

What Went Wrong?
Reflections on the Condition of Architecture and Urbanism in Lebanon

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Abstract

In a short article presented at a conference in New York City two years ago, Joan Ockman lucidly diagnosed the contemporary dilemma faced by architecture, i.e. how to insert itself between a pessimistic discourse that warns of the end of time, and an uncritical surrender to globalization.ⁱ This dilemma is now universal. It applies to New York City, where in the same context Kenneth Frampton commented on the dystopia of an “oddly paranoid, rather ruthless, instrumental and resentful landscape”ⁱⁱ, as well as to other cities around the world, especially in the Third World, where more difficult conditions permeate architectural practice, resulting in even more devastated landscapes.

This article will discuss issues that relate to architectural practice and pedagogy, drawing on specific examples in the context of Beirut, Lebanon, and reflecting on the impact of ‘architectural education’ and the transformations within the architectural profession in this context.

One can no longer deny the negative impact of economics on a profession that has been, for the most part, idealistic in its approach to the built environment, but the responsibility of architects and architectural education, can no longer be minimized in assessing the problems that cities like Beirut face today.

Architecture Today

Recent architectural trends around the world, after the gradual demise of post-modernism towards the end of the 1980’s, can be roughly summarized in three major trends:

- a. A survival of the postmodernist paradigm in some parts of the world, without the critical dimension that accompanied the work of its original protagonists from Robert Venturi to Aldo Rossi.
- b. A wide movement towards a ‘slick architecture’ propagated essentially by the work of Rem Koolhaas, the ‘blob’ phenomenon, and other trends, leading towards a ‘new aesthetics’ inspired by modernism, but rid of its social agendas. Under the hands of less gifted imitators, this trend is translated as a mere ‘architecture of the image’ or ‘skin’ architecture.
- c. A conscientious modernism that survives in various forms, following the example of architects like Raphael Moneo and Alvaro Siza. In their emphasis on the continuing importance of ‘craft’ and, more or less, in their attempt to anchor their work in its social context, this

architecture of resistance continues to draw on the heritage of the Modern Movement.

In the Arab world, if one looks at the productions of the last decade, especially in the Gulf countries, it is evident that the first trend, i.e. Postmodernism, has been appropriated and used extensively as the mode which answers best to developers, users, and political establishments, given its appeal to the question of identity and tradition, albeit a very shallow interpretation of these concepts.

In second place, the globalizing economies of this part of the world are also opening up towards contemporary trends, propagated by periodicals and reviews such as *El Croquis*, which promote a ‘slick architecture’. Projects along this line are increasing, made possible by large capital surpluses, as was first detected by Rem Koolhaas in Asia, and as is now the case in the Gulf countries. Both the first and second trends outlined here, share a common interest in simulation as the main formal catalyst, i.e. an ‘architecture of the image’, although they differ on what ‘image’ to present. And both are made possible by the ‘excess’ of surplus capital, through one means or another.

The ‘modernists’ survive on the fringes of these two large movements, similar to the craft oriented practices surviving on the fringes of global economies today. They are in a sense, helpless in the face of the onslaught. This retreat is also expressed at the urban level and at the level of the territory, as a surrender to the forces of the market, in the absence of any urban safeguards.

This raises a pressing question for architecture in the Arab world, which also applies to other parts of the world: what went wrong in architecture? Is it a question of pure economics, or does architecture also bear responsibility in the degeneration of the built environment? Or are we simply being nostalgic now for a lost modernism, as our predecessors were at the beginning of the Twentieth century, when the onslaught of modernism eliminated Neo-classicism from the architectural scene?

I propose in this paper to reflect on these issues, taking examples from Beirut specifically, where I am personally located, which offer another perspective on questions of architecture and urbanism in the world.

Looking back: Modernism in Beirut

In the 1960's this metropolis took full advantage from its geographical position, in close proximity to a region booming from the profits of the petroleum industry. Beirut became a prime service location for the region by virtue of its banking laws, shipping services and entertainment, in addition to its natural site along the Mediterranean. The international outlook of Beirut was reflected by its gradual adoption of Modernism as an architectural 'language' that expresses the ideals of progress, openness, and faith in technology.



Figure 1. Antoun Tabet. Almaza Beer Factory - Beirut, 1934

Modernism in Beirut appeared with a number of architectural works, some of which have survived the speculative urge of the real estate market, and which reflect the variety of references, from Le Corbusier to Mendelsohn, Dudok and Terragni.

Most of these structures were apartment buildings developed to house the growing middle-class, in addition to factories, schools and other institutional buildings. A general observation applies to most, if not all of these buildings: they are characterized by an apparent simplicity of form, which then reveals a complexity in details. In contrast, today's architecture is characterized by the very opposite: an apparent complexity of form, which shows a simplicity or 'flatness' in detailing and spatial experience.

If we take two examples of institutional buildings, one from the 60's, one from the 90's, it becomes clear to what extent architecture has sacrificed its attention to detail, to craft, in favor of a billboard image of questionable aesthetic value.

Thus, on the one hand, we have this example of the pre-war period, when the efforts of the Lebanese State to forge a new identity for the new country especially during the Shehab regime [1958-64],ⁱⁱⁱ led to an ambitious building program of new public schools, hospitals and other institutional buildings, most of which were conceived in the Modern idiom. Here, one can see first of all a sensitive understanding of scale, and then the subdivision of the



Figure 2. Teachers Institute, c. 1970 above and National Security HQ, c. 2005, below

program into distinct components, linked together by a common. In counterpart, a recently completed structure to house the new National Security Headquarters is in complete reversal of the previous case. It violates the scale



Figure 3. Apartment Buildings, Beirut

of its context, and masks its functions by a veneer of stone and glass curtain wall, in an articulation that appears fortuitous and arbitrary. [Fig. 2]

The comparison is even more blatant at the level of the main staple of architectural practice in Beirut, i.e. the

apartment building. Many of the older structures in the city show a masterly assimilation of the lessons of the masters, from Corbusier to Terragni, in their sophisticated articulation and their sensitive insertion in urban sites that impose strict limitations. Most of these buildings from the 1960-1975 period succeed in this challenge while presenting variations on a theme, rather than repetitions. The situation is reversed nowadays, and the discreet application of precious materials is replaced by a blanket coverage of granite or other stones, violating their context and proclaiming their status as 'luxury' buildings. Interesting to note, is the disappearance of the articulate entrance lobby, hitherto an inviting space that mediated between street and private apartments, now a removed and forbidden space that sets itself back from the street, in clear disregard of the public realm. [Fig.3]

Articulation in Architecture

In his seminal essay "Function and Sign: The Semiotics of Architecture", Umberto Eco gave a concise summary of semiotics in its specific architectural application while at the same time exposing the shortcomings of such a theory.^{iv} His initial hypothesis recognized that architecture posed a particular challenge to semiotics, as most architectural objects "do not communicate (and are not designed to communicate), but to function."^v

Eco nevertheless gave an example of the connotative function of architecture, illustrated this by the multiple meanings that any particular sign could take throughout its history, as in the case of the Gothic cathedral, associated at one time with Divine light, structural ingenuity, or mysticism. The connotative aspect of a sign does not depend simply on the material of the sign itself [as a building, a cathedral of certain dimensions, materiality and type] but rather on the interactive relationship between such a sign and the complex "code" that operates largely at the social level, and which governs the reception and interpretation of such a sign. It is clear that semiotics, in this sense, puts emphasis on the social codes of interpretation, rather than on the individual "phenomenological" perception of a work.^{vi}

The semiotic interpretation of architecture is still relevant today, despite the abandonment of all attempts towards a 'larger' semiotic project. Thus, postmodernism is credited with attempting to resurrect the connotative function in architecture, which had been overlooked or even discredited by the Modernists, and which partly explains this

fascination with the cocktail of references brought back to life in the architecture of this region. On the opposite side are those who advocated the investigation of the syntactic function of architecture, which had been carried on at a 'degree-zero' level by Eisenman in the early 70's. At a more basic level, one of the elements of this syntactical function is 'articulation', a notion that seems to be out of favor in the post-modern era. This notion which was intimately related to craftsmanship in architecture, produced a more complex formal language which survived within Modernism. A comparison between two examples will show this.

In the first case, we see a building that is composed of a main slab, with overhanging balconies. The balconies appear as articulations protruding from the main body of the text. Yet the balconies themselves, are further articulated into subsets, or sub-elements, that enrich the main element, while maintaining the continuity of the general theme. There is definitely a point at which further articulation becomes irrelevant, redundant, or excessive. As in poetry or prose, one can not always pinpoint this particular point, or give a rational explanation of it.

On the other hand, we look at a typical product of the Postmodern period. A building that covers, or masks, the articulations of the form, forcing instead a glossy image that may or may not appeal, depending on particular taste. As mentioned before, it is characterized by an apparent complexity, which reveals a lack in details. [Fig. 4]

The analogy with language is again illuminating. Here is a text that does not reveal in anyway its compositional rules, nor does it entice one to go deeper into the deciphering of its 'words', concentrating instead on its surface appeal, on a message it attempts to communicate, pure semantics. It does not open the possibilities of further readings, but just offers a single narrative, with limited readings. It is analogous to the difference between a work of popular fiction, say by Paulo Coelho, and a work by Borges.

From Modernism to Postmodernism

How do we explain this return of "styles" and the dissolution of critical thought in architecture? How can we explain this invasion of forms, invigorated by the postmodernist absolutism that continues to pervade our culture in the Arab world? Is it all a question of bad taste? Can we dismiss it in condescending terms, or are these also legitimate expressions of genuine cultural expressions?



Figure 4. Two opposite details, Beirut

There may have been legitimate concerns against the spread of a western-influenced Modernism in the area, and in this sense one can see that Postmodernism gave legitimacy to the return of 'regional' styles as part of a genuine search for identity. The works of the Iraqi Rifaat Jaderji and the Lebanese Assem Salam may be cited as exemplary references of this revisionist position, yet these architects still operated within Modernism. Nowhere did they espouse a superficial resuscitation of clichés, but rather a synthesis between Modernism in its expression of transparency, functionality and openness, and a search for

identity that mediates or tampers the modernist zeal for pure and abstract forms.

Salam for instance had designed a number of interesting projects in the 60's, among them the Pan American building and the Ministry of Tourism in Beirut. Towards the end of the sixties, Salam's work witnessed a transformation towards a more 'regional' tendency, in an attempt to answer to the question of identity and the search for an architecture that resolves this opposition between modernity and tradition.

One of the examples of Salam's work that expresses this transition is the Kashoggi Mosque in Beirut, built in the early 70's, a play on the geometry of two intersecting squares, the motif of the Islamic star. The clear articulation between structure and cladding, internal and external spaces,



Figure 5. Assem Salam. Mosque Khashoggi, Beirut, 1973

creates a complex text that incites the reader to decipher it, to dis and re-assemble it visually. This translates into an experience of space that is also engaging. The articulation

of the structure and other elements brings to mind the work of the master-articulator, Louis Kahn. [Fig. 5]



Figure 6. Mosque Muhammad al-Amine, 2005

Compare this with the recently completed Grand Mosque of Beirut. A structure of reinforced concrete, totally and homogeneously clad with prefabricated stone panels, including those which are ornamented with Koranic verses. Despite this ornamental effort, the structure remains 'flat' architecturally, not to speak about its historic irrelevance as a copy of more significant examples of Islamic architecture in Egypt and Turkey. The comparison between the historic Assaf or Munzer mosques in Beirut, genuine example of local religious architecture in its typical sandstone walls, the Kashoggi Mosque by Salam in its re-interpretation of a historic type, and the Grand Mosque, reveals this degradation in religious architecture, which also reflects on other works. [Fig. 6]

What appears from this simple comparison, by retrospect, is that the Post Modern discourse that emerged in the 70's when regional tendencies started to manifest themselves within Modernism was hijacked by other tendencies in a 'fundamentalist' drive all the way back to 'original' historical referents.

A New Avant Garde?

In a context where Robert Venturi's inclusive call for co-existence among different historic styles still finds a fertile

ground, one can see in Beirut the emergence of other manifestations of architecture that are more contemporary and quite sophisticated in some cases. These new projects nevertheless show, like their relatives in the West, obliviousness to the social concerns that were primary on the agenda of the earlier Modernist movement. It is as if design has been re-dedicated nowadays to the service of the elite in every society, whereas its initial purpose in the 20's and 30's was the betterment of life for all.

An example of this generation is the young architect Bernard Khoury, who has risen to prominence among this group promulgating a new architecture. His internationally acclaimed *B-018 Nightclub* in the zone of Karantina, took the negative character of the place with its tragic history [The site of a massacre during the civil war] as a latent theme in the conceptualization of a project that buries itself in the ground, like a sarcophagus, and opens itself to the outside world only at night, through its mechanically operated roof. The macabre interior, with its display of neatly organized tables that fold like burial tombs, adds to this perversion of space which takes a Dionysian dimension at night. This project subverts the tragic memory of the site

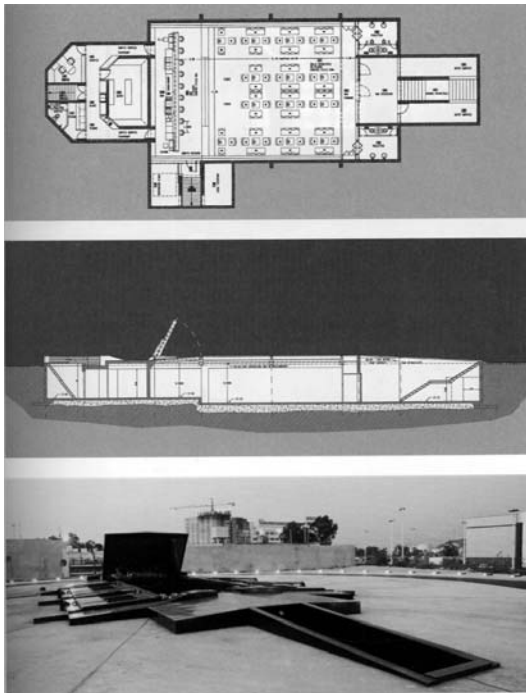


Figure 7. Bernard Khoury, *B-018*, Beirut, 1998

by resuscitating its history as a leitmotif in the project, a haunting presence that does not call, nevertheless, for any genuine act of remembrance. [Fig. 7]

From this initial coup de force, Khoury moved on to develop *Centrale*, a restaurant in an old palazzo-type house. Throwing against the wall all the traditions of restoration, Khoury rigged the place from within, emptying its hull and reinterpreting the ritual of dining. In yet another work, *Yabani*, Khoury once again proved to be a provocateur, placing what looks like an oversized air-conditioning unit at the corner of a tight site in Beirut. The cylindrical shaft proves to be precisely just that, a mechanical shaft that symbolically expresses the presence of yet another subterranean space, a restaurant and bar, organized in a circle around the cylindrical elevator unit. Khoury's work has now expanded beyond the limits of Lebanon to the Arab world and Europe.

What went wrong?

After Marx, we can repeat: "A specter is haunting the world". This time, it is the specter of globalization and its negative by-products: cheap imitations, vulgar productions and the disappearance of certain basic notions in human culture, with drastic effects on education itself.

Architecture cannot be conceived or criticized outside of the realm of the political. Architecture and urbanism are in symbiotic relationships with three poles that permeate and organize human life: the socio-political, the economic, and the cultural. Today's 'decadence' can only be explained as a failure of interaction between architectural production and these 3 poles, and as a failure of architectural education itself to face this challenge.

At the level of the socio-political, this is clearly reflected in the governmental failure to control growth and urban development. At the economic level, it is reflected in every society where a laissez faire attitude has overtaken economic production, and where capitalism is free from any regulatory binds. At the cultural level, the crisis is more acute in societies where an identity crisis has resulted from the challenges posed by Modernity. In certain cases, as in the Arab world today, all 3 poles are in crisis, which results in a devastated landscape, a severely damaged urban fabric, and an architecture in desperate search for an identity. In such situations, imitations invade the landscape, take-offs of Eisenman, Gehry, and Hadid, in addition to the

continuing damage produced by an ill-conceived interpretation of tradition. [Fig.8]

And whereas one could argue that the same happened when Modernism was adopted by local architects in the 60's. It is clear that with Modernism, there was at least an attempt to 'critically' engage the original references, with eventual reminders of the social agenda of modernism with Team X among others, whereas with the recent trends from Postmodernism onwards, it is only an image that is being duplicated, for its simulative value.^{vii}



Figure 8. Wooden Bakery, Beirut, c. 2000

In reflecting on the current condition in the Arab world today, I borrowed this title from Bernard Lewis's critical survey of the political condition in the Islamic world, and the identity crisis it is undergoing.^{viii}

It is true that in a certain sense, architecture on a global level is also facing the consequences of its own failure at the political level, which either translated into a reactionary return to an idealized past, or an uncritical espousal of western trends, both extreme choices, which can only subvert the possibility of a real reform of the built environment, and by extension, of the political.

Endnotes:

ⁱ The conference was organized at Columbia University, and published as *The State of Architecture at the Beginning of the 21st Century*, New York: Monacelli Press, 2003. See Joan Ockman's "Criticism in the Age of Globalization" [78-9]

ⁱⁱ "Brief Reflections on the Predicament of Urbanism", *ibidem* [13]

ⁱⁱⁱ Fouad Shehab, third president of the republic [1958-64], was one of the major founders of the new state, and the driving power behind many of its institutions.

^{iv} Published first in VIA, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Fine Arts, Vol.1, 1973. Republished in *Signs, Symbols, and Architecture*, edited by G. Broadbent, R. Bunt, C. Jencks. Wiley, 1980 [11-70], and in a modified, shorter version in *Rethinking Architecture*, ed. Neil Leach. Routledge, 1997 [182-204]

^v Eco. 1980, *ibidem*. [12]

^{vi} In attempting to address the notion of an architectural "code", Eco identified a number of possible "codes" in architecture, among those the "typological" code which would later have more currency in architectural circles, further dividing the codes into three: technical codes [covering mainly the structural components of architectural forms], syntactic codes [which cover the typological codes and the spatial articulation of forms] and the semantic codes [which relate the sign-vehicles in architecture to their denotative and connotative meanings]

^{vii} See Neil Leach, *The Anaesthetics of Architecture*. MIT Press, 1999

^{viii} Bernard Lewis. *What Went Wrong?* Oxford Univ. Press, 2002