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Building As Social Practice

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Introduction
The last century saw the establishment of various institutions that organized building construction in Lebanon as well as the formation of academic programs in architecture. The number of architects has grown from the handful who came from abroad in the first quarter of the twentieth century. With a skill known only to few, and forming a sophisticated class of professionals they, together with structural engineers, maintained exclusive legal access to the making of buildings. Architects have been involved in all matters of physical design, developing broad planning regulations as well as micro-scale spatial regulations that covered all Lebanese territory. On the whole, Lebanese architects have been ‘successful’ in establishing for themselves a profession that has secured positions on state committees concerned with the built environment. They have also been successful in distinguishing themselves from other engineers and contractors, legitimizing a specific role for themselves in the building market. These achievements were always triggered by a concern for the betterment of the built environment, best exemplified by Assem Salam’s plea in 1966 to save Beirut from its chaotic development, caused by buildings that are not designed by architects.¹

Along with this visibility on state boards and committees, architects have consistently had a lesser voice in matters of actual building and the built environment vis-à-vis other actors such as politicians, contractors, and state bureaucrats. While architects are dismayed by their shrinking effectiveness in building, exclusive control over the building process on their part is assumed in academic institutions, an assumption that structures the development of academic courses and curricula. Architectural academic discourse is often critical of the practice of architecture from the passive observer’s position. It regards the field of practice as others encroaching on the process and rarely assumes the role of self-assessment. The unacceptable environment is thus considered the product of the degeneration of ‘others’ while architects, in their proper definition, are set apart from this ‘degenerating’ social condition. Facing a hopeless state produced by others, the architect’s discourse within academic institutions rarely attempts to present alternatives to its present social condition, but rather discards and replaces it by another discourse judged ‘better’.

In this paper I try to look back swiftly at the evolution of architecture as an educational and a professional discipline in Lebanon in order to work towards a re-assessment of the architect’s role in relationship to others in the process of making buildings. The profession thus stops being a self-reflective process between the architect and the building and starts to operate within a social setting, in a specific space-time context and with concerned actors. In the following two sections, I work on a critical analysis of the making of the institutions that came to shape architectural practice and discipline in Lebanon. This analysis intends to link the phenomenon of making buildings to a larger social context: a context where the building is considered to be the space around which communication and interaction among different social bodies is performed.
Instituting Building-Making Architecture

Let me first focus on the institutions that were created to regulate the profession and building in accordance with the 'modern' way of practice. I will move, in the following section, to a discussion of the academic institutions and their ideological framework, which I believe constructed a particular Lebanese architect type. Building permits, since the establishment of the building law in 1940 (article 61/LE), were mandatory and issued by the municipality. In order to better guide the growth of the built environment in Lebanon, the Directorate of Town Planning (DGU), which is directly attached to the Ministry of Public Works, was established in 1959. The DGU is responsible for preparing master plans and ensuring their application. Another institutional body, which had already been created in 1954, is the Order of Engineers and Architects, which certifies engineering and architecture graduates and 'monitors' their professional performance, in addition to providing retirement and health benefits for this prestigious body of professionals.

These institutional bodies institute themselves through publications, enrolment fees, and established procedures, which are embodied within a legal text: the Building [and Planning] Law of Lebanon. Judging from the current situation of practice in Lebanon, this multi-layered system of supervision, which requires additional signatures for the building permit, still did not ensure greater involvement of architects in matters of the built environment. Physical planning in Lebanon has been continuously dominated and controlled by heads of the state, seeking personal and political benefits. Furthermore, the Building Law, which dictates building envelopes, heights, and land exploitation factors, is trapped within conditions that were introduced in 1940 by the French mandate law. Any change in its clauses, especially the one that affects exploitation factors, would start a whole debate over which land (in what area) gets to have more square meters to trade with. The potential added revenue of these extra square meters has to be equally repartitioned among the different confessional communities, as they inhabit the Lebanese landscape. It is in this context that I discuss the example of the Murr law 6/80, decreed for a two-year period by the then-minister in charge, Michel Murr. The law allowed, through increasing the exploitation factor, an additional floor of an area equal to the largest horizontal projection. It is interesting to note here that the DGU High Council at the time did not approve this law, but the state chose to issue it anyway. The law thus proposed a two-fold 'solution' for the housing problem in Lebanon: first, the construction of the additional floor and second the hypothetic use of revenue to fund 20,000 residential units. While those residential units were never realized, the law enlarged the possible built-up area and thus changed the skyline of many Lebanese cities and villages. Since then, attempts at revising the Murr law have always been webbed within a political debate and it is still in force to date.

It is important at this point to discuss the social dynamic of architects within the context of early twentieth-century Lebanon to better assess their urge to collaborate in the making of these institutions. One could read the development of these professional institutions that legitimate the role of the architect in building matters as an extension of the academic institutions that produced those architects. Pierre Bourdieu argues, in his article "Rite of Institution," that credentials, academic or otherwise, affect the way people perceive the accredited person and what is expected from him. Furthermore, he asserts that those credentials also change the way the accredited person perceives himself where he adopts certain obligations that conform to people's expectations. These pioneering architects, graduates of architecture schools in the United Kingdom and France, strove to establish a framework of operation that went in line with their education, that is a framework that could make use of their potential role and recognize what their degree stands for. Needless to say, Western education in architecture is the result of a long history of development of the architect's active role in Western societies. Lebanese Modern architects thus
had the aim to create those institutions in order to legitimate and define their role within the
Lebanese society, i.e., a framework that recognized their ‘credentials.’

“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.”

Unlike in the West, the absence of a sophisticated institutional state set-up that lets others recognize
the particularities of those credentials made architects battle mainly with structural engineers
who were more numerous, better-established academically, and shared the same professional
title: muhandes, or engineer. Furthermore, working within an institutional frame of reference
reduces the possibility of alternative procedures and concentrates the architects’ struggle against
other engineers and professionals, who are produced and recognized by similar institutions.
The legitimate institutional bodies, therefore, 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 who are neither university-degreed nor engineers.
Nevertheless, architects, in a relatively short period of time, were able to create spaces and pro­
cedures that necessitated their existence, a fact that was probably facilitated due to their familial
connections to people in positions of state power.

As a result of the institutionalization of the profession, the following three conditions contribute
to silencing the architect:

First, working from within state institutions and agencies, which implied legitimizing the
profession by aligning it with power positions or the state, created a social mark for the
profession as a whole. Architects as designers or planners are always looked upon as state
agents who are used to consecrate large planning schemes to the disadvantage of other
social factions. As such, the whole ‘class of professionals’ is considered to be affiliated with
state institutions by outsiders to the state and its agencies. This is specifically important
as architects, as a ‘class’, aspired to but never got to control the decision-making of the
urban-planning boards and committees. Architects at best are looked on with suspicion
both by the empowered and the powerless.

Second, achieving the centrality of decision-making concerning the whole built environ­
ment, the DGU further alienated the decision-makers from the population affected by their
decisions. Such a mechanism of operation depends on developing master plans within
executive meeting rooms, using various modes of representations, personal, figurative,
political, or statistical, eliminating any actors other than politicians and their professional
agents. It is a mechanism that serves authorities in providing them with better control and
the further marginalization of social involvement in developing the built environment.
The failures of these master plans are numerous. One example is the concentric zoning
law of Beirut that assigned higher exploitation factors to the center, thus encouraging
development in the historical center and creating less incentive for development on the
empty periphery. SOLIDERE and Elissar are more recent master plans for downtown
Beirut and a Beirut southern suburb respectively. While the first subdued all historical,
symbolic, and social meanings to major business fantasies, resulting in a colossal project
of gentrification, the latter secured a balanced share of all current political factions while
displacing large communities into subdivided enclaves. All these projects follow purely 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.
Third, the establishing of the profession along institutional processes embodied in objective structures, such as the law, has contributed to handing over control of building matters to bureaucrats, state agents, and politicians. The text, figures, and numbers that constitute building law empower bureaucrats with objective criteria according to which they can assess the legality and the value of an architectural project. Through institutional processes, the space of the building escapes any discussion, as the objective of these processes is to confirm meeting the legal requirements regardless of their constituency. According to the preceding discussion on the Murr law, legal architectural requirements are entangled with larger politics that resist change and thus remain outdated and at some instances pointless. Any resistance to this state of affairs cannot come from within the state institutions themselves but from the outside, in order to alter the mechanisms of these institutions, that is, resisting the objective structures (laws and procedures) that sustain such a social dynamic.

Building Exclusiveness—Making Architects

In this section I want to discuss the goals that architects attribute to their profession and the role they draw for themselves to play within those goals. These goals, in many ways, guided the development of the curricula of the academic professional programs that were instituted in the 1950s and 1960s. The pioneers of modernism in Lebanon, mostly graduates of Europe such as Antoine Tabet and Fareed Trad, were keen on introducing modernity, its aesthetics, as well as its ‘way of life’ into Lebanon. Buildings designed by these architects were trying to catch up with the rest of the developed world, however, altering their design methods to accommodate local conditions, such as limited availability of materials, technical know-how, etc. While the concerns of these architects were behind the struggle to establish the Order of Engineers and Architects, it is the second generation that mostly forged what the personality of the Lebanese architect would be. Architects such as Henry Edde, Raymond Ghosn, and Assem Salam belong to this generation and their concern is probably best expressed in Salam’s lecture on May 20, 1957 at al-Nadwa al-Lubanniah, in which he says:

‘... the architect has missionary responsibilities to create a correct Lebanese architectural heritage, he has to preserve what we inherited and to direct in order to create a better understanding of architectural values, and differentiate between what is authentic and what is ugly imitation.’

At that point it was not only architecture as a profession that needed to be established, but it was also a threatened heritage that needed to be saved and incorporated into the architect’s agenda. This exercise, made once more into a sublime goal, had no social foundation, a goal that was purely the concern of the intellectual architect, who was trained to visually assess the built form. Creating a new Lebanese architecture stemming from earlier Lebanese architectural heritage is definitely an obscure goal since such a category is historically and stylistically unfounded. Such a move meant the start of an eclectic project in which Lebanese architecture would be reduced to certain buildings in Lebanon. This is definitely an ideological/political proposal, which aims at creating a visible identity for a new nation, looking for any form of unitary representation, by sons and nephews of the creators of the state. It is also ideological as it separates the elite architects from their social context by adopting a paternalistic relationship to the rest of society. The project is created among intellectual architects and voiced as a national concern, a process that echoes the master plan schemes of operation which have been discussed earlier. I believe that this dissociation between the architect’s goals and the concerns of all other social groups has eventually confined architects socially and professionally.
On the professional level, if the architects' role is already confined within their society, if their profession does not have a strong base locally, they became also excluded from European architectural discourse as their agenda is exclusive of mainstream Western architectural concerns. This professional situation, that adopted a separatist modern-heritage agenda, has had major negative effects on the development of the profession, as it would be deterred from being included in modern architectural discourse. However, the newly instated procedures and laws that dictate modernist modes of operation have dissociated the body of the modern Lebanese building (that has to follow modern law) from its looks (that has to follow the identity discourse). However, the discourse on heritage in architectural practice is superficial and mainly happening around building façades.16

On the social level, linking the production of any building in Lebanon to a national cause accessible only to few architects seems not only utopian but also insensitive to all other social groups. 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, delivering all building activity into the hands of the architect can also be seen from the viewpoint of engineers and contractors to be a big monopoly over large amount of business that happens in the built environment.

If we make some hypothetical calculations to see what it means if all building activity had to be done by architects, we would see that in 1962 each individual architect out of the 123 registered will have a volume of work of around 21000m². Such an average amounts to more than double the average of 1972, a year of relative financial prosperity demarcated with a building boom in Lebanon.17 From outside the architects' circle, the request to subject all building activity to the architect's judgment, voiced by Assem Salam in his 1957 lecture, would have seemed absurd, since it not only marginalizes all other players in building projects but also reflects a desire to confiscate and monopolize a big investment market. Eventually this paternalistic relationship has resulted in alienating the architect, while the building market continued along its previous way. When the architect's signature on building permit documents became obligatory, in most of the mass-produced building market, the price of the signature was added to the construction cost! This lack of regard from mid-century architects to their social context, I believe, has largely contributed to their current seclusion and ineffectiveness in matters of the built environment. It is because of the fact that within the context of Salam’s talk, new programs of architecture were created which established the typology of the detached architect who produces models of practice that are dissociated from the building market. It is interesting to note here that this track of development of the modern architect in Lebanon has resulted in architects nowadays imitating the building work of contractors and construction workers rather than elevating the market standards to meet the academic ones, but this point remains to be elaborated on in another context.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis suggests that architects, in establishing their profession, aligned themselves strictly with representations of political power such as the law, the institutional order and state agencies, and thus dissociated themselves from other social structures. They overlooked the fact that their allied control agencies generate structures that are independent of them and the building (the target of their profession), thus subduing themselves to the mechanisms they established. Any re-evaluation or assessment of the condition has to look at the larger framework
and to understand building as a social phenomenon that has a past from which it evolves, a present that interacts with its production (involving mechanisms, people, economies, representations), and a future as an inhabited object but also as an ‘object’ for possible repetition and regeneration. Focusing on the visual, on the understanding of architectural form and its representations, while paying lip service to ‘others’ in the process, has confined architectural discourse within the community of its authors. By reducing the understanding of society to that of built form, the discipline of architecture dissociated itself from social practice. The visual focus is definitely the designer’s expertise but this expertise is not sufficient to communicate with ‘others’. This paternalistic relationship to others in matters of building has done nothing but marginalize architects as a group of professionals. In order for architectural education to relocate the process of making buildings into a social discourse, academic bodies need to approach social conditions without the possibility of absence or lack, but as a daily practice worth learning from, investigating, and developing.

Notes:

2. The Directorate of Town Planning of 1959 is the earlier form of the current General Directorate of Town Planning (DGU), which was established in 1965.
3. “To institute … is to consecrate, that is, to sanction and sanctify a particular state of things, an established order, in exactly the same way that a constitution does in the legal and political sense of the term.” In Bourdieu, P., Language and Symbolic Form, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1991, 119.
4. “the process of investiture … exercises a symbolic efficacy that is quite real in that it really transforms the person consecrated: first, because it transforms the representations others have of him and above all the behaviour they adopt towards him … and second, because it simultaneously transforms the representation that the invested person has of himself, and the behaviour he feels obliged to adopt in order to conform to that representation.” Ibid., 119.
5. Ibid., 121.
6. If engineering has already been known as an academic field since 1913 in Lebanon (at Ecole Supérieure 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 Beyhum, N. and Tabet, J., “Le rôle social des ingénieure au Liban, idéologies de formation et stratégies sociales” in Bâtisseurs et Bureaucrates: Ingénieurs et Société au Maghreb et au Moyen-Orient, E. Longuenesse, Ed., Lyon: Maison de l’Orient Méditerranéen, 1990.
7. to speak of rite of institution is to suggest that all rites tend to consecrate or legitimate an arbitrary boundary, by fostering a misrecognition of the arbitrary nature of the limit and encouraging a recognition of it as legitimate…” Ibid. Bourdieu p118
8. Pierre Khoury, Assem Salam, and Henri Edde are all closely related to State figures active during independence period in Lebanon.
9. Salam argues, in 1957, that the 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. In Salam, A., al-lmar wa al-Maslahab al-Amma: fI l-Amara wa l-Madina, Beirut: Dar al Jadid, 1995, 16.
10. I owe this realization to Assem Salam who mentioned it to Rania Ghosn, my research assistant, in a talk in August 2001.
11. SOLIDERE is the real estate company that was created to plan and execute the reconstruction of
downtown Beirut.


As I mentioned earlier, reference here is to the familial bonds between state officials and the modern group of architects in Lebanon.

It is interesting to note that calling for a local style already shows inability to resist Western thinking indoctrinated through education where buildings are reduced to their stylistic categorization mainly documented and taught in architecture history courses. this could further be seen in salam’s discussion of traditional Lebanese architecture in the same lecture where he does not consider it stylistically “strong” enough and not as “palatial as other Arab and European Palatial Architecture”…etc. Salam, A. (1995), p. 27-28.


Original figures to make these calculations are taken from the Order of Engineers and architects Council Report 1995-1996, Beirut: Order of Engineers and Architects, 18-19.