



**HAL**  
open science

## Beirut. Transcultural Currents in an Arab City

Michael F. Davie

► **To cite this version:**

Michael F. Davie. Beirut. Transcultural Currents in an Arab City. Muæ, 1997, Collapsing New Buildings, 2, pp.122-129. hal-01091890

**HAL Id: hal-01091890**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01091890>**

Submitted on 7 Dec 2014

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Beirut

## *Transcultural Currents in an Arab City*

Western stereotypes posit that all Arab cities are characterized by labyrinthine streets flanked by mysterious walled dwellings that are closed to foreign eyes, yet from which all can be observed. Hopelessly disorganized, noisy, and dirty, the neighborhood souks overflow with shoppers identically clad in flowing robes, though the women are veiled, fleeing the inquisitive Westerner. Influenced by extremist ideologies and sympathetic to international terrorism, the Arab city, both in form and content, is thus seen as an isolated, autonomous object—it lives and develops on its own, gives nothing to the outside world, and refuses to adapt. It is both fossilized and unintelligible.

This model of a monocultural Arab city exists, of course, only in the Western minds that created it; the reality is, and has always been, far more complex. In fact, Arab cities are engaged in a permanent process of redefinition and mutation through a continuous influx of transcultural influences. One could even argue that the “Arab City” does not exist at all.

Beirut serves as a perfect heuristic example of this. High-rise buildings dominate its skyline, with streets chockful of cars weaving between them. Here and there, a surviving spot of greenery is lost

in the dull polluted gray of the city. Nothing remains of the old “Arab” town, located in the heart of the city; damaged during the civil war, it was flattened to make way for the reconstruction of the city center. On Beirut’s outskirts, spreading slums and squatter areas abut luxurious hotels and apartment blocks. Signs of building and intense activity are everywhere, and high-speed launches and jet-skis criss-cross the sea while planes roar in and out of the city’s airport.

And yet, less than a hundred years ago, Beirut’s low skyline was red and green, punctuated here and there with a minaret or a church steeple and, in the distance, the imposing mass of snow-covered Mount Lebanon. Sailing ships and coal-fired merchant vessels from all over the world converged on its port, the best in the eastern Mediterranean. The buildings that housed its merchant bourgeois combined a curious amalgamation of influences and materials: red-tiled roofs from Marseilles; Provençal shutters; Italianate balconies; sanitary fittings from Paris, Lyon, or London; oriental gardens, etc. Buildings housing the lower classes—or the few that survived the previous pre-industrial period—might not have had access to these same decorative innovations, but

the internal layouts of both types of dwelling still followed the Arabic, and more generally, Mediterranean “Central Hall” model in which family members are placed in rooms arranged around a central space called the *diwan* and presided over by the pater familias.

The 19th-century Beirutis — at least the upper- and middle-class ones — also adopted a complex mixture of cultures. As Ottoman citizens, they were participants in the general movement of the *Tanzimat*, or the progressive westernization of the Empire. Men and women alike were educated in schools financed by the French, English, Scots, Prussians, Italians, or Russians, with local community schools also being provided by Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, Maronites, Jews, Latins, and Sunnis. Multilingual conversations were the norm, with Arabic as the mother tongue, Turkish as the language of governmental administration, and one or more European languages for social conversation. Through economic links, the local bourgeoisie had contact with Damascus (Beirut was, after all, the port of the Syrian interior), as well as with Aleppo, Constantinople, Izmir, Alexandria, Marseilles, Liverpool, Manchester, Naples, Venice, and the Americas. The latest technological innova-

tions and fashions from abroad — ranging from electricity, running water, heating, and transport to eating habits and dress — were rapidly integrated into everyday life. Varied cultural influences also came from rich urban art centers of the Near East such as Cairo and Alexandria, and from religious sites such as Jerusalem, Medina, or Mecca.

At the end of the First World War, the previously Ottoman Levant was conferred upon France by the League of Nations. From the 1920s to the 1940s, Beirut and its surrounding mountains (together with large portions of geographical Syria) became part of the French “Mandate” in the Middle East. Beirut was made capital of a newly invented Republic, and the city became a beacon of French influence in the eastern Mediterranean. The center of the city — previously the heart of the local commercial, cultural, and political activity — was flattened and rebuilt along contemporary lines: straight avenues converged on a *Place de l’Etoile*, complete with a newly built Parliament. Banks, offices, shops offering European merchandise and foods — and even French-style bars, bordellos, and cabarets — replaced the “Arab” vegetable, fish, and meat souks, as well as the traditional coppersmiths, carpenters, booksellers, and

perfumers. French became the official language alongside Arabic, and through it, the values of the "Metropole" and the republican political system were highlighted. The automobile became the main means of transport, encouraging the spread of the city towards the gardens and orchards that surrounded it. Beaches without sexual discrimination were opened, complete with French names (L'Ondine, Club Français, Saint-Georges, Saint-Simon, Côte d'Azur). Organized tourism made its formal introduction, and modern hotels were built on the sea-front to cater to the increasing flow of visitors. In the city itself, the vast red-tiled houses were slowly replaced by rented apartment blocks, albeit in an architectural style that mixed revised elements of the previous period (the interior layout, the wide windows, the use of marble) with the introduction of concrete.

Despite all this, previous cultural influences were not abandoned. In addition to French and Arabic, conversations were sprinkled with Turkish, Italian, or English words. Men, at least the older generation, might put on a tarboush, or fez, in addition to their Western suits. Women wore the latest French fashions, but those who were Muslim would also cover their faces in public with a fine veil. French musical hits were available for listening on the newly invented phonograph, as were the voices or music of Arab stars, recorded locally or in Egypt. New ideas and messages were being broadcast over the radio, influencing the emergence of radically new political parties, both to the Left and Right. The nargileh was still smoked, but cigarettes had begun to predominate. Bread was available in both the traditional flat form and as *franji*, a French baguette.

These subtle changes marked the slow demise of the domestic patriarchal organization of the



family and its replacement by more autonomous family units. Similarly, the very effective Ottoman system of managing the Republic was replaced by a local variant of Western democracy, based on the proportional representation of the different religious groups. Traditional urban society and its associated values were replaced by a system that was outwardly more "modern," but which lacked any of the previous social and political controls.

Lebanese independence, obtained in 1943, brought about the end of France's military and administrative presence throughout the Middle East; the 1950s marked the decline of French influence and its replacement by a more American- and British-inflected culture. Only a few years after the formal end of the French presence, Beirut saw an influx of Palestinian refugees, displaced or evicted from their country as a consequence of the Israeli military actions of 1948. The Palestinians, or at least the educated segments of that society, brought both capital and their British-influenced culture. English became the dominant language for business in Beirut, which in turn facilitated the introduction of still other lifestyles. A new quarter, Hamra, was built to accommodate the banks, cinemas, apartment blocks, supermarkets, and department stores that epitomized the new type of economy being embraced by the city.

Strategically located in the eastern Mediterranean and possessing both a port and an airport, Beirut was the lone remaining Arab staging post after the creation of Israel. Combining a completely liberal economic system with a concentration of skills, knowledge, and capital, Beirut economically monopolized the profits of Gulf state sheiks, emirs, and companies, suddenly rich from the discovery of oil. In addition, it was the only port still open after the repeated closings of the Suez Canal in 1956 and 1967. Living standards rose through this contact with the Saudi and Gulf states, particularly from the revenue being sent back to the country by Lebanese expatriates.

Beirut society was willingly shedding all the cultural influences judged to be "archaic"—i.e. "Arab." The more affluent or educated Beirutis were now speaking English as well as French, listening to American music, eating in sidewalk cafes or in Italian, Chinese, French, Spanish, Indian, Portuguese, Swiss, Austrian, English, Japanese, and German restaurants, following the latest fashions, and reading literature from the West. Listening to Arab music was now in very bad taste, at least in the upper classes, as was smoking the *nargileh*, or even speaking Arabic. To show that one was "modern" meant adopting not only the external attributes of Western civilization (cars, furniture, dress, dance, etc.) but also thinking and acting like a Westerner. Holidays were to be spent in European countries, not in nearby Syria. Local political allegiances were scorned, and local intellectual production ignored. The only interesting films, music, or literature—the only important ideas and ideologies—were those produced outside the Arab world. More old red-tiled mansions were torn down to make room for "modern" apartment blocks, complete with supermarkets, cine-

mas, discos, and underground parking. Amongst the middle and lower classes, however, things were not so clear-cut. Both Christians and Muslims were torn between the necessity of joining the prevailing cultural currents and maintaining some sort of social and political coherence. How could one be "modern" —i.e. Westernized—when this imported culture was destroying the fabric of society, its spatial context, its values and certitudes? How could the Arab language be updated to function in fields such as science? How could one deify the West that created Israel? Could there be some sort of median path that was both Arab and "modern"? Could socialism, Nasserism, or revolution be answers? These were some of the existentialist questions being discussed in the 1970s by Beirutis while sipping Turkish coffee in sidewalk cafes, watching mini-skirted girls ambling by and shoppers hailing service taxis that blared out Arab music.

The civil war in Lebanon, which resulted in the massive displacement of people from the countryside, added a rural atmosphere to Beirut's already heady mix of cultures. Offices, hotels, and apartment blocks that had been "requisitioned" by the militias were converted into free, if squalid, housing for refugees. As the function of rooms changed in accordance with rural habits, walls were pulled down, transforming the apartments into duplicates of homes left behind in the villages. Between 1978 and the late 1980s, it was not uncommon to see sheep on balconies, tiny vegetable gardens, children playing in the streets, and a strict segregation of the sexes. Vegetable and meat souks spontaneously appeared in shopping malls once frequented only by the very rich. Department stores were converted into car-repair garages, with upper floors serving as military posi-

tions for snipers. Beirut became culturally amorphous—not strictly urban and without a dominant mode of cosmopolitan culture.

In addition to being ruralized, Hamra was very rapidly becoming pauperized, while the exodus of capital and resources to the previously rural outskirts of the city suddenly made them the most urban and modern sectors. Those who could migrated to the outskirts of the city and reinvented their social organizations, trying to continue as if nothing had really changed. The suburbs were hit by a frenzy of building. Others went abroad, to Paris, London, New Zealand, Venezuela, Mexico, Sweden, or the United States. Or they worked in the Gulf states, the Ivory Coast, Senegal, Greece, or Canada. Beirut upper-class and rural or semi-rural populations converged onto these freshly urbanized sectors at the outskirts of the city, creating a mix of cultures that had the potential to replace the city's center, now thoroughly dismembered into "East" and "West" Beirut.

In the heart of the city, a culture of war was being created. Parental authority disappeared as young people joined the militias. Drugs and promiscuity became the norm on the front lines. Conversations revolved around military issues, violence and death, and those who had left the

country. All other topics seemed out of place or irrelevant. Death was a part of daily existence, with obituaries plastered on every wall and gory photographs appearing in every newspaper and newscast. Architecture adapted to fit the new living conditions characterized by a lack of electricity and running water, and by the continuous danger of shellings and car bombs. Apartment entrances were barricaded and protected, underground shelters built and furnished, deep wells dug, and private electricity generators installed. Television and videos provided the only means of contact with the outside world, producing a society with a warped vision of things not directly related to daily survival. As all postal and most telephone lines were cut, communication became limited to a few friends or members of one's immediate family. Social visits, either in the city or elsewhere, were curtailed or stopped. The mental geography of the inhabitants was limited to the immediate neighborhood and one or two main roads.

As militias slowly took control of all aspects of daily life, the city's urban culture shed its rich heritage and was forced into a more uniform mold. Having long hair, reading newspapers from the "other" side of the line, listening to "their" radio broadcasts, or expressing opinions different from the imposed norms were all potentially dangerous. Political discussions were forbidden, books were censored, and in some places, gambling and alcohol were banned. In the southern suburbs of the city, the emergent Hizb Allah militia declared the tchador suitable for women, while religious imagery flooded the eastern areas of the city that were controlled by the Christian militias. "Love it or leave it," Beirutis were told, and tens of thousands, from both sides of the now divided city, decided it was time to leave. This totalitarian







atmosphere produced little except a rediscovered sense of solidarity among family members and neighborhood friends. It also forced new social relationships with people one did not choose: the refugee, the displaced, the militiaman, the thug. Violence became the accepted norm for settling conflicts ranging from petty domestic squabbles to larger confrontations. With the police force largely non-existent, the concepts of law and order became meaningless incantations. Compromise was not considered; civility was the exception, not the norm.

And yet the war ended. After 15 years of violence, Beirut was remarkably different: the city had been split into two spatial entities, with a clear Muslim majority on one side and a completely Christian population on the other. The Demarcation Line marked a broad swath of destruction that separated the high population densities in West Beirut—where hundreds of thousands of squatters (mainly Shi'ite) who had been displaced from South Lebanon by the Israeli army were settled—

and the nearly empty quarters to the east that had been cleared by displaced Christians and the militias. The suburbs on both sides of the Line also evolved according to their specific religious, geographic, and social identities. Such differences were marked through architectural details, colors, dress, smells, and sounds, as well as posters, graffiti, and the kinds of newspapers for sale.

However, everyone shared the same motivating dream: to succeed, to be rich, to move to a more distinguished residential area, to be one's own boss, to mix in politics, to be recognized as a local leader, a *za'im*. Models of such success came from many sources: the relative who came back to Lebanon after making an easy fortune in the Gulf states or Africa; the sly local militiaman who, thanks to his contacts in the underworld, became a respected member of the upper class; the never-ending American television series filmed in the glamorous soap opera worlds of Texas or California. American fashions, complete with jeans, baseball caps, t-shirts, and Ray-Bans, were ubiquitous, but a neu-



tral public space where all Beirutis could meet no longer existed. Each group, religious or social, met and mixed in their own particular areas. Inhabitants were now immediately identifiable by their place of residence. The city, having lost its cosmopolitan identity, was now slowly losing its socio-spatial unity.

Recognizing this, the authors of the Reconstruction of Beirut project proposed that the missing public spaces be reinvented in the heart of the newly rebuilt high-rise, high-tech city center. Appealing to the needs of the international financial community and upper-class residents, these developers suggested creating a new park and souk that would imitate their original 19th-century predecessors. It was hoped that this reconstruction, together with those buildings that had been saved from demolition, would reintroduce the special atmosphere and culture of pre-war Beirut into the city, which would then spread spontaneously to the outlying areas. Beirut would thus be fertilized from the center outwards. However, this plan reduced the urban culture of Beirut to two simplis-

tic and nostalgic elements: the "Arab" (the souks), and the partially French (the preserved colonial buildings). It ignored the fact that pre-war Beirut (from the fifties to the seventies) was characterized by a constant flux of trans- and polycultural influences, some ephemeral, others longer-lasting. The project to reconstruct Beirut somehow froze time, society, and culture into a mental framework that had never really existed.

So, what kind of culture prevails in Beirut today? Apart from the city center, which remains a very large, deserted piece of flattened real estate, the rest of the city is alive and convalescing. Once again, currents of all kinds can be found there, from the cutting-edge to the archaic. Today's educated Beirut is perfectly at ease in the Global Village, surfing the Internet, and taking part in discussion groups on local and international issues. His cellular telephone, used everywhere and at all times, keeps him in touch with the world. The spatial ghettos and demarcation lines that once limited ideas are disappearing, albeit only for the privileged few. The Beirut can tune into a multitude of channels,



from the numerous local stations (both legal and not) to Egypt or Saudi Arabia to CNN or Euro-News. Information control is no longer effective, as the Beirutis can listen to daily broadcasts from the BBC and Monte Carlo Radio, Damascus and Cairo, the Hizb Allah station and the ex-Christian militia for that extra bit of news necessary to understand the contents of the censored newspapers.

The Beirutis has thus evolved in a complex matrix of cultures, with no clear-cut monolithic cultural identity. Although a consumer of modern technological culture, the Beirutis still belongs to a traditional political society and still lives in a patriarchal family structure, the members of which usually settle in close geographic proximity. The once despised *nargileh* is now back in favor, as is Lebanese food. The popularity of the hamburger and fast-food counters are declining, as are the European restaurants, which are too expensive for the middle class. There has been a belated rediscovery of "traditional" cafes in the newly reconstructed, preserved, or make-believe urban environments, complete with backgammon matches and Arab music and costumes.

Even though the city may no longer exist in a traditionally recognizable way, patches of rich cultural mixes are emerging. The city rearranges itself in new spaces with different urban actors. In the street, *tchador*-covered women brush others in tight jeans and high heels; teenagers in Paris or London fashions mingle in Hamra with scarfed girls from the southern suburbs of the city. On the seaside avenue, lonely off-duty soldiers and workers ogle the scantily dressed rich and famous as they lounge in private beaches; these, in turn, have purchased most of the land in and around the city center and have invested millions in buildings that will imprint a new cultural identity on the city. Old

red-tiled mansions survive and are sometimes even rehabilitated in "modern" quarters. In the nearby slums, tightly knit patriarchal societies survive in precarious conditions, while elsewhere, homosexual couples can live in relative indifference in state-of-the-art modern condominiums. The Beirutis absorbs all of these repositionings and accepts all these different cultures, but can, at the same time, project archaic biases. For example, the indifferent use of the word "T'Abd" to mean slave, servant, and black person is reminiscent of a custom abolished over 150 years ago. Cultural intermixing is not accepted with the same speed or intensity by all strata of society, and past cultures still survive in today's continually redefined Beirut.

Is Beirut in any way unique in its adoption of a multitude of cultural influences? All Eastern Mediterranean cities have followed, at different paces and intensities, the same general model. Alexandria was once an example of this kind of intermixing, as was Smyrna before it. Today, Damascus—a far more conservative city—shows the same signs of transcultural adoptions, with Western influences being absorbed along with those from the Gulf. Latakia and Aleppo follow its lead. Even the villages of Lebanon or of the Syrian interior are practically indistinguishable from one another, exhibiting the same external characteristics while maintaining their own special "flavor." But surely that is what all cities are about: creating new urban identities by bringing together various cultures. That is their basic definition and function: no city would work without transcultural exchanges and exclusions, and Beirut is no exception.