Instituting Exclusiveness: Modern Lebanese architects and their society

Marwan Ghandour, American University of Beirut

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/marwan_ghandour/10/
Instituting Exclusiveness: Modern Lebanese Architects and their Society

MARWAN GHANDOUR
American University of Beirut

The number of architects in Lebanon has grown from a handful of foreign educated professionals with exclusive skills known to a few at the first quarter of the twentieth century, to form a sophisticated class of professionals that benefits, together with structural engineers, from exclusive legal rights to the making of buildings. While they became visible on state boards and committees, architects have seen their decision-making power over matters of buildings and the built environment consistently reduced in favor of other actors such as politicians, contractors and state bureaucrats. Architects are today overwhelmed by their shrinking effectiveness in the built environment; however architectural academic institutions still structure their programs and curricula on the assumption that architects have exclusive control over the building process. In fact, the Architectural academic discourse views its field of practice as dominated by the encroachment of others on the building process and rarely assumes a (much-needed) self-critical role. What is considered to be an 'unacceptable' condition of the built environment is viewed as an outcome of the degeneration of 'others' while architects, perceive themselves as outsiders to this 'degenerating' social condition. In this paper, I look back (swiftly) at the evolution of the architecture profession and discipline in Lebanon in order to work towards a re-assessment of the architect's position within the process of making buildings. I propose a critical outlook at the modern architectural practices in Lebanon within their social context in order to explain the current marginal position of the architect.

EXCLUSIVE PRACTICE

The 20th century witnessed the establishment of several modern institutions designed to organize the process of construction in Lebanon as well as the inauguration of academic programs teaching Architecture. The first Lebanese Building and Planning law was instated in 1940; in 1954 the Order of Engineers (and Architects) was established based on a semi-formal 1938 organization, and in 1959 the Ministry of Public Works instituted the Directorate of Town Planning (DGU). In what follows, I will discuss the social disposition of architects within the context of early twentieth century Lebanon in order to better assess their urge to collaborate in the making of the above listed institutions. I propose to read the development of the professional institutions that legitimate the role of the architect in building matters as a direct implication of the academic institutions that produced those architects.

Pierre Bourdieu, in his article "Rite of Institution," argues that credentials, academic or otherwise, are predisposed to act as "symbolic capital," whose accumulation is perceived as a process of accumulating competence. Academic credentials therefore affect the way people perceive the accredited person and what is expected from her. Furthermore, Bourdieu adds, those credentials change the way the accredited person perceives herself and encourage her to adopt certain obligations that conform to people's expectations. These pioneering architects, graduates of architecture schools in the United Kingdom and France, strived to establish an institutional framework for their practice in line with their education; that is a framework that could valuate the 'symbolic capital' they had accumulated in terms of professional credentials earned abroad, be it through their education, training or cultural values. Modern Lebanese architects thus aimed to create the necessary institutions to legitimate and define their role within the Lebanese society. They designed a framework that could recognize 'who they are' and 'what they stand for' within their society.

The act of institution is thus an act of communication, but of a particular kind: it signifies to someone what his identity is, but in a way that both expresses it to him and imposes it on him by expressing it in front of everyone—and thus informing him in an authoritative manner of what he is and what he must be.
Working within an institutional frame of reference reduces the possibility of alternative procedures and limits the architects’ struggle to a struggle between engineers and professionals, who are all produced and recognized by similar institutions. For example, with the establishment of the Order of Engineers (and Architects) the discourse over building affairs was almost entirely relocated within the space of the Order and limited to its recognized professions, mainly architects and structural engineers, both sharing the same professional title of muhandes. These legitimate institutional bodies define the boundaries within which professionals act, resist, or battle; a fact that conceals the possibility of other modes of operation, which could include other ‘non-institutionalized’ actors that are neither university degree nor engineers. In a relatively short period of time, architects were able to create spaces and procedures that would make them indispensable, such as building guidelines and construction approvals that were constituted, in form and content, in line with professional norms that followed their own structure of architectural knowledge. Their ability to do so, I believe, is due to the fact that a good number of these architects had familial connections to people in state power position, which brought an authoritative and state-complicit tone to their practices.

The establishment of the architectural profession along institutional lines has proved over time to contribute to the subjugation of the architect’s voice rather than its empowerment. I will discuss in the following paragraphs three ways in which this is happening. First, working from within state institutions and agencies, which implied legitimizing the profession by aligning with the power positions of the state, placed a social mark for the profession as a whole. Architects as designers or planners are now often perceived as state agents who are used to consecrate large planning schemes at the disadvantage (at best irrelevance) of other social factions. As such, the whole ‘class of professionals’ is seen as affiliated to state institutions by outsiders to the state and its agencies. This is specifically important because architects, as a ‘class’, aspired but never got to control the decision-making of the urban (physical) planning boards and committees. I am using here Bourdieu’s understanding of social classes where

[The ‘real class’... is nothing but the realized class, that is, the mobilized class, a result of the struggle of classifications, which is a properly symbolic... struggle to impose a vision of the social world...]

For Bourdieu social class is a class-in-the-making that marks difference within social space, which is constituted in the present by affiliating to certain “goods and practices.” In adopting exclusive practices that are not historically webbed within the local social context, the class of architects differentiated itself from other non-professionals and formulated an introverted class. The class of architects reproduces itself within the space of the new institutions and through the credentials and modes of practice that the institution prescribes. Architects at best are looked at with suspicion both by the empowered and the powerless. While the former perceives the architect as an ambiguous prospective hindrance for the dissemination of his power, the latter suspects the architect to be the hand of the former in the materialization of his power in space.

Second, achieving centrality of decision-making power over the whole built environment through a single institution, (the DGU), further alienated decision makers from the population affected by their decisions. The DGU’s mechanisms of operation depend on developing master plans, within executive meeting rooms, using various modes of representations (personal, figurative, political, statistical) that eliminate the participation of any actor other than politicians and their professional agents. It is a mechanism that serves state authorities by providing them with tools of better control and further separation from the social affairs of the built environment. The failures of these master plans are numerous. One example is the concentric zoning law of Beirut (approved in 1964) that assigned higher exploitation factors to the center thus encouraging new development in the historical center and creating less incentive for development on the empty periphery. A more recent example is SOLIDERE, the company responsible for the reconstruction project of Downtown Beirut, after the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990. The SOLIDERE project transformed property rights in war-torn downtown Beirut into public shares administered by a single real estate company. The company then initiated a project, which cleared entire neighborhoods and their historical fabric and preserved only few structures. This resulted in a colossal project of gentrification where the historical downtown was made into an “emporia of mass consumption” targeting local elite and foreign tourism. The entire project was conceived, drawn and produced behind closed doors in SOLIDERE’s headquarters and in the offices of their consultant Dar al Handasah, seeking the approval of the state figures that commissioned them in the first place. Such projects follow the whims of political leaders of the time with virtually no mechanisms or space for others to contribute or to resist, including the community of architects themselves. The space of the architect is invisible in the process. To the general public, the role of the architect in shaping their spaces remains ambiguous because it is practically “behind the scenes.” Master plan architects are can only be seen in their own offices and the offices of the state institutions that they have helped establish.

Third, the establishment of the profession along institutional processes embodied in objective structures, such as planning and building laws, has contributed to handing over building matters to bureaucrats, state agents, and politicians. The text, figures and numbers that constitute the building law empower bureaucrats with objective criteria according to which they can assess the legality and the value of the architectural project. The scope of the process of building permit assessment and approval is limited to ensuring that the design meets legal
requirements, regardless of its technical quality. Through the institutional processes, the design of the space of the building remains outside any discussion. However, legal architectural requirements that dictate built-up areas and exploitation factors are the subject of heavy political discussions because they determine the size and limit of building investment, and hence the potential profits of developers.\textsuperscript{11} For example, the Murr law 6/80, decreed for a two-year period by minister Michel Murr in 1980. This law allowed by increasing the exploitation factor to build an additional floor of an area equal to the largest horizontal projection. The law was issued to help resolve the housing problem in Lebanon by diverting the tax revenues of the additional floor to fund 20,000 residential units. It hence responded to a different planning and political goals unrelated to the organization of the physical space. However, while the said residential units were never built, the law has had a tremendous impact on the physical structures of the city because it enlarged the possible built-up area and thus modified permanently the skyline of Lebanese cities and villages. Since then, other interests have appropriated the law and attempts at terminating the Murr law have been resisted by developers and property owners alike. What was issued as a temporary two-year item is still in practice twenty-two years later.

In short, the institutional setups and the legal items they incorporate, originally formulated by architects to register their symbolic power, have also helped eject the architect outside the discourse on the built environment. This environment is ordered by the objective structure of the law with its consequent procedures, and supervised by state agencies.

EXCLUSIVE MISSION

Pioneers of modernism in Lebanon, such as Antoine Tabet and Fares Trad, were

engineers with solid academic training. Farid Trad graduated from the École des Arts et Métier in France [1926], and Antoine Tabet, after getting a degree in engineering from the École Superieure d’Ingenieurs in Beirut [1926], joined the atelier of the famous French architect Auguste Perret in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris [until 1928].\textsuperscript{12}

Both Tabet and Trad were keen on introducing modernity, its aesthetics, as well as its ‘way of life’ into Lebanon. Buildings designed by these architects tried to catch up with the rest of the developed world; altering their modern design methods to accommodate local requirements such as limitation of material, technical know-how, etc. These architects produced the first modern Lebanese buildings such as St. George Hotel (Tabet, 1931), Hikmeh School (Tabet, 1937) and UNESCO Palace (Trad, 1946) in Beirut that were architecturally influential for years. Those same architects helped to institutionalize the profession by contributing to the formation of laws, regulations and procedures of buildings and serving as presidents at the Order of Engineers (and Architects).\textsuperscript{13} However, it is the second generation that mostly forged the future personality of the Lebanese architect. Henry Edde (graduated 1946), Raymond Ghosn (graduated 1950) and Assem Salam (graduated 1950) among others belong to this generation. While these architects were active in building construction and legislation, they also engaged academic careers and helped in formulating the curricula of the architectural engineering degrees in Lebanon. Hence, their concerns were influential on a wider field than their predecessors. Assem Salam in a lecture delivered on May 20, 1957 at al-Nadwa al-Lubnaniyyah expresses such concerns with a discourse that still resonates until today, he says:

...the architect has missionary responsibilities to create a correct Lebanese architectural heritage, he has to preserve what we inherited and to direct [it] in order to create a better understanding of architectural values, and differentiate between what is authentic and what is ugly imitation.\textsuperscript{14}

Creating a new Lebanese Architecture stemming from the early “authentic” Lebanese architectural heritage is definitely an obscure goal because such a category is historically and stylistically unfounded. Even if certain Lebanese cities share similar architectural features, they do not distinguish themselves from the regional context of Syria and Palestine, as particularly Lebanese. Nevertheless, Salam’s definition of the Lebanese architect’s role represents the conditions onto which ‘good’ architectural practices were promoted in architectural education in Lebanon from the 1960’s onward. The urgent agenda of the profession is to create buildings that represent the so-called Lebanon identity and which are extracted and inspired from an ‘authentic’ Lebanese heritage at a point where identity and heritage in Lebanon had highly conflicting definitions among members of the Lebanese population.\textsuperscript{15} Salam’s call to create buildings that signify and give shape to a Lebanese identity/heritage is a far outcry to construct a unitary representation of a young nation by ‘sons and nephews’ of the creators of the nation.\textsuperscript{16} In practice, talking about a Lebanese architectural heritage meant a stylistic eclectic project in which heritage would be reduced to certain buildings that are positioned as reference models for modern architectural practices. However, calling for a local style is also a significant reflection of the inability of the architect to resist a Eurocentric thinking approach, indoctrinated through education, in which buildings are stylistically categorized, documented and taught in architecture history courses. The influence of this stylistic approach could further be detected in Salam’s discussion of traditional Lebanese architecture during the same lecture where he describes this form of architecture as not stylistically “strong” enough and not as “palatial as other Arab and European Palatial Architecture.”\textsuperscript{17}
Salam’s discourse, though local in its content, is part of the larger discourse on modernity in Europe in which architects assumed the role of social reformers. In his book “French Modern,” Paul Rabinow discusses French architects, trained at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts at the turn of the century, using architectural design as a tool to induce and control social activity. He discusses the early work of Tony Garnier, Ernest Hebrard and Henri Prost to illustrate this trend. For these architects of the early twentieth century modernism, the architectural object was considered to be capable of producing a pattern of behavior in people. It is through the architectural object that the social concern of the architect is manifested. I want to extend this understanding to say that the architectural drawing gained in the process a prominent status as it contained in addition to the formal dimensions of the object, the socially designed environment. This process dissociated the architect from people as he masteredminded their behavior through the object he is designing at the same time that he understood them through the objects they inhabit. It is within this mentality that I see the Lebanese architects are developing their profession. Their work required very little interaction with their society as their design discourse remained within architectural representations of that society. This is at a historical point were master plans were being formulated and building and planning laws were being written practically from scratch.

To go back to Salam’s lecture, it is his call for authentic local modernism, which will create the particular contradictory dynamics of the local practice. I consider it contradictory, as it is a practice that breaks with the social context and with non-local architectural practice at the same time that it claims being context-grounded and modern. While industrialization, mechanization, and urbanization were important challenges to modern world architecture in shaping the future, authenticating modern practices through ‘a local heritage’ gradually became the central challenge for Lebanese architects. While the Lebanese society was facing the challenges of modernization with the rest of the world, architects were facing their own self-created challenge: authenticating their modern practices. Lebanese architects as a result of perpetuating the duality of the ‘modern-authentic,’ created a local self-referential architectural value system, which excluded their society as well as non-local architectural concerns.

On another level, linking the production of any building in Lebanon to a national cause accessible only to a restricted number of architects seems not only utopic but also insensitive to other social factions. On the one hand, architects are expecting all building activity, irrespective of its class or system of production, to pursue this cultural/intellectual agenda: a condition that is not paralleled anywhere in the developed world in which stylistic diversity differs according to the different conditions of production and the different players in the project. On the other hand, concentrating all building activity to the hands of the architect can also be seen from the point of view of the engineers and contractors as a monopoly over the exchange of the large amounts of capital that exists in the built environment. For example, quick calculations indicate that in 1962, each of the 123 registered architect will have a volume of work of around 21,000m2, which amounts to more than double the average work volume of 1972, a year of relative financial prosperity demaricated with a building boom in Lebanon. See from outside the architects’ class, the call to subject all building activities to the architect’s jurisdiction voiced by Assem Salam in his 1957 lecture must have seemed absurd, for it not only marginalizes all other players in building projects but also reflects a desire to confiscate and monopolize a big investment market. As a result, the building market was shaped by the power positions, economic conditions and users’ demands within the building market and remained consistently resistant to attempts of inclusion by architects, each of which was deviated to reinsure their exclusion. For example, when the architects’ signature on building permit documents became legally mandatory in 1948, in most of the mass-produced building market, the architect’s signature was purchased, usually from fresh graduates, for a minimal cost added to the overall construction budget. However, it is within the context of Salam’s talk that new programs of architecture were created, thus prolonging and establishing the personality of the detached architect with an exclusive noble mission, who throws models of practice that are dissociated from the conditions of the social and built environment around her.

This lack of indulgence by the architects of the mid-century to their social context, I believe, has largely contributed to their current marginalization in matters of the built environment. In order to be able to participate in the construction industry, architects nowadays are forced to imitate the practices of the market. Rather than elevating market standards to meet academic aspirations, the approach of the professional and academic institutions of the 1950s and 1960s has lead to a situation in which the architectural and urban work of politicians, contractors, developers and construction workers determine the norms for the architects to follow.

NOTES

1 “The process of investiture…exercises a symbolic efficacy that is quite real in that it transforms the person consecrated: first, because it transforms the representations others have of him and above all the behavior they adopt towards him…and second, because it simultaneously transforms the representation that the invested person has of himself, and the behavior he feels obliged to adopt in order to conform to that representation.” Pierre Bourdieu, Language and Symbolic Form (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press; 1991): p. 119.

2 Ibid, p. 121.

3 The Arabic word Muhandisoon does not differentiate between architects and Engineers, hence the Nasbat al Muhandisoon literary translate as Order of Engineers but is inclusive of architects.

4 If engineering has already been known as an academic field since 1913 in Lebanon (at Ecole Superieure Libanaise d'Ingénieurs de Beyrouth-ESIB and
American University of Beirut-AUB), architecture is only to differentiate itself
in the fifties with the establishment of separate Architecture degrees at AUB
and Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts-ALBA. See Nabil Beyhm and Jad
Tabet, “Le rôle social des ingénieurs au Liban, idéologies de formation et
stratégies sociales” in Bâtisseurs et Bureaucrates: Ingénieurs et Société au
Maghreb et au Moyen-Orient (Lyon: E. Longuevilles, Éd., Maison de l’Orient

...to speak of rite of institution is to suggest that all rites tend to consecrate or
legitimize an arbitrary boundary, by fostering a recognition of the arbitrary
nature of the limit and encouraging a recognition of it as legitimate...” Pierre
Bourdieu, Language and Symbolic Form, p. 119.

Pierre Khoury, Assem Salam, and Henri Eide, prominent young architects of
the mid 20th century, are all closely related to State figures active during
independence period in Lebanon.


Salam argues, in 1957, that post WW2 Building Renaissance ... was missing
the “broad thinking that include a master plan that can preserve for the
capital Beirut its beauty and its natural situation that can situate its growth in
an accurate professional direction that the coming generations can follow.”
He later calls for a central planning authority affiliated with the ministry.
Assem Salam, al-Fnar wa al-Mashala al-Amma: fi l’Amara wa l-Madina
(Beirut: Dar al Jadid, 1965); p. 29, translation by the author.

I owe this realization to Assem Salam, in an interview, August 2001.

Sharon Zukin studies similar projects in which old city quarters are
transformed into large consumption markets, she says: “In the process of
revitalizing the waterfront, old piers and Main Streets were turned into
emporium of mass consumption. Beneath the image of locality these places
project, they are really marketplaces for goods that are not locally pro-
duced... Like high-class shopping streets, these shopping centers unify
international investment, production, and consumption.” Sharon Zukin,
Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World (Berkeley: University of

For a further discussion on the building law; see Marwan Ghandour,
“Building Law: a Critical Reading of the Lebanese Case,” 99th ACSA Annual

Jad Tabet, “From Colonial Style to Regional Revivalism: Modern Architecture
in Lebanon and the Problem of Cultural Identity” in Peter G. Rowe and
Hashim Sarkis, eds., Projecting Beirut: Episodes in the Construction and
Reconstruction of a Modern City (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1998); p. 84-85.

Farouk Trad was president of the Order of Engineers (and Architects) on 1959
& 1960; Antoine Tabet was president on 1954 and deputy president on 1951-
53, 1961-62, and 1963-64. Trad was also one of the founders of Académie
Libanaise des Beaux-Arts-ALBA.

29. translation by the author.

In 1958, a short civil war broke in Lebanon caused by the different Lebanese
groups claiming cultural identification and alliance to various regional and
international cultural and political forces.

As I mentioned earlier (endnote 6), reference here is to the familial bonds
between state people and the modern group of architects in Lebanon.

27-28.

Paul Rabinow, French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment
(Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1989). These architects are
discussed in chapter seven: Modern French Urbanism.

These conditions of modern architectural practices can be observed in other
postcolonial societies in their struggle to dissociate themselves from their
colonial past.

Original figures for these calculations are found in Order of Engineers and
architects Council Report 1995-1996 (Beirut: Order of Engineers and
Architects); p. 18-19.

Date confirmed in Nabil Beyhm and Jad Tabet, “Le rôle social des
ingénieurs au Liban, idéologies de formation et stratégies sociales.”
LOCAL HOST
Instituto Superior Politécnico José Antonio Echevarría

LOCAL CO-CHAIRS
Arq. Rubén Bancroft, Dean
Arq. Mario Coyula

LOCAL CO-SPONSORS
Union Nacional de Arquitectos y Ingenieros de la Construcción de Cuba
Arq. Norma Díaz, National President
Ing. Dulce Camejo, Provincial President

Union Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba
José Villa, President, Visual Arts Association

Sociedad de Arquitectura
Arq. Walter Guerra, National President
Arq. Roberto Caballero

Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad
Dr. Eusebio Leal, Director
Prof. Orestes del Castillo

Grupo para el Desarrollo Integral de la Capital
Ing. Julio Reyes Villafruela, Director

CONFERENCE SPONSORS
The Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture would like to acknowledge the support and assistance of the following:

- J. M. Kaplan Fund
- Reed Foundation
- Tulane University
  Center for Caribbean Studies
  School of Architecture, Koch Chair in Architecture
  Stone Center for Latin American Studies
- World Monuments Fund