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Éric Verdeil

To cite this version:

Éric Verdeil. Plans for an unplanned city : Beirut (1950-2000). Worldview. Perspectives on Architecture and Urbanism from around the World, 2005. halshs-00007780

HAL Id: halshs-00007780

https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00007780v1

Submitted on 28 Feb 2018

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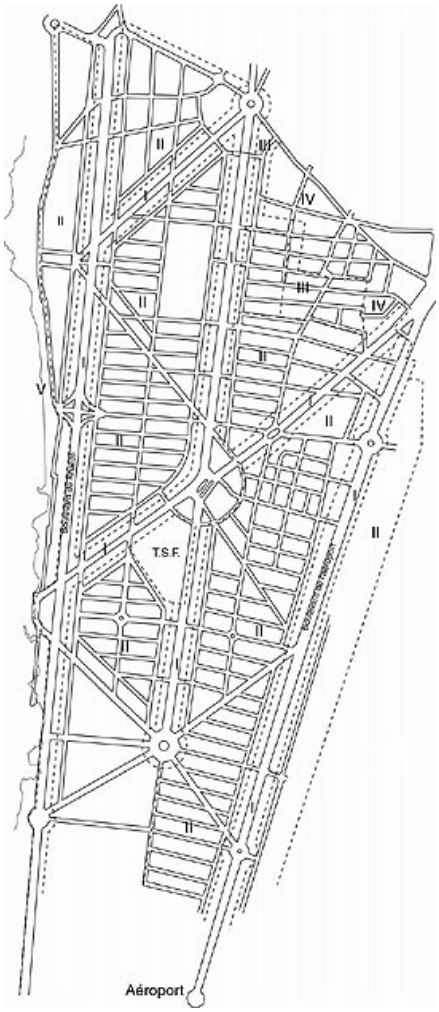
PLANS FOR AN UNPLANNED CITY: Beirut (1950-2000)

By Eric Verdeil

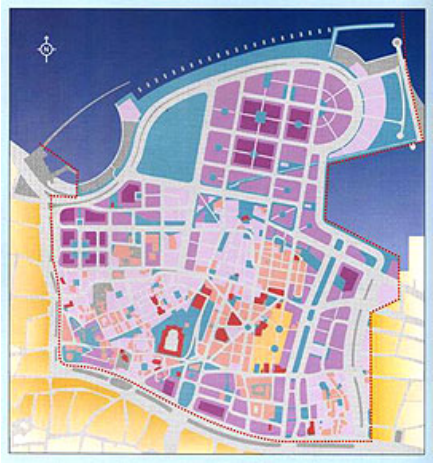
Within the ring of boulevards that circumscribe the municipal perimeter of Beirut today, the dominant feature of the urban landscape is the high density of concrete structures, mostly indiscriminate mid-rise and high-rise buildings that cast their shadows on the remaining vestiges of villas or low-rise "yellow" houses of the French Mandate period. The buildings' irregular setbacks create discontinuity in the urban fabric, and the scarcity of sidewalks, frequently occupied by cars, reduces pedestrian space, aggravated by the quasi-absence of urban parks and public spaces. In the middle of the city, the wartime dividing line remains desolate, with large tracts of no-man's land and bullet-ridden facades. The war has accentuated the chaotic spreading of the city alongside the highway, where the hills surrounding the capital provide substitute residential suburbs for the middle classes fleeing the high real estate prices in the city.

It would be however a mistake to assume that such an "unplanned" growth is the result of the absence of any regulations or urban directives. On the contrary, planning the city has always been a major objective of the successive governments since the Independence (1943) and until the Civil War (1975-1991). Major urban planners from Europe, like Constantinos Doxiadis (1958), Father Lebret IRFED's Team (1959-64), Michel Ecochard (1961-64), the Atelier Parisien d'Urbanisme (1977) and recently the Institut d'Aménagement et d'Urbanisme de la Région Ile de France (1983-86 and 1991 onwards) have made various urban proposals for Beirut. Ecochard's plan for Beirut is the most representative of the State's effort. It attempted to organize the growth outside the congested city around a "governmental new town". In addition, it planned new infrastructures and remodeled the center. In the same years, Doxiadis drafted a comprehensive housing plan for the whole country while the IRFED set up a national strategy for "harmonized development", including a polarization scheme intended to balance Beirut's growth. Local engineers and architects were commissioned to realize specific urban projects, or to collaborate with the European planners mentioned above, architects and engineers like Farid Trad, Joseph Najjar, Gabriel Char, Mohamad Fawaz, Amine Bizri, Assem Salam, Henri Eddé, Pierre al-Khoury, or consulting firms like Dar al-Handasah . They played a great role of accommodating, filtering and implementing the projects.

Thus, Beirut's architectural landscape derives from a number of building regulations, influenced by the Athens Charter but altered in order to fit the interests of the land owning class that never ceased to be socially prominent, enacted in the 1954 Beirut master plan and in the plan for the suburbs drafted by Ecochard in 1964. The highway grid set up by the same French planner, gradually realized by the Lebanese government, oriented most of the actual urban network. The successive attempts to plan a "new city" in the southern suburbs in 1907, then in 1953 and in



Master Plan for the Governmental City, by Michel Ecochard (1961).



Solidere's Master Plan in the City Center (1994).

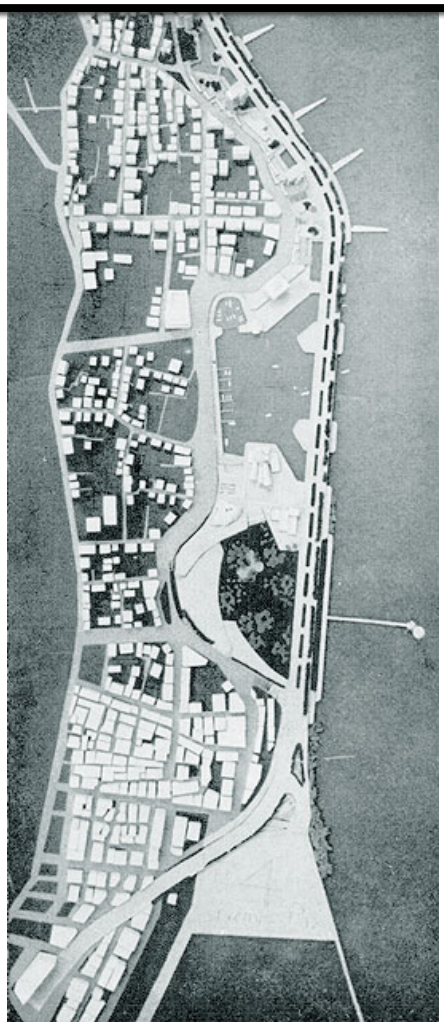
this case, an indirect byproduct of planning efforts is the emergence of this "illegal city". In other places, irregular settlements or buildings were, although temporary at first, later officially sanctioned by special planning measures that thus allowed their consolidation .

After the end of the war in 1991, a private company, Solidere, has been commissioned to study and implement a new plan for the city center, 80% of which had been erased after the end of the war. The project bore the imprint of Rafic El-Hariri, who would later become Prime Minister of the government. Hariri already offered his services in 1982-1983 to former president Amine Gemayel by sponsoring studies for the city center, which started the process of large-scale destructions during the brief reconstruction effort of that time. Further studies by Hariri's consulting firm explored various scenarios expanding the logic of tabula rasa, which were partially enacted in Solidere's final schemes for the city center.

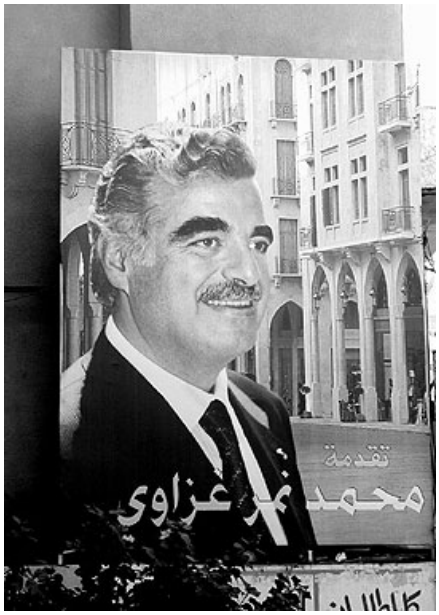
The war-time destructions made the renovation and the modernization of the city center necessary, yet this could have been done in less radical ways. The previous uncompleted episodes of planning of this strategic center largely affected many radical features of the present-day scheme. The architectural and urban emphasis, in both the ancient and actual plans, reflects the common modernist inclination of a generation of professionals who led these efforts from the Sixties to the Nineties, and who eliminated in their proposals the existing urban fabric. The sea reclamation in Saint Georges' bay for example was the natural result of leveling a wartime dump, but it was also featured in previous plans of building on reclaimed land.

The objective of the Hariri government was to re-shape the image of the city center, and to use it as a tool and symbol for the economic recovery of the country. The project became the most notable achievement of the Prime Minister. Yet, one could argue that the price paid for the planning and political obsession with the center alone was too high, in relation to the unachieved efforts for the physical reconstruction of the rest of the city, including the dividing "green-line" which split the city into two parts during the civil war. In another example, in the southern suburbs, the ambitious project of Elyssar, launched in 1995, which aimed at restructuring an irregular settlement and providing new housing for nearly 80,000 persons, is still on paper due the lack of funding and to other political complications.

Beirut's recent history - war and reconstruction - lead us to look at the city through the lenses of exceptionality. But today's planning agenda (as identified in the National Master Plan by Dar al-Handasah and the IAURIF) has much in common with several developing cities in the world: uncontrolled urbanization, environmental damages and the concentration of urban transportation along the main coastal corridor.



Master Plan for Beirut and its Southern Suburbs (decree n°2616, 14 september 1953).



Rafik Hariri, then former and future Prime Minister, in front of the "levant-style" renovated Maarad street, in downtown Beirut. Source: photograph Eric Verdeil, all rights reserved.

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