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American University of Beirut  
Department of Architecture and Design  
**City Debates Programme**

Debate 3 "City as excavation?"  
June 5, 2002

Notes for

**THE EXCAVATION OF BEIRUT: A QUEST FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY?**

**Michael F. DAVIE<sup>1</sup>**

The "city as excavation" poses a series of questions on the object itself, the city, which lead further than just piecing together archaeological material. A city cannot be reduced to its material dimension, nor can it be simply related to its economic functions. It is both *signifiant* and *signifié*, a coded object which its societies continuously appropriate, territorialize and reterritorialize according to numerous collective or individual stakes. Metaphorically, its invisible and deep roots can explain what happens on the surface of things. Today's city, both in its material and symbolical reality, is also a consequence of past actions; today's reality can be decoded once its invisible, underground foundations are exposed. Excavating the city gives sense to the present, a prerequisite, for urbanists at least, to plan its future. The "city as excavation" is thus at the centre of complex choices, all anchored in the semiosphere, and thus all ideologically motivated. Excavating the city is a deliberate decision with far-ranging consequences, not the least being nation-building strategies and economics.

This conference will examine how the "city as excavation", is part and parcel of complex strategies of Lebanese nation-building while at the same time being at the core of the speculative economy of the reconstruction project of the city's centre.

Three preliminary points should be mentioned.

1) Cities in the Mediterranean area are complex objects, the product of long sedimentations of old and new, the old being recycled in the new or mixing with it. We are not surprised to see Graeco-Roman foundations to churches or mosques, nor by the re-use of ancient granite columns in 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup>-century buildings, nor by bulldozers regularly unearthing sarcophagi, temples or artefacts. We were brought up in towns and cities claiming to be "The oldest continuously-inhabited place in the World" and this is proudly mentioned in schoolbooks and tourist brochures. For the inhabitants, the past is in the present and that has never been a problem, or an obstacle to the contemporary urban dynamics of the cities. Only in extreme and very rare cases were cities built on totally levelled previous ones, or built or rebuilt *ex nihilo*. Fires, ethnic cleansing, major earthquakes, volcanic eruptions or imperial

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designs were some of the cases when new cities were built without fitting in portions of the previous city.

2) Archaeology is a recent, Western invention, with its philosophical roots dating back to the Renaissance. The aim of this new "science" was to extract aesthetically pleasing objects to furnish the residences of the rising, sophisticated urban elites, who were slowly breaking with the previous cultural and religious order. These objects were posited as proof that European civilization had its roots in the Graeco-Roman period, itself presented as the supreme form of culture and civilization. With visits to ancient sites in Greece or the Italian peninsula — and later to the Middle East — together with the systematic use of drawings, sketches and paintings, the ancient civilizations could be recycled in art, architecture, literature, history and politics. Archaeology was also used the other way round: to prove that *before* the Greeks or the Romans, presented as invaders, there was a thriving "European" civilization, which constituted the "real" foundations of the various contemporary nations. Archaeology was used to "prove" the existence of a vast Celtic civilization, of which the Gauls (thus to-day's French) or the Irish or Scots would have been part.

3) Urban archaeology is an even more recent invention, dating back only around fifty years, i.e. just after the Second World War. Its aims were more "scientific" and less ideologically motivated to understand the long-term evolution of the cities through the everyday routines and use of objects of their inhabitants. This would lead to clarifying elements in the political history puzzle of the cities while at the same time map the various influences, cultures and commercial flows that affected that particular point in space. Finally, urban archaeology contributed to the modern or post-modern need to create a spectacle out of selected parts of the city, to highlight all objects with the aim of creating and promoting "culture", to make the inhabitant a spectator (preferably a paying one) of his or her city.

These three remarks lead to the specific case of Beirut's city centre.

There is no need to remind that the reconstruction project for Beirut's city centre is first and foremost a speculative operation, with land being offered to investors in return for a profit. Space had value only if it met technical norms (standardization of plot sizes, new building codes, a car-friendly road infrastructure, a high-performance telecommunications network, etc.) and made geographic sense (ease of access, economic centrality, recognizable urban markers, symbolical depth, urban conviviality, etc.)

As a project, it integrated the notion of physical centrality (a strategically-central position in the larger city), as well as a symbolic centrality (the "heart" of the city with its main religious, political and economic edifices, its war memories, etc.). The Master plan postulated that the new city centre would be built not with the pre-existing city, but as a largely new *ex nihilo* replacement, ignoring the previous accretions. While the visible city would be levelled (except for some carefully chosen sites to be rehabilitated in the name of preserving the national heritage), some other parts would be excavated. In some cases, the excavations would be done "just to see what was underneath", while elsewhere, the excavations would have a more professional or scientific aim, or for carefully thought economic reasons.

Thus, the city as an object for excavation integrated a complex spectrum of economic, cultural and political stakes. Or, put differently, the parts of the city chosen to be

excavated were the material witnesses of ground-level human actions. I can identify three major orientations in this respect.

The first position, defended by some archaeologists and intellectuals, can be expressed as that of the professional archaeologists, mainly politically neutral or at least uninterested by the storms of political or economic debate around the excavations. Their ambition was to “write” the “real” history of the city, to clarify, by scientific means, what “really happened” between the Neolithic period and 1926, when the old city was gutted by the French Mandate engineers and Army officers. Beirut had to be fitted into a wider chronological and geographical perspective, that of the Levant and the Middle East.

The second position wanted archaeology to go straight to central questions: Where was the Beirut Law School, destroyed by the earthquake of 551? As accessory questions, where was the Phoenician city? Where were the Roman monuments or the Crusader churches? As such, this position is grounded in ideological considerations. While the questions posed are important, they are no more central than any other one. The Beirut Law School was only one of many buildings, even though, granted, it might have once been famous. But excavating a city is not just bringing to light an isolated object, but a whole urban context, including its social dimensions. The very fact that a Roman-Byzantine building was chosen, and not, say, a Mameluke one, indicated a choice of objects and particular time frame, if not a cultural or religious bias.

The third position, mainly defended by Solidere, wanted the excavations to be as short as possible, and to limit the zone to specific areas so as not to hinder the rebuilding process; whatever was found, of whatever epoch, could eventually be integrated in the project, exploiting its cultural or touristic value and thus increasing the land value of the plots. While apparently neutral, this position was, in fact, deeply affected by political and personal pressure put on the Company and on the excavation operations. The aim was to safeguard particular interests of owners of certain plots so that they would not be affected by delays or legal quibbling over the archaeological finds. As such, the underground city was seen more as a hindrance to economic profitability or to engineering efficiency, or even as a non-issue, than a future asset in a larger urban plan.

The last two positions were retained. The “negative city”, the invisible, covered, mysterious underground city would be used as “proof” of the continuity between the Beirut’s deep past and the reconstruction project. The buried city would be opened, cleared of dirt, cleansed and exposed to the public eye. The past would be symbolically purified by exposing it to the light of day while integrating it into a modern, economically profitable project.

However, a strict choice of objects and periods would be made. The Phoenician, Roman and Crusader periods were deemed worthy of excavation and eventual preservation, while the Pre-Canaanite, Persian, Byzantine, Ottoman or Mameluke periods could be safely ignored. Whenever possible, large monuments, columns or mosaics would be preserved, as they had manifest visual (i.e. touristic) interest.

Archaeology was thus put in the service of two objectives: economic profitability and National identity. Traces of the Phoenician city would give proof that Lebanon and today’s Lebanese were descendants of the Phoenicians, “confirming” a myth invented by a Jesuit missionary in the early 19th century and which was the basis of

Lebanese nationalism. The Roman period would confirm the city's links with Latin culture and civilization, while the Crusader period would stress the role of the city as an interface between the Orient and Western culture, religion and art. On the other hand, the Ottoman period, associated with the Turks, was synonymous in schoolbooks as the decadent oppressors, which had occupied the country for over 400 years. In all logic, they could not have built or left anything of interest to the Lebanese. The Mamelukes were, after all of Egyptian origin, while the other periods were too markedly "Arab", which, through a semantic anachronism, meant "Pan-Arab".

The excavations were thus to be directly linked to the construction of the national identity. Being Lebanese meant not being Syrian, neither Palestinian, nor really "Arab", nor Turkish, nor Cypriot, etc. Being Lebanese really meant descending from chosen ancestors, and not being just an end product of a very complex and rich local and regional history. Being Lebanese, through a circular tautology, meant being part of Lebanon, a land that had always existed and which had, by essence, a specific cultural and historical identity. Archaeology was all about Nation-building and *not* about scientific investigation of the past.

However, this aim could only be effective if archaeology was transformed into a *spectacle*. The public must be able to see, touch—and thus physically confirm—the past, and not just simply read about it. There must be "proof" of the past, something material to awake images and dreams, which, in turn, would give life to the Nation's history. Spectacular ruins, dramatic illustrations, hyped legends and stories would be put to use to confirm that the excavated city was not just another Middle-Eastern city, but a unique, completely different one in respect to neighbouring countries. Its uniqueness would equate with the uniqueness of the "Largest reconstruction project in the World".

The negative city thus becomes positive; it can philosophically be part of the positivistic approach to the city and be an element of its new master plan. The archaeological spectacle is introduced into the equation used to create centrality in the city. The negative city will be used to attract visitors (seen as consumers of images and of derived products) and investors, who are presented as being the active participants of a larger heritage operation.

An example. The space between Maarad and the Place des Martyrs was designated as being of archaeological importance. The real question is, of course, why there and not elsewhere? Elsewhere, whole areas were "excavated" by bulldozers, then destroyed without any explanation given. *Those excavations were, in the main, in no way scientific, nor were they intended to be.* Notwithstanding the seal of approval given by UNESCO, the excavations were poorly conducted, with no experts of urban archaeology being part of the operation; publications are rare and fragmentary.

In this designated and "protected" area, the "Garden of Forgiveness" is an example of the recycling of History and the use of careful archaeology. Located on excavated plots between the Maronite and Greek-Orthodox Saint-George cathedrals, a garden was planned to be the locus of an evolved form of recreated public space. Here, the last remnants of the 18th to 20th-centuries Ottoman city were flattened between 1976 and 1993; the excavations brought to light parts of the Roman *cardo* and the associated city, without going deeper. On this site, a garden was planned, with pathways built above it, re-creating the trace of the streets and alleys of the destroyed souks. Here, the Lebanese of all political and religious creeds would meet and put a

definitive, symbolic end to the civil war. The excavated city would thus be part of a political operation; as a side effect, it would also create added value to the rehabilitated buildings overlooking the site.

Another example can be given around the frantic quest to find the Law School, presented as being Roman, but in fact Byzantine. Finding it under or close to the Parliament would be of extraordinary symbolic value: today's Republic would metaphorically and physically have its roots in the Roman Empire's most prestigious law school. If found under the Maronite cathedral, then that community could claim direct links with the West; if found under the Greek-Orthodox cathedral, then the Byzantine continuity of that *Beiruti* community would be confirmed. Happily, the School was never found.

Another site looked for was the *Anastasis*, or the Church of the Resurrection during the Byzantine period. From literary sources, it would have been close to the School, and was the main church of the city, famous all over the Levant. It would have been the heart of the Christian city before the Muslim and Crusader conquests. Its symbolic value would be enormous, as it was the epicentre of all religious and cultural activities of the Christian community. Hopes were high to find it under the Greek-Orthodox cathedral, but in vain. Leads pointed to the Omari mosque, but for obvious reasons, permission was denied to excavate in or under it in order to find it. No doubt, the latest extensions to the Mosque, conducted in 2002, have destroyed whatever archaeological evidence there may have been, thus settling the question forever.

Thus, the aim of excavating the city was not to clarify some historical point, but to "prove" some ideologically useful one. Nation building, Lebanese identity, even *Beiruti* identity are stakes present in archaeological excavations, all over the country. This is not a Lebanese specificity, as *all* countries have used archaeology as a useful tool.

But with most of the traces of the Beirut's past now destroyed, the official version of Lebanese history can be perpetuated without any new or "revisionist" ones proposing alternative versions. Awkward historical questions can be eluded, National heroes maintained in their place, romantic explanations given to facts. The Lebanese can now contemplate columns and Roman streets, without any of the peripheral details which would have re-written the country's official history.

Perhaps that is the price to pay for a neutralized post-war society?

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