The Un-Built Lebanon: From the Romantic Gaza to Deferred Urbanization (and Back Again)?

Michael F. Davie

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The Place That Remains

Recounting the Unbuilt Territory

ما تبقّى

edited by
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The Un-Built Lebanon: From the Romantic Gaze to Deferred Urbanization (and Back Again)?

Michael F. Davie[1]

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 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 twelve times in the Bible, and in the sixty-four 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 up through the dark green pine forests to the immaculate white snow-clad mountain summits. Everywhere, only faint signs of the built-up should be seen, ideally limited to quaint villages situated 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 expression of this special relationship between Nature and the spiritual, or even with the divine, a sort of "message." The un-built, the "natural" would be a central *topos*, an obvious synonym of Lebanon.

"Built," "un-built," space and place

But identifying, conceptualizing and locating the "un-built" is no easy task in the social sciences, as all the words or notions used—from "space" and "built," to "territory" and "landscape"—are semantically polymorph and chaotic. The "un-built" is quintessentially inseparable from the built, just 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 is a different objective reality from the built; we are also 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. Architects conceive, plan and build on "empty" space, leftover, useless or made "free" by the destruction of once-built spaces, while urban planners organize the whole show and try to adapt laws and by-laws, with varying 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 wrongly implies that only built space is a product of human activity. But as *all* space is a social product (Lefebvre 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, at times even considered 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. Tim Ingold neatly explains this terminological difficulty: "So the thing itself and its image are expressed by the same concept. [...] the concept of landscape is cultural and more concrete: it is nature or space perceived and totalized by man; [landscape] belongs neither to nature nor to culture, but it is rather their mediation or alliance. Landscape is nature and culture at the same time, it is their mediation, synthesis or alliance" (Ingold 1997). The un-built is thus both 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 now lie buried under thick sediments, to the joy of archaeologists.
The concept of "culture" will be used in a simple way: it is 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. Our space—now a "place"—is the space that has, or makes, sense, and which we recognize and identify ourselves with. It is central to our identity, to our 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.
So, space, whatever its physical characteristics, has value. Perhaps it does not have the same value for all, since affective, sentimental, symbolic, or ideological values cannot be compared to simple commercial value. Intuitively, there must be a link somewhere between space, affect (or nostalgia), and an individual's or a group's identity. In other words, space has value not only for individuals, but also for groups, which can include the State or the Nation. To put it differently, 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 all. 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 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 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 of the built and the un-built becomes the homeland of thoughts, the territory of ghosts (Nagle 2017; von Hirschhausen 2017), the locus of many-layered meanings, which require fine-tuned geographical methodologies, not least a humanistic approach (Cosgrove 1989), or a "pensée complexe." 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, of constructions of meaning, of memory and stakes, all leading to the invention of tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 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 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 all.

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

In this presentation, I will examine the way the spaces of the un-built in Lebanon have been represented, by both Lebanese and foreign observers, between the start of the nineteenth century and today. As mentioned previously, the "un-built" 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-eighteenth-century *Weltanschauung*; in Lebanon, it was both adopted and adapted, to be replaced in the twentieth century by partially overlapping capitalist and postmodern narratives.

Briefly, the first period can be placed between the middle of the nineteenth century and the last years of the French Mandate; the second spanned the first twenty-five 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, and fueled different narratives on heritage and cultural values.

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 eighteenth- and nineteenth-century western literary and artistic current. It refers to scenes of unspoilt 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 sidelines; 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, and so forth.

These descriptions were followed by paintings or engravings highlighting an escape from the cluttered towns and cities (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 1994, 1996; Debbas 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.

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 *Beiruti* "three-arched house" were a variation on the theme of unspoilt Nature. Here, the local bourgeoisie adopted the Western aesthetic norms for the new residential quarters and very clearly rejected the local, "traditional" architecture (Davie 2003, 2016; Khater 2003; Mollenhauer 2003, 2002; Hauser, Lindner, and Möller 2016). It was as if the outward movement from Beirut's historical center 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 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 nineteenth century (the *Nahda* and the *Tanzimâts*, 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 World War I. Lebanon being unique by its landscapes, it was obviously a different country from its neighbors, 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 upon 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 twentieth 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 *muhâjirîn*, who craved for a "return" to "traditional cultural values." They re-invented the village and its identity (Khater 2001), 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, the country's 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 its rapid integration into the new post-World War II economy dominated by the United States. 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 urbanized, "filled in" and crisscrossed by roads and communication infrastructures. The un-built belonged to the "white spaces" on the map that had to be erased and included in "normal" space.

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. 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.

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 television series. Even the cinema took up this topic, such as Nasser's *Ila 'ayn?* (Davie and Davie 2017; Koteit 2017), edging close to a melancholic local *saudade*. Another tipping-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 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 remodeled according to the labyrinthine whims of pure capitalistic supply 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? And with the end of the "traditional" cultural values associated with the country, which ones could replace them?

What role could be given to the Place That Remains? What value could be given to these fragments of landscape after the spree of disfigurement and of destruction? The collusion between the power structure of the country and the neoliberal economy is such that space is now mainly thought of as being exclusively a commodity or an asset, an object to be sold and bought, with profits extracted from marketing the view, the landscape, or the return to a re-invented and very kitsch "authentic" architecture and *cadres de vie*. Little does it matter that this very landscape currently has no intrinsic interest, nor does it seem as worthy of protection—even UNESCO heritage sites (such as the Qadisha valley) are now being considered to be taken off the list as no-one seems able, nor willing, to take measures to maintain elementary norms.

As for the cultural values, the debate is open as to what is "Lebanese." Are there any core values left—and have they ever existed? Or are Lebanese now so woven into other cultures that it is vain to identify any particularity? The Lebanese all speak at least three languages, sometimes in one sentence, while some even speak four, or five, even with a smattering of Sri-Lankan, Hindi, or Philippino expressions. Is there still such a thing as "authentic" Lebanese food? Is there anything specific about the Lebanese landscape?

Here is the core question: If the landscape and the Place That Remains are part of Lebanese culture, then we need to define these values if they are to have any chance of being safeguarded and transformed into heritage. 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-story 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' Bayroût* 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. 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, 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.

Concluding remarks

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, immanence and memory. 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 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 2017), immanence and memory (Jones 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 in 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 thanks to 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 is very far from simple aesthetic considerations.

The un-built is evolving into the unbuildable (Harbison 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, just another ploy to translate memory and nostalgia into "easy faces of cosmopolitanism." Whatever the case, 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 multi-layered, Lebanon. The un-built is becoming the "place of condensation of the nation," the locus for preserving the nation's past, with a romantic Lebanon 2.0 presented as both trendy and strategic for the country's survival.

The un-built is thus, in essence, the building block of the future.

[1] Department of Geography, University of Tours (France) and CNRS-UMR "Espaces, Nature et Culture," Paris-Sorbonne.

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