from the built. To make a parallel with linguistics, 'just as the word, for Saussure, is the union of a concept with a delimited 'chunk' of sound, so the place is the union of a symbolic meaning with a delimited block of the earth's surface. Spatial differentiation implies spatial segmentation.' (Ingold T. 1993) The only clear statement is that the un-built can be located, as it has a different objective reality from the built, and we're used to the idea of un-built space as a sort of neutral backdrop, the scene where things happen. Geographers study what humans do to this backdrop, identifying organizational spaces, networks, relationships of power stakes, that all produce 'real' spaces, those of everyday life, those that we use, like or hate. What do architects do? They conceive, plan and build on 'empty' space, leftover, useless or made 'free' by the destruction of once-built spaces. Urban planners organize the whole show and try to adapt laws and by-laws, with differing degrees of success. Landscape specialists try to give some semblance of sense and of aesthetic value to space, while all the Social sciences try to understand who does what, why and where. But the key word is 'built', not the un-built. The 'built' would be space produced by the hand of Man, a thing manifestly unlike natural processes, although both are deeply loaded with symbolic meaning.

This spatial division implies (wrongly) that only built space is a product of human activity. But as all space is a social product (Lefebvre H. 1974) 'natural' space is also part of the human experience through its gaze. The 'un-built' is as much a social construct as the 'built', even though our representations are quite different: historically, the 'un-built' is the ideal landscape perceived through our culturally-biased eyes, being even the essential component of a landscape. However, the dichotomy between the two is fallacious, as both are perpetually under construction: the 'un-built' (in Lebanon or elsewhere) makes sense only when it corresponds to our pre-conceived image, and is 'finished' when it is in conformity with this image produced by a specific society at a precise moment in time. Ingold neatly explains this terminological difficulty: 'So the thing itself and its image are expressed by the same concept. [...] Whereas space and environment are more or less physical and abstract

concepts, the concept of landscape is cultural and more concrete: it is nature or space perceived and totalized by man. Thus, landscape belongs neither to nature nor to culture, but it is rather their mediation or alliance. Landscape is nature domesticated and appropriated by man. [...] Landscape is nature and culture at the same time, it is their mediation, synthesis or alliance.' (Ingold T. 1997) The un-built is thus partially natural and cultural: the forests of Mount-Lebanon are in fact just abandoned agricultural terraces recolonized by pine-trees, and many un-built and vegetation-free valley slopes were once covered by agriculture, while whole villages lie buried under thick sediments, to the joy of archaeologists.

Being appropriated by man, the un-built has commercial, aesthetic or symbolic value, and can also be part of larger geopolitical stakes. We can state, with Mitchell, that the un-built, just as landscape, 'is a medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and other. As such, it is like money: good for nothing in itself, but expressive of a potentially limitless reserve of value. Like money, landscape is social hieroglyph that conceals the actual basis of its value. It does so by naturalizing its conventions and conventionalizing its nature. Landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both a represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package.' (Mitchell W. J. T. 2002) Through having value, the un-built becomes a central topos in the narrative on the topography of capitalism through the landscape it produces. 'The landscape tells—or rather is—a story. It enfolds the lives and times of predecessors who, over the generations, have moved around in it and played their part in its formation. To perceive the landscape is therefore to carry out an act of remembrance, and remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past.' (Ingold T. 1993). The landscape is thus the territory of ghosts (Blanco M. del P. et Peeren E. 2013; Mills S. 2013; Nagle J. 2017) The un-built can thus 'the homeland of thoughts' (Merleau-Ponty M. 1945), the locus of many-layered meanings which require fine-tuned geographical methodologies, not least a humanistic approach (Cosgrove D. 1989; Tuan Y.-F. 1977, 1974, 1976), or a *pensée complexe* (Morin E. 1990). And, of course, the un-built has a cacophony of meanings, of constructions of meaning, of memory and stakes, all leading to the invention of tradition (Hobsbawm E.J. et Ranger T.O. 1983) and heritage. Space, and especially place, is just congealed time at the crossroads of the production of riches, emotions, values, beliefs and power (Cresswell T. 2015). Briefly then, space has value through its other values: symbolic, un-measurable, and unexplainable intimate ones, which are essential to forging the identities and cultures of each and everyone of us. As for the concept of 'culture', it can be reduced to what people do, and the traces they leave behind in a conscious or unintended way, producing forms of

space and place. This means that what we do, the way we act and move, how we produce place and space, are all social constructs, inherited from a long series of actions and reactions, of habits and constraints, of norms which we accept or refuse, and which are produced by ourselves, by our immediate social environment, and also by actors in a position of power. Space, now a 'place'—is the space that has, or makes, sense—and which we recognize and identify ourselves to. It's central to identity, to the degree of interaction with others. We claim to be part of those who think and act like ourselves, we share a common idea of ourselves; we are part of a community—an imagined community, of course. This, in turn, allows us to project ourselves into the past, and identify objects, spaces, or landscapes, which are 'part of us', our heritage. And, as we are different from those who do not share our values, then their heritage and history must be different from ours. Being unlike them, they are excluded from our frames of reference. Interestingly, these very frames are often defined by the State and imposed on the population through education—the role of history classes cannot be minimized. The end result is the creation of the citizen who should ideally and wholeheartedly adhere to the ideology of the Nation or the State. So, heritage, invented communities, and cultural values all relate; but they must have some form of material visibility. This brings us back to the question of the un-built, to its very existence and to its cultural value.

Finally, and just to complicate further the meanings of the word, 'un-built' is the past of to un-build, i.e. to demolish. Are un-built spaces just those that have been reduced to rubble? But were all 'un-built' spaces once built?

This paper examines the way the spaces of the un-built in Lebanon have been represented, by both Lebanese and foreign observers, between the beginning of the 19th century and today. As stated above, the 'un-built' is just the product of a particular gaze by individuals or by society on part of the landscape. It postulates that space was once natural, untouched by humans, and as time passed, this natural environment was progressively transformed into a wholly artificial one. Only small islands or oases were left behind, and these now constitute the craved-for 'un-built'. This narrative has a history, that of a product of the West's late-18th century *Weltanschauung*; in Lebanon, it was both adopted and adapted, to be replaced in the 20th century by partially overlapping capitalist and postmodern narratives. Briefly, the first period can be placed between the middle of the 19th century and the last years of the French Mandate; the second spanned the first 25 years of the country's independence and the Lebanese civil war, while the third can be placed between the 1990s and today. Differentiated according to scale, each period gave diverse values to both built and un-built spaces.

THE UN-BUILT AND ROMANTIC LEBANON

Exported to Lebanon, the way of looking at its space is very clearly romantic, in the sense given to the 18th and 19th century western literary and artistic current. It refers to scenes of unspoiled nature, to the mountains and valleys barely touched by human activities, a sort of a-historical scene of Man and Nature living in idyllic harmony, the crucible of the authentic Lebanese national identity. The Lebanese would be moulded by this majestic space located between the white snowy uplands and the blue Mediterranean Sea. In all cases, the villages (i.e. the rural 'built') were portrayed as being in perfect symbiosis with Nature, while the cities were pushed into the side-lines; there, life was dirty, corrupting, and degrading, just as those in Europe's Industrial revolution. The West, in fact, had created and imposed on all its own definitions (i.e. the 'romantic') and geography through its technological apparatus, while, clearly, there is no starting point for the existence of a particular landscape. But suddenly, Lebanon was aesthetically beautiful, a unique piece of land between the sea and the desert, the only mountain between the Mediterranean and Turkey and Persia. This aesthetic experience was further popularised through the recently invented fashion of the 'Grand Tour', which all well-educated persons had to ritually accomplish once in their lifetimes. To visit Lebanon was to observe, in situ, where history had taken place: the Cedars and Solomon's temple, the miracle at Cana, the myth of Adonis, the legend of Saint George, Alexander the Great and the siege of Tyre, the Roman empire, the Phoenicians, Jonas and the whale, Saint Paul and Beirut, the Crusades, etc. These descriptions were followed by paintings or engravings highlighting an escape from the cluttered towns and cities (de Laborde L. 1837; Musée Nicolas Sursok 2013; The British Lebanese Association 1986), and thanks to the new medium of photography, an exotic vision of the Orient was popularized (Debbas F. 1994, 1996; Debbas F.C. 2001). This clearly orientalist model produced an imagined landscape and population that never existed. In Western eyes, the Lebanon (reduced here to its mountains) was un-built and pure, in direct contrast with the coastal cities or with the semi-desert interior and its caravan hubs. In fact, the West's *Zeitgeist* had invented the Orient and the Mediterranean according to its own set of values, fears, desires and dreams. (Cohen W.I. 1983; Garcia-Ramón M.D., Kirby A., Luna A.[et al.] 2004; Said E.W. 1979; Bourguet M.-N., Lepetit B. et Nordman D. 1998).

Progressively, through the usual acculturation processes, even the Levant's local inhabitants were drawn into this romantic framework: at the very local scale, the gardens—the un-built—that surrounded the new Beirut 'three arched house' were a variation on the theme of unspoiled Nature. Here, the local bourgeoisie adopted the Western aesthetic norms for the new residential quarters and very clearly rejected the local, 'traditional' architecture (Davie M.F. 2003, 2016; Khater A. 2003; Mollenhauer A. 2003, 2002; Davie M. F. 2003; Hauser

J., Lindner C. B. et Möller E. 2016). It was as if the outward movement from Beirut's historical centre towards the agricultural periphery required metaphorically taming this un-built space in order to incorporate it into the bourgeoisie's values. The modernized city thus became the epitome of civilization—with undertones of being a *civitas*—with the outside natural environment slowly becoming associated to being 'wild' and possibly 'dangerous'. Simultaneously, this same class also adopted the West's romantic gaze on the sea and the mountains: the three-arched house opened up to the North and the sea, and the mountains were always visible from the balcony. Arabic-language literature also followed suit, presenting the rural parts of the country to an interested public. Relayed by foreign schools, the West's regime of truth, anchored in the Enlightenment (Clement V. 2017) and relayed by the *Nahda*, despised the un-built as being economically 'useless' and 'primitive', requiring investment by modern capitalism to make it 'civilized', 'developed' and profitable.

In turn, the descriptions fed the nation's self-depiction, and consolidated the local nationalism and nationalist ideologies: the French Mandate and Lebanese Republic flag showing the mountain cedar is a case in point. Also, how better to describe a Lebanese on his way to the *mahjar*, as a courageous peasant who had left behind the terraces, orchards and forests close to the snow-capped summits? Writing back to relatives left behind, he (or she) would lament this loss of the familiar, ancestral, landscape; his wish would be to be buried in the space he loved contemplating in his youth.

Briefly then, the new local economic and power structures that emerged at the end of the 19th century (the *Nahda* and the *Tanzimât*s, the inclusion of the Levant into capitalism's sphere) adopted the West's gaze on the un-built, further confirming that Lebanon was 'different' from the other spaces around it. This was instrumental in identifying the particularities necessary for the invention of new countries at the end of the First World War. Lebanon being unique by its landscapes, it was obviously a different country from its neighbours, justifying new *ex nihilo* frontiers—the Lebanese un-built could not be compared to the Syrian desert, nor to the plains and hills of Palestine. The country could now be politically detached from its historical environment by European powers that had imposed a different gaze on its space. Being different, Lebanon was also transformed into a tourist destination, especially during the Mandate: innumerable postcards and photographs were taken of the un-built parts of the country, and colonial literature is replete with descriptions of the Cedars, of hidden valleys and of their secretive but proud populations; in a sense, this Romantic vision continued well into the 20th century. Built-up Beirut was given only glancing attention.

Perhaps this turning point paradoxically saved the villages in the rural parts of the country: they became active only during the summer, with visits by the descendants of the *muhājirīn*, who craved for a 'return' to 'traditional cultural

values'. They re-invented the village and its identity (Khater A. 2001 ; Hourani A. et Shehadi N. 1992), and glorified the landscape in poems, songs and literature. It became a marketing asset, a sort of branding of Lebanon. The un-built was the core of the country's projected identity, and this pleased both the new local tourist industry and the new political élite.

These same cultural values were central in consolidating a sort of consensual national identity in the face of regional or of international ideologies. Between the late 1930s and the early 1950s, its cultural values were stated as not being identical to those of the wider Arab nation, nor could they be merged into narrower nationalistic ones. Surely, neither Palestinian nationalism, nor the pan-Arab or Greater Syria ideologies could have any points in common with the Lebanese identity.

THE UN-BUILT AND THE DRIVE TO MODERNITY

The major change in this romantic depiction of Lebanon occurred just after the country's independence and it's rapid integration into the new post-WW2 economy dominated by the USA. Suddenly space, and especially the un-built, was no longer just the frame for an idealized Lebanese identity, but instead had real material value. The un-built was postulated as antagonistic to modernity, and space was part and parcel of the technical aim of placing Lebanon among the developed countries. This modernity was based in the cities, and primarily in Beirut, which had to be urbanised, 'filled in' and criss-crossed by roads and communication infrastructures. New residential quarters with high-rise buildings became the obvious norm, both in the city's municipal limits and its once-rural suburbs, and the tamed nature of the private gardens of the 'three-arched-house' to be replaced by concrete. The more un-built space was filled in, the more modern the country would be, a trend encouraged by both the Point 5 and IRFED plans (Institut de recherche et de formation en vue du développement 1963a, 1963b, Malsagne S. 2002, 2011).

At this point in history, 'un-built' meant only land waiting to be built, in a form of dialectical relationship. To build, to fill in the gaps, to uproot forests and level hilltops meant being part of the developed World; to work the land as a peasant meant being hopelessly in the past.

During this same post-Independence period, maps were central to the identification of the un-built parts of Lebanon; they were vital in building a discourse on the usefulness and profitability of space (Edney M.H. 1997 ; Goren H. 2000 ; Jacob C. 1992 ; Bord J.-P. et Baduel P. R. 2004). They pursued capitalism's vision of the world through colonial forms of control of independent countries (Césaire A. 1950 ; Deprest F. 2014 ; Singaravélou P. 2011). The un-built belonged to the 'white spaces' on the map that had to be erased and included in 'normal' space.

At this moment, nostalgia slid in with a longing for the romantic, now lost, Lebanon: Fayrouz sang *Lubnan al-Akhdar* or *Hkili hkili 'an baladi*, and village life and rural personæ were popularised in operettas and TV series (Stone C.R. 2008, 2014). Even the cinema took up this topic, such as *Nasser's Ila 'ayn?* (Davie D.F. et Davie M.F. 2017 ; Koteit G. 2017), edging close to a melancholic local *saudade*. Another tilting-point can be identified during and the Lebanese war (1975-1990). With the destruction of parts of Beirut and with the spreading of insecurity, the un-built parts of the country suddenly became strategically important—they were 'safe'. The coast between Beirut and Jbail absorbed populations from all parts of the mountain (Davie M.F. 1994); Tripoli spread into the Koura; Chtaura extended to Masnaa; Saida covered the overlooking hills; the olive groves close to Choueifat disappeared and were replaced by completely new residential quarters collectively named 'Dâhiyé'. Even forgotten villages in the Akkar or the Jabal Aamel spread uncontrolled. New University campuses and gated communities sprung up everywhere, the further from the cities, the safer. Un-built space was just merchandise, bought, sold or stolen, transformed and remodelled according to the labyrinthine whims of pure capitalistic offer and demand. Un-built space could have no other value, be it symbolic or emotional, while built space signified facts on the ground, 'we are here to stay', 'this is now ours' it seem to state. Put otherwise, the built expressed power and privilege, with the flip side of exploitation and domination being the un-built; the un-built was a sort of island, which could potentially be used by the dangerous Other. By metaphorically 'filling in' the island, the enemy could no longer be within; the un-built, even in this context, is perceived as un-natural, un-desirable, un-healthy and dangerous. This process of building the un-built continued well after the official end of the war, unchecked and uncontrollable, producing an amorphous dystopia inhabited by a disorientated population, but paradoxically confined to clearly delimited religious or ethnic territories.

THE UN-BUILT AND A YEARNED ROMANTIC RETURN TO THE PAST

But it was in the post-war years that a new attitude emerged. With the questioning of once clear political, religious, spatial and cultural identities imposed by the war, with the uprooting and forced internal migrations of populations of whole areas, the question of the value of un-built space was posed. What national or local identities could be maintained or created in a built (and in an un-planned) environment? Could individuals, groups or communities live without some form of romantic space linked to myths surrounding their origins? Granted, all communities are imagined; but what would Lebanon represent to the Lebanese if the un-built was pockmarked by untidy and free-for-all urbanization? How could the

past be used to explain the present if no past (the rural or 'natural' Lebanon) was visible? With the coast now completely built up, with the mountain scarred by large residential complexes and huge gated leisure complexes planned for the upper mountains, with every valley now marked by multi-storey buildings and the forests already planned for future housing projects, the un-built has become a prized commodity. The un-built plots in cities, towns and villages are reduced to parking lots or garbage dumps, while whole non *ædificandi* areas are mysteriously built over thanks to complacent politicians and unscrupulous architects. Only the powerful now have access to the view of the un-built, as the gated and defended built rise ever higher, especially in the capital: *Sama' Bayrou't* reaches for the un-built sky, the next horizon, while those living near ground-level zero are forced to exist in a panoptical dense space ordered by full-spectral surveillance domination. The built and the un-built all point to forms of power imposed on space

In this self-doubting moment, postmodern attitudes have emerged: NGOs have sprouted in defence of forests, of national parks, of natural environments, of beaches, of views. Nature is 'rediscovered' by hiking groups, while the questions of rural and natural heritage are put forward and forcefully defended by new political groups as vital for the political, social and economic survival of the country; nature and images of nature are valued (Debarbieux B. 1996).

The destroyers of forests, the builders of visual scabs are named and shamed, irrespective of their political or religious affiliation. Suddenly, the un-built is more valuable than its commercial value: the country's identity (or distinctness) requires protection, attention and re-enchantment (Kitson J. et McHugh K. 2015), and even the question of gender has invited itself into the debate: the perceptions by women of the value of the un-built differ from those of men's, and various social or religious minorities have also expressed their position on the matter.

The un-built seems to indicate a vital need for some form of freedom, of a return to normalcy, to a redefined, convivial, stable and timeless but complex and multilayered, Lebanon. What buildings do (Gieryn T.F. 2002) is mirrored by what their absence can do. The un-built is becoming the 'place of condensation of the nation' (Debarbieux B. 2010), with a romantic Lebanon 2.0 presented as both trendy and strategic for the country's survival. In a sense, the un-built relates to the ghosts of the past that force all to reconsider the past (Maddern J.F. et Adey P. 2008 ; Matless D. 2008 ; Nagle J. 2017 ; von Hirschhausen B. 2017) in a struggle against amnesia. The un-built is evolving into the unbuildable (Harbison R. 1991) and through these notions, new forms of empowerment—and thus of democracy—have crystallized, questioning the undisputed race to 'modernity' and urban sprawl, both of which have lead the country to disaster. Perhaps a new breed of citizen has been born, unless, of course, 'landscape' and the

un-built are just newer profitable items for the oligarchs in control of the country's neoliberal economy.

CONCLUSION

The un-built, just as the built, expresses 'relations of power and discipline [...] inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life... human geographies become filled with politics and ideology.' (Soja E.W. 1989). What we look at as being just empty space is in fact loaded with significance: it can only exist if it combines material form, performance and affect (Duff C. 2017), immanence and memory (Jones O. 2011). The un-built exists only in the eye of the beholder; it has value and meaning only in a particular moment in time, either in the short term or in the longue durée, and under particular social, political and economic contexts. Should the un-built in Lebanon be protected because of its position in memory, heritage or nostalgia, or should it be an asset, a key element in the quest for modernity and progress through the invisible hand of the economy? In this struggle between actors, the un-built is clearly a geopolitical object, forcing a debate around democratic values and shared futures, and very far from simple aesthetic considerations. The un-built simply makes visible the very complex crises Lebanon has (and still is) going through (Davie M.F. 2018).

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of nostalgia whispers enchantments, engendering attentiveness to what is near, to sensing closely. Nostalgic practice, performance, and materiality give rise to an everyday aesthetic of pastness, an embodied ethics of care rather than strict adherence to historic preservation codes and guidelines. We contribute to rethinking nostalgia and residential historic preservation as modes of sensing in which all bodies, objects, and things – human–nonhuman, animate–inanimate – have capacities to affect and to be affected.

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AUTHOR

Michael DAVIE is currently Professor of Geography at the University of Tours in France, and researcher at the UMR-CNRS unit "Espace, Nature et Culture" at the Paris-4 Sorbonne University. His current research is on the spatial identities of various urban groups in the Middle East. Heritage and geopolitical questions are at the center of his investigations, which have been expressed through different mapping techniques. Michael Davie has extensively published on Lebanon in books and academic journals; he also participates in research activities with various Lebanese universities and supervises PhD students in Geography on the Middle East.