

BEIRUT: A CITY PALIMPSEST

Architecture and Urban Mediterranean Cultures

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Abstract

Reading and mapping the urban fabric through the permanence of its traces is a very important fact that drives us to interpret the complexity of a “*Locus*”¹ and guides us to decode the cityscape in relation to the metamorphosis of its urban components.

This article underlines the complex nature of the historical construction process of Beirut city, and points out the characters of its transformation by examining its structure through the historical process of its formation: polymorphic continuity in its multiple fractures caused by the superimposition of different architectural and urban cultures.

The palimpsest and the urban *continuum* “legible” in the metamorphosis of Beirut city are examined in this article as “tools” in order to individualize, through the permanence and persistence of the old urban traces, the geometric alignments and the positioning of monuments; a sort of hidden urban correlations among the various urban components that characterize the city as a phenomenon.

Keywords: Urban traces, Permanence, Urban Form, Artifact, Superimposition

Introduction

As the concept of the city as palimpsest contains various cultural aspects, understanding its historical layers and data is very important to comprehend the wider context of the subject throughout various periods and scales².

The urban structure of the cities of ancient foundation, especially the Mediterranean cities, is determined in the actual morphology by the original matrices much more than one would think: in signifying how the streets, the property limits, and the primitive geometric configurations are so permanent in the building fabric to the extent that they are “legible” and understood in the current morphology and to be the reason of their formative construction.

On the other hand, the single element, whether it is a street, a parcel or a building, is always conceived as part of the city, and by consequence the city that gives *raison d'être* and meaning to individual architectures. Thus, in urban architecture, a more or less apparent logical thread must be established among urban traces and the urban form through the ages.

Therefore, the study of urban traces is extremely related to urban form. In this context, first, the trace is intended as a descriptive figure to transcribe an urban form, that is the question of how Beirut urban traces have occurred in the current urban fabric, hence the interpretation of their construction process. And second, the questionable form of how the traces of deferent civilizations were developed in relation to each other (*urban continuum*); what is the role of the archaeological dimension and the placement of certain monuments in the constructive process of Beirut Center District over the years? The above questions will give us a possibility to propose methodologies, tools and principles to operate within this phenomenon.

“Le territoire historiquement constitué, en croisant l’approche visuelle et connaissance concrète du terrain quelle procure avec une lecture / interprétation des données historiques, cartographiques en premier lieu. Il s’agit alors non plus seulement de s’intéresser à telle ou telle route qui structure une partie de l’agglomération mais de s’interroger sur la manière dont celle-ci s’organise en système et de retrouver dans les occupations actuelles les traces et les conséquences de l’histoire ”³.

Hence, the aim of this article is not to analyze the various urbanites master plans, but rather to conduct a critical reading of the formative process of the urban fabric through the permanence of its morphological traces.

Beirut Urban Nucleus: Fragments of a Text

Aldo Rossi writes in his book “Architecture of the City”⁴, or even Saverio Muratori in his book “Storia Operante”⁵: thinking of urban science as a historical science is wrong; because in this case we should only talk about urban history while what we mean here is simply this: that urban history seems increasingly satisfying, even from the point of view of the urban structure, then any other investigation or research on the city. Therefore, it is important to examine in this case the contributions to the problems of the city, which arise from historical considerations.

Looking briefly at the historical development of Beirut City Center, we can understand its foundation and the historical aspects of its particular fragments in question, in order to make critical judgments for their architectural value.

Beirut *intra-muros* is scattered with a long series of archaeological episodes brought to light during the French Mandate (1920-1943) and then in the early 1990s. This led to the dismantling of buildings, streets and squares, and left long stretches – with almost one hundred and fifty excavations – revealing a precedent city.

Observing the excavations surveys documented during the above-mentioned periods, we notice that the *intra-muros* city was built on itself several times, often not coinciding with the current time, it is revealing of a past that as subtext does not suggest certain answers, insinuating, on the contrary, new doubts and perplexities.

The future of the exceptional vestiges (ramparts from Bronze Age, Greek towers and districts, large sectors of the *Colonia Julia Felix Berytus*, various aspects of the Byzantine city, Medieval and Mamluk fortifications) discovered during the numerous excavations poses a question about their preservation and/ or their relocation and reintegration in the reconstruction of the city center.

The destruction process adopted by Solidere⁶ was based on the principles of the *tabula rasa*; more than one thousand buildings belonging to late the nineteenth century, and to 40s, 50s and 60s of the twentieth century were completely destroyed first in 1982, then proceeded after the civil war, followed by erasing a big part of the old traces and irreversibly removing the archeological findings, whether they were parcels or streets or boundaries. The erasure of Beirut history through the annihilation of the old urban traces would have offered a chance to rewrite it.

Peter Eisenman in his book entitled “*The End of the Classical*”⁷ describes the city as a text, as a discourse that tells its story through its history. This suggests the idea of architecture as writing as opposed to architecture as image. What is being “written” is not the object itself - its mass and volume – but the *act* of massing. This idea gives a metaphoric body to the act of architecture. It then signals its reading through another system of signs, called traces.

Traces are not to be read literally, since they have no other value than to signal the idea that there is a reading event and that reading should take place; trace signals the idea to read.

“Thus, a trace is also a partial or fragmentary sign; it has no objecthood,” and once removed from its original ‘objecthood,’ it produces an acknowledgement and understanding without linking it to a former reality”⁸.

The temptation to make a *tabula rasa* of the past, to erase the traces of violence, and to rebuild a city on entirely new grounds, beyond the destructive frenzy related to real estate speculation, which is a form of amnesia that claims mainly the ruins of the old city, therefore surpasses the ancient, urging that the city be rebuilt from scratch, as if nothing had existed before.

Around this problem, multiple issues are being polarized, calling into question some more radical options of the plan; such as, a better assumption of site data and urban morphology and the relationship between the modern city and the historical one.

In his book entitled *Angelus Novus*, Walter Benjamin borrows the Angelus Novus painting, a famous artwork by Paul Klee, where “the angel of history identified Benjamin himself must have this aspect: he has a face turned to the past. Where there appears to be a chain of events, he sees only one catastrophe, which accumulates relentlessly ruins on ruins and overturns them at his feet. He would like to stay well, awaken the dead and reassemble the shattered. But a storm blows from paradise, which has become entangled in its wings, and it is so strong that he can no longer close them. This storm pushes him irresistibly into the future, to which he turns his back, while the pile of ruins rises before him to the sky. What we call progress is this storm”⁹. (Fig. 1)



Fig. 1. Paul Klee, Angelus Novus painting

On the other hand, the “zeitgeist” or the spirit of time promoted by Eisenman attempts to project the past into the present and into the future. Eisenman’s work has always been against this propelling force of history, Benjamin’s theory in Angel of history. Today there is another kind of energy internal to the site. For instance, the Eisenman’s projects in Santiago de Compostela, in Verona (Romeo and Juliet) and in Venezia (Cannareggio) are about layering different ideas of time into the site. At the same time, these projects definitively express the culmination of architectural operations centered on the reading of places through the traces they leave as they themselves are hypertext. (Fig. 2)

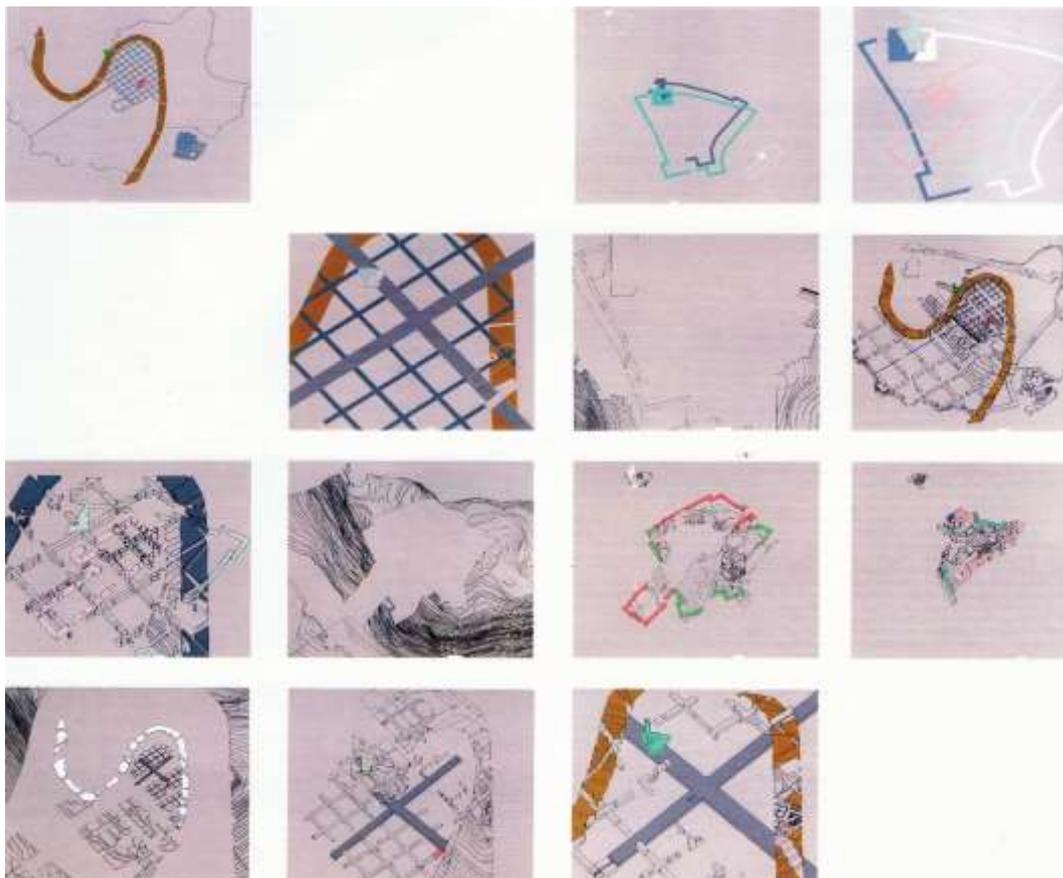


fig2: (Eisenman, Peter. “Moving arrows, eros.” *Architecture Theory Since 1968*. ed. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2000. 582 – 585. Print.)

Alternatively, the *Urbis Romae* form conceived by Rodolfo Lanciani represents the contribution of a proven scientific methodology and features, as in a map of epochs, the remains of ancient Rome unearthed and studied above the map of contemporary Rome.

Palimpsest on schedule, it is a reality of two thousand seven hundred years. The resulting space, however objective, still leads us to dream of the reality that it describes, the volumes, the sections, the elusive figure of that space, a space as ancient as its destruction, the new successive destructions, the signs of cultures faded over time, the ambush of forces that certainly undermine it. (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Forma Urbis Romae. Luciani R. 1893-1901

Therefore, we can recognize the importance of the constant “persistence of the traces,” proposed by Robert de Rubertis¹⁰ where here clarifies the spontaneous non-planned metamorphosis of the built, by the tendency of the existing structures to maintain their present directions and attitudes. Thus, “these traces can be interpreted also as formalized ‘informal’ figures, which become a generative mold of new settlements”¹¹, therefore dynamically tracing the transformation of the city.

“After two centuries during which the management of the territory had little other recipe than the *tabula rasa*, a conception of the layout was more like an abstract operative field but as the result of a very long and very slow stratification that it is important to know in case of intervention”¹².

“*Reconstruire la ville* means for Bernard Huet, to find out the urban traces, canceled by the functionalist schemata and the “open structures” of the Modern Movement, which are able to redefine the spatial qualities of the historical city, against every “anti-urban ideology” on which is based the common practice, which sees architecture independent from the city and its formalities”¹³.

Urban Correlations: Permanence of Old Traces in the Buildings Fabric

André Corboz in his article “*Le territoire comme palimpseste*”¹⁴ attributed the notion of “palimpsest” to researchers in the field of architecture, who very ambitiously endeavored to elucidate the complex relationship between the parcel and the building typology, as much as the For instance, the permanence of a narrow parcel whose dimensions remain close to those of medieval cities - including the speculative allotment of the nineteenth century - ensures the unity of London or Brussels despite the different architectural styles.

Paraphrasing Philippe Panerai, “*La parcelle, le tracé, ne peuvent se définir l’un à part de l’autre. C’est leur totalité qui doit être considérée. Il n’y a ni support, ni supporté, mais des interrelations multiples qui ne sont en fait dissociées que lors d’interventions d’ordre spéculatif.*”

Tracés et parcelles ne doivent pas seulement être regardés, saisis, analysés dans leur seule dimension morphologique. Ils forment avec ceux qui les empruntent, y construisent, utilisent les bâtiments, une trame vivante”¹⁵.

The old Beirut Souks, which constituted a portion of the city charged with memory and urban practices, was demolished in 1992 under the pretext of unhealthiness.

solid ere was supposed to integrate the experiences of the international ideas competition held in December 1993 with the new programmatic data, restoring the deep emotional charge linked to the history of a site now deserted.

“From the outset, the approach of the urban project for the reconstruction of the ancient souks should have been based on the need to start from the plot level to find the old traces that constituted the memory of the place. This path, previously intuitive, should have been compared in archaeological findings”¹⁶ where, the persistence and permanence of old traces is given by their constitutive value; from history and art, from being and from memory.

The stripping of the strata of the site, which date back as far as the Hellenistic period, showed that the major traces of the souks existed from the foundation although the city was demolished and rebuilt more than seven times throughout history: below the modern sewers, the Ottoman sewers were discovered, then the Mamluk sewers, followed by the Byzantine sewers, concluding with the Roman sewers, all practically on the same axis.

Each time, subsequent occupants of the site did not pose problems: they returned to settle where their predecessors had left traces, on the foundations of shop walls, reusing the same materials, the ancient paving stones; a continuous rewriting of the city, a true palimpsest.

The reconstruction of the old souks would have been a good opportunity to study the overlap and the persistence of the great fragments highlighted by the archaeological excavations, to register in the historical continuity that allowed the city to rebuild itself every time it was destroyed.

In Lavedan theory¹⁷, persistence becomes the generator of the plan, the “plan” for Lavedan intended here as “architecture”; this generator is the main objective of urban research because it is from its understanding that it is possible to go back to the spatial formation of the city; or, the concept of persistence is included in the generator, which also extends to physical buildings, streets and urban monuments.

It is important, however, to keep in mind that it is not a matter of finding direct influences of a civilization on another, but of grasping the birth or persistence of patterns of organization of space, capable of crossing eras and civilizations and giving rise to absolutely architectural distinct results, in which the common scheme is practically unrecognizable for a superficial analysis.

For instance, the famous Souk El Tawile, founder axis whose imprint had remained the same since the early Hellenistic times, respects the primitive urban plot whose traces have maintained in the network of secondary streets (Souk Ayyas, Souk Al-Arwam, Souk Sayyour), to give back the symbolic points of reference and to integrate both the preserved monuments (mosques and historical buildings) into the new reconstruction project.

On the other hand, the great works that marked this part of the city: the ramparts of the medieval wall that defined the limits of the city from the tenth to the nineteenth century and the Khan Antoun Bey Misrilian Palace (the old caravanserai, built in 1853 then demolished in the 90s) that with its neoclassical *façade* (60 m.

Side) have dominated the marine front for several years. They constituted an urban *unicum*; a great architectural work built in different eras, which arises in direct morphological relationship with the city.

The reconstruction of Khan Antoun Bey, later replaced by a department store designed by Zaha Hadid and Patrick Schumacher, should have allowed the articulation of the historical city and the new extensions on the landfills. However, what is now left of the image of the old Souks is a small fragment of the medieval walls, and is now buried under Raffael Moneo's project. (Fig. 4)



.Fig. 4. Beirut medieval wall. photo credit. C. Maskineh

According to Aldo Rossi, “the persistence of a city is revealed through monuments – physical signs of past and monuments as urban artifacts - becomes an important element of the city, which helps to constitute the total picture of an urban context”¹⁸. (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Transfiguration of the trace, Caixa Museum Madrid, Design Herzog and De Meuron Architects.

The monuments, Khan Antoun Bey, Banque de la Syrie and Al Majidya Mosque, located between the old Souks, the seashore and the first basin of the harbor, all are demolished (except for the Al Majidyya Mosque), constituted a system of correlation based on the *ensemble*; religion (Al Majidya), commerce (souk), tourism (khan), economy (bank) and harbor (cultural exchange).

They constituted an image closely connected to the identity of the Mediterranean City.

Moreover, the new expansion of the city center into the sea, with the construction of the new Normandy, caused the loss of the old contact that the city had with its sea, consequently the loss of the *raison d'être* of the above-mentioned system.

While in the area of what used to be called the “elegant Souk” next to Martyr’s square, which includes: Souk Sursock, Souk As-Saraya, Souk Mar Girgis, Souk En-Nouryeh, Souk Abi Nasr and Souk Al-Moutran, originally attributed to the Emir Fakhr ed-Din period, those Souks used to be a homogeneous system extended along the Eastern defensive walls of the old city; “grouped around a central region and subdivided, according to their activities, into special economic zones in the manner of old Syrian cities of that era”¹⁹.

This system has an exception plan overlapping the Hellenistic-Roman urban arrangement generated by the rotation of the roman *cardo* with respect to the overall fabric, while En-Nouryeh, which is considered the main axis of the Souks, is a linear street constructed on both traces; the Hellenistic and the Eastern medieval defensive wall.

The orthogonal matrix of the later (north-south axis) connects the Phoenician Tell with the St. Elie (Greek Catholic), En-Nouryeh Chapel (Greek Orthodox – Byzantine period) and with St. Georges Cathedral (Maronite), all of which were built in different historical periods.

This portion of the urban nucleus, characterized by a co-existence of cathedrals and mosques with “shoulders” turned to each other, later became the geometric center of the *étoile* city²⁰ that grew up around it, and at the same time, it became a point of expansion of the city *intra-muros* represented by the “*Place des Martyrs*.”

These religious monuments are also superimposed to the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine traces.

Their orientation is strongly determined by the precedent city; The St. Georges Cathedral (Maronite, 1894), situated at the edge of the southern wall of the *intra-muros*, in proximity to bab El Derrekeh, represents the meeting point of the presumable Hellenistic *agora* and the crossroads of the Roman *Cardo and Decumanus Maximus*. (fig. 6).

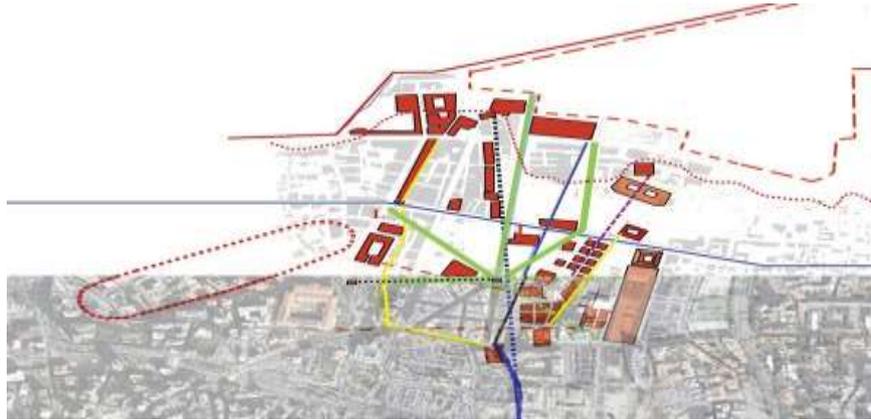


Fig. 6. Beirut City Center, Correlations and Superimpositions.
Elaboration, C. Maskineh

According to Lavedan’s theory: “whether it is a spontaneous city or a planned city, the layout of its plan, the design of its streets is not due to chance. There is an obedience to the rules, both unconsciously in the first case and consciously and openly in the second. *Il existe toujours un élément générateur du plan*”²¹.

On this basis, the urban nucleus of the city of Beirut is composed, decomposed and recomposed during the following two millennia: its traces, still easily identifiable in some points for their historical and stratified value, and for their intrinsic strength which helps to study peculiarities of parts of the city that have so far disappeared. In this sense, the palimpsest of the multilayered city could act as “paths matrix” of the new generation of spaces.

The above-analyzed monuments have established between themselves a system of spatial correlation in correspondence with the antecedent traces, which constitute the “matrix path” and the main characteristic of Beirut.

Thus, the historical method ends, not only to identify permanence but to be constituted always and only by permanence, because only they can show what the city has been, for all that in which its past differs from the present.

Therefore, permanence can become, as Aldo Rossi writes, with respect to the state of the city, insulating and aberrant urban facts; it cannot characterize a system except in the form of a past that we still experience. (Fig. 7)

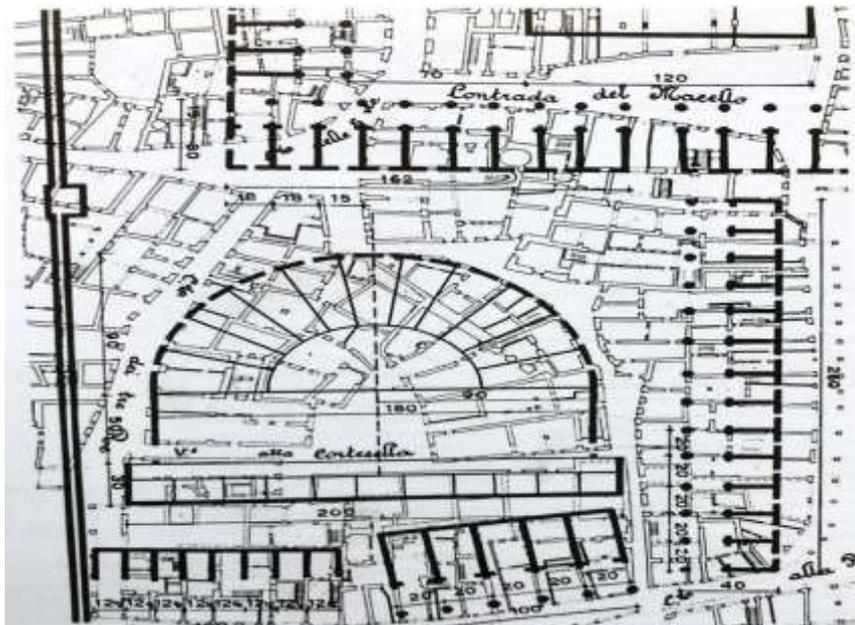


Fig. 7. The traces which act as path matrix of a new generation of buildings. Source Caniggia G. and Maffei G.L. 2008

The Transfiguration of the Trace in the Urban Form

Some traces are clearly recognizable by the superimposition of districts or monuments that confirms the anteriority of formation of the path itself with respect to the construction of the special buildings, like the case of Wadi Abou Jmil District in Beirut.

The later, built on the western edge outside the city ramparts, became, in the late Ottoman period, a Jewish quarter superimposed on the traces of the Roman Hippodrome; its urban shape, adapted to the layout that preceded its foundation to define the margins built. (Fig. 8)



Fig. 8. Wadi Abou Jmil distric before demolition in 1993

This palace district, before being swept away by the rampant “international style”, had an architecture that was compared to the particularities of a space with a strong sense of community. (Fig. 9)



Fig. 9. Wadi Abou Jmil Distric after the demolition.

Source map DAG. 2008

The example of Wadi Abou Jmil district finds its analogy in other cases in some European cities such as the Medieval district of Peruzzi in Florence²², which is superimposed on the Roman amphitheater; an axonometric drawing by Buonsignori perfectly shows the geometric form of the district. (Fig. 10.a. – Fig. 10.b.)



Fig. 10.a. Peruzzi district superimposed on the roman amphitheater. Buonsignori Axonometric drawing



Fig. 10.b. Peruzzi district overlapping the Roman amphitheater of Florence. Source Maffei G.L. in Firenze Architettura Anno X n. 1

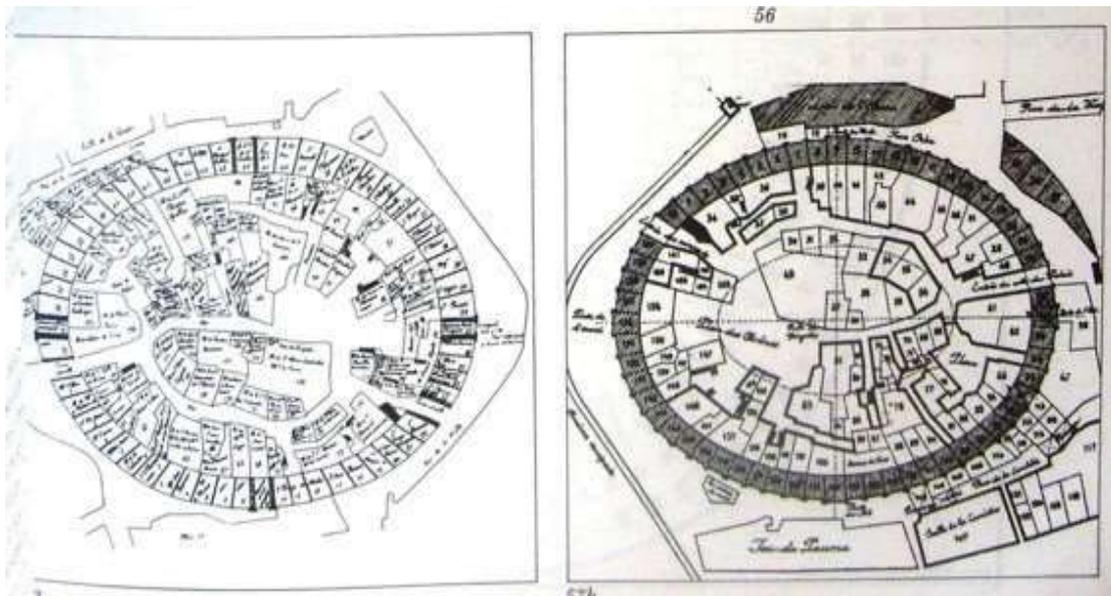


Fig. 11. Roman amphitheater Nîmes, 1782-1809, Indicating properties and trades. Source Rossi A. Architettura della città

“In Nîmes in France, the amphitheater is transformed into a fortress by the Visigoths and contains a small town of 2000 inhabitants. Later, around this monument, the city will begin to grow again”²³. [\(Fig. 11\)](#)

In Arles, France, the medieval settlement overlapped the Roman amphitheater. The later becomes a city. It is also a fortress; it contains and defends the whole city. In cities as Lucca, Assisi, and Polenzzo, Italy, the medieval settlement follows the geometric shape of the Roman amphitheater. It is, at the same time, a public *piazza* that represents today the core of the social and urban fabric. (Fig. 12.a. – Fig. 12.b.)



Fig. 12.a. Roman amphitheater Arles, Source Rossi
A. Architettura della città.



Fig. 12.b. Roman amphitheater Lucca

The story of these cities is extraordinary; “it also leads us to some considerations on the dimension, on the precise form, on the function, and shows that the quality of some facts is stronger than their dimension”²⁴.

An amphitheater, as in the case of Florence, Nîmes, Arles, or a Hippodrome as in the case of Beirut, they all become a city; their traces are extremely precise in their structures, in their architecture, and in their form.

Another case of transfiguration is given by the transformation of the Beirut old seashore, in Zeytouneh square, into a public space.

The project named “Shoreline Walk” and designed by Gustafson Porter office²⁵ is placed between the natural topography and rationalised medieval street layout of the old city, and the engineered grid of the new land-filled area. It is located between memories and aspirations, between activities that made a connection to an organic coastline and a new contemporary landscape.

Rather than leave the old coastline land-locked and redundant, it was decided to create a pedestrian route that straddled the old and new city boundaries including the trace of the historic “*Avenue des Français*”. (Fig. 13 a - Fig. 13.b.)



Fig. 13.a. Beirut former seashore trace. Source Areamum. 120, 2012



Fig. 13.b. Beirut Shoreline Walk, transfiguration project. Source Area num. 120, 2012

Within this context, the old seashore trace is transformed into a wide pedestrian promenade which guides and reveals elements of history, and forms a connective spine. Organic movement line runs along the length of the walk, links the four open spaces and re-establishes an East–West link between places that might not be connected by the new grid. Physical and visual links extend beyond the spaces to re-establish memories between key monuments and spaces.

Conclusion

The poetic description on the territory by André Corboz in “Le territoire comme Palimpseste” reads as follows: “ Le territoire, tout surchargé qu’il est de traces et de lectures passées en force, ressemble plutôt à un palimpseste. Pour mettre en place de nouveaux équipements, pour exploiter plus rationnellement certaines terres, il est souvent indispensable d’en modifier la substance de façon irréversible. Mais le territoire n’est pas un emballage perdu ni un produit de consommation qui se remplace. Chacun est unique, d’où la nécessité de “ recycler ”, de gratter une fois encore (mais si possible avec le plus grand soin) le vieux texte que les hommes ont inscrit sur l’irremplaçable matériau des sols, afin d’en déposer un nouveau, qui réponde aux nécessités d’aujourd’hui avant d’être abrogé à son tour ”²⁶.

From the morphological diversity of the urban fabric of Beirut, the persistence of fragments and traces of the historic city emerged, some of which have been documented then covered, others dedicated to museums (outdoor and enclosed), which is not enough when rebuilding a city.

The reconstruction of the center of Beirut would have been a great opportunity to detect and deeply study the continuity and persistence of fragments and traces of the submerged city, to be later on perfectly reintegrated in the new urban layouts; it would have been a true urban laboratory as in the IBA²⁷ case for the reconstruction of Berlin.

When the city loses the dialogue with its past and with historical and cultural references, the architectural project inscribed in its fabric dematerializes from its linguistic essence and loses the reference that links it to its city.

The reconstruction of the center of Beirut could have reinterpreted the old traces through the synthesis between previous urban models and a creative mimesis of places, defining a new city starting from its memory. A city that is exploded in a multitude of segregated neighborhoods, in a conglomerate of suburbs that revolve today around an empty center.

The reflection must first of all aim at restoring a new urban structure capable of rearticulating the different community territories by reading the old traces of the city.

The novelist Rabih Jaber, in his book entitled *Berytus: An Underground City*²⁸ writes that another city was found by chance under the current Beirut, where beautiful women and many families lived in the light of candlelight [...]. The author asks, where did they come from? Did they descend from “above” the ground during the Lebanese civil war that killed more than a hundred thousand people, and hid in the darkness seventeen thousand abducted? Or were they born underground?

Are those families being ghosts, living under the city together with the old buried traces? Or are they alive, witnessing that must be another underground city that is not recognized by most of the city’s inhabitants, and transmit hidden signals to the above one?

In his novel, Rabih Jaber has tried to find the missing link between underground and aboveground Beirut.

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