Reshaping the City Image: Impact of the French Colonial Architecture on the Contemporary Identity of Beirut Central District

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Abstract:
War destruction and post-war construction has provided an excellent opportunity to rebuild the contemporary identity of Beirut Central District (BCD). Due to the occupation by other cultures, the identity of the city has always come from abroad, from Italy, France, Ottoman dynasty. During the late 19th century and early 20th century Beirut has witnessed new transformations and shaping forces that affected the built environment. As the seat of the French Mandate in the region, the city was influenced by the hybridization of local architecture with the western oriented trends and styles, in addition to imported construction materials and techniques. Therefore, this period represents a significant stage in shaping the architectural legacy of Beirut, which has an apparent impact on the new developments in the city. The project of reconstruction of Beirut central district (1994-2000) is one of the most significant examples that reflect the clear influence of this colonial legacy on the contemporary identity of the city. The objective of this research is to determine to what extent the colonial architectural legacy can play a significant role in shaping the contemporary identity of the Arab city. The research aims also to identify the most appropriate approach for dealing with the issue of architectural legacy in addressing the dilemma of contemporary identity in the Arab city. To achieve these two objectives the research focused on two issues. Firstly, tracing and analyzing examples of the colonial architectural legacy of the early 20th century in Beirut, and secondly, investigating and analyzing the experiment of the reconstruction of Beirut central district. The investigation and analysis of this experiment focused on the approaches that were adopted to deal with the architectural expression, character, and reflections of the heritable elements on the new buildings of the central district. This research relies on the theoretical investigation, in addition to a photographic survey carried out by the author. A documentary analysis of secondary data was used to attain the objectives and answer the research questions. This research concluded that the colonial architectural legacy is a significant motive in the process of shaping the contemporary identity of Beirut as an example of the Arab cities. The research concluded also that there are two approaches for dealing with the issue of architectural legacy in addressing the dilemma of contemporary identity in the Arab city. The first approach is based on the absolute adoption of the historical model, and the second approach is based on the perfect re-use of the historical model, where the model is researched, studied, and analyzed to learn from the experiment. The second approach could be adopted at two levels: (a) the re-use of the traditional thought, and (b) the re-use of the traditional elements. This research proposed a number of recommendations for municipalities of the Arab cities, schools of architecture, practicing architects, and developers who are dealing with the historic contexts.

1. Legacy of Colonial Architecture

In addition to its role in expressing the community advancement in the past, the cultural legacy plays an important role in the community breakthrough, or falling behind towards the future. The cultural legacy motivates the community to innovation and creation, or to imitation and blind copying. When we talk about the architectural legacy, innovation and creation could be attained through studying and analysing the heritable examples, and taking lessons from the experiments. While, imitation and remaining behind are attained through the absolute adoption of the copy and past concept. In this sense, Tarek Wali indicates that the progress of any community from the cultural point of view should give a special priority to the issue of reviving the architectural and urban heritage as it is strongly related to the cultural identity of the community through its previous ages (Wali, 1985). In the last three decades, with the emergence of new phenomena such as globalization and the hybrid world, the architectural legacy has been a controversial issue. Charles Jencks denotes to the inevitability of memory and history in the city as positive catalysts for invention (Jencks, 1996, p 131). Frank Gehry has a different view. He claims, "The use of forms and details from the past is a denial of the

present. It is a rotten thing to do to our children. It's as if we are telling them there is no reason to be optimistic about the future" (Gehry, 1993, p 178). Gehry, like many other architects, rejects the role of architectural legacy in contemporary thought. Between the agreement and rejection of the architectural legacy, William Curtis tries to resolve the dilemma and defines authentic trend as an attempt to penetrate to what is of lasting worth in the present culture and in the tradition (Curtis, 1986). In Curtis's point of view, authenticity does not mean the absolute adoption of the traditional model. It includes implications and lessons from the present and the past. Yet, heritage remains embedded in modern cities in a position of servitude. It is there to recall nostalgic longings or provide a sense of profundity for a current theme (Kennedy, 2008). When we focus on the legacy of colonial architecture, we find that most of the cities that witnessed a long colonial period are characterized by colonial buildings. These buildings with their distinct aesthetic values were acted as the source of inspiration of new development as well as building city image (Rahman, 2008). Although the architectural character of these buildings doesn't express the local culture of the community, they represent a remarkable period in the city history which contributes to shaping the city image and identity. The colonists had adopted their architectural styles in buildings modified to the climate context. Due to migrations and cultural exchange, the colonial architecture has combinations of the styles from other cultures (Chun, 2005). In many cases, the result is a blend of styles or what is so-called hybrid architecture.

2. French Colonial Architecture of Beirut

French colonial architecture was introduced to Lebanon in the early 20th century with

The French mandate, bringing a variety of architectural elements drawn from the West, which blended beautifully with the local neo-Ottoman and Eastern styles prevailing at the time. The French Colonial era had a major influence on Lebanese architecture and design, most apparent in downtown Beirut, Achrafieh and Ras Beirut area. Multi-story buildings were constructed in and around the city declaring the start of a new period. These included the 1930 buildings in downtown (Opera, Sursock, Maarad Street, etc.…), the neo-Ottoman Art nouveau and Art déco municipality of Beirut (1928) and the Grand Theatre (1929) (Aoun, 2012).

Robert Saliba claims that Beirut was an important city during two periods of its history. The first was the Roman period, when it was a Roman colony with a famous low school; the second was during the nineteenth and early twentieth century's, when Beirut emerged as a colonial outpost (Saliba, 2000). The early 20th century architecture of Beirut, which represents most of its architectural legacy, expresses the significance of the city during that period. Architecture and urban planning in the post-colonial state of Lebanon originated from the colonial initiatives and developed without breaking with the legal and conceptual framework that had been established under the colonial rule (Verdeil, 2008). According to Saliba, Cairo and Istanbul, the two metropolises of the colonial period in the region, provided the architectural and urban models that were followed in smaller provincial cities such as Beirut (Saliba, 2000). The absence of an old historical core in Beirut and the reconstruction process itself has brought forward the colonial heritage as the only remaining townscape expressing a historical dimension of the city centre beyond its archaeological strata. The city has witnessed an early modernization as the French mandatory authorities have implemented French urban and architectural models in the city. They have also tried to utilize some vocabularies of the Ottoman architecture. In this sense, Saliba claims that the important factors affecting the residential structures of the city during this period revolved around the rise of Beirut as a colonial gateway city and the seat of the French Mandate in the Levant, in addition to the formation of the western oriented urban bourgeoisie that gradually filled and shaped the newly created suburbs around the medieval core (Saliba, 1998). Beirut became a showcase of the French Mandate in the region and affected by the hybridization of local architecture with the integration of imported construction materials and western oriented trends. Figures (1) and (2) illustrates examples of the early 20th century architecture in Beirut.

Figure 1: Gear Bldg. (1915) In Fleuve Street – The Early 20th Century Architecture in Beirut
Source: Saliba (1998)
Figure 2: Masabni Bldg. – The Early 20th Century Architecture in Beirut
Source: Saliba (1998)

### 3. Impact of the Civil War on Beirut

In 1974, the civil war flared up in Beirut. Its central district represented the main battlefront, which witnessed violent battles among the different fighting parties, especially in the area of Martyrs Square in the heart of the central district. These battles resulted in the destruction of most of the buildings of this area and its infrastructure. A large number of the historic buildings of the French mandate period was affected or damaged. The war led also to the separation of the city into two divisions (Eastern and Western). The original inhabitants emigrated from the city towards more safe areas. In this sense, Hasan Alabdalla indicates that the civil war separated the community and divided the city history into two parts and transferred the possibility of communication between them to a serious crisis (Alabdalla, 1993). After the end of the war in 1990, there was a necessity for drawing up plans, frameworks, and principles for the reconstruction of the war destruction. Figure (3) illustrates the war impact on the historic buildings of the French mandate period in the CDB.

Figure 3: The War Impact on the Historic Buildings of the French Mandate Period
Source: The Author

4. The Central District of Beirut (CDB)

The powerless financial situation of Lebanese government after the war invalidated the possibility of financing the execution of the CDB development plans. Accordingly, the most appropriate choice was to establish a private real-state company, which can overcome all the possible obstacles that may confront the process of reconstruction and development. In 1994, the Lebanese company of the Development and Reconstruction of the Beirut Central District (SOLIDERE) was established. The main tasks of SOLIDERE are to regenerate, reconstruct, and redevelop the central Beirut. These tasks have placed the company in front of the objectives and challenges of Beirut's return to its economic, tourist, and trading position in the world. According to Fadi Jamali, the main aims of reconstruction and development of the central Beirut are: (1) removing the war remains, (2) to set the frameworks through which the guidelines and regulations of development and reconstruction could be identified, and (3) bringing out the city characteristics and its architectural heritage and fuse them within the contemporary architectural fabric (Jamali, 2004). After the establishment of SOLIDERE, the company announced its proposed plan, stretching over an area that exceeds 1.8 million sq. m. including 645,000 sq. m. of reclaimed land, with a floor area of 4.7 million sq.m. The plan allotted 50% of the area to public spaces and roads. 34% of the total floor area was offices, 42% residential, 12% commercial, 8% cultural and governmental offices, and 4% hotels. 265 existing buildings were to be restored (Tappuni, 2001). As part of its tasks, the company gave a special interest to control, organize, and supervise the execution of the central district Master Plan. The morphology of the existing buildings was studied to preserve the existing urban fabric and the historical buildings and maintain a distinctive architectural identity through integrating the existing and new architecture.
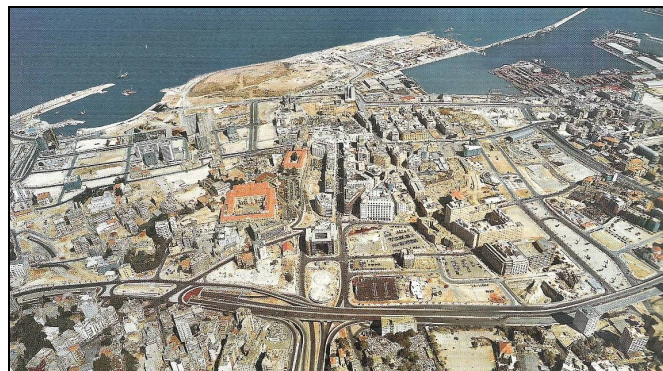
Figure 4: Ariel View of the CDB under Construction
Source: Albenaa (2000)

5. The Architectural Identity

Identity dilemma has been a global phenomenon as a consequence of globalization which calls for the dissolution of all cultural peculiarities (Abdelsalam, 2002-a). To approach the concept of architectural identity, we need to define whether identity is a by-product of architecture or has a fundamental relationship with it. We will refer to the results of a study carried out by Balakrishna Doshi on expressing an architectural identity in Bohra houses in Western India. He indicates that the Bohras in their search for a separate identity have evolved a house characteristic, which is largely distinct from that of other houses in the region. They judiciously utilized elements of European architecture via the British influence (Doshi, 1986). Through Doshi results, we understand that identity is not a by-product of architecture; it is rather subjected to a process of search. Architectural identity is an intended process, which is evolved through utilizing distinctive elements.

According to Romi Khosla the search for architectural identity is being carried out on two planes: the "vertical" or historical plane and the "horizontal" or contemporary plane (Khosla, 1983, p 63). The vertical plane represents the cultural heritage, while the horizontal plane represents the solutions for the contemporary problems. Mona Serageldin gave another definition, which could be linked to that of Khosla. She argues that identity has two dimensions. The first is inbred derived from the ethnic, religious, and cultural background and the second is acquired and shaped by challenges (Seragldin, 1983). The two definitions stress the historical dimension which indicates the importance of the time factor. While confronting the contemporary challenges and problems represents the second dimension of identity. In search for architectural identity, the two dimensions should be handled together and expressed clearly in the building by employing the appropriate elements.

The expression of identity in architecture embraces three main elements that are; continuity, distinction, and recognition. Continuity is expressed through invariable social, cultural, and religious values. Distinction is expressed by the limits and boundaries generated through the process of confronting the local and regional challenges. Recognition is expressed through recognised elements that integrate both continuity and distinction (Abdelsalam, 2002-c). Figure (5) shows the elements of expressing identity in architecture.
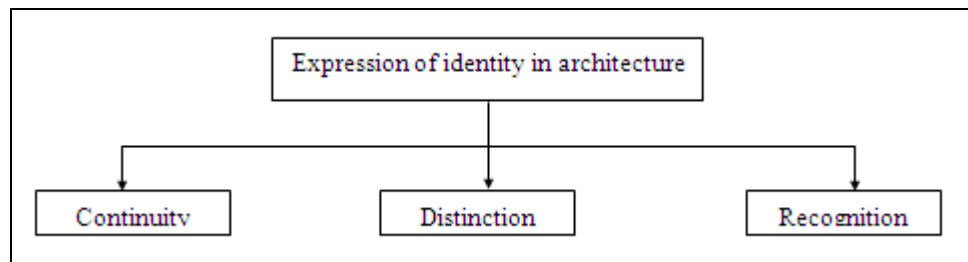

Figure 5: Structural Diagram of the Elements of Expressing Identity in Architecture

6. Contemporary Identity of the CDB

It is clear that the civil war has left Beirut in a crisis of architectural identity. Angus Gavin (Gavin, 2000), the planning adviser to the chairman of SOLIDERE, explained the company experiment in maintaining the architectural identity in Beirut City Centre. The company imposed design controls through the development briefs and approvals procedures. They try to stay clear of prescribing architectural style. The design guidelines are intentionally written in such a way that they can equally well be interpreted in a modernist or a vernacular idiom. The limits of prescribing architectural form are in the required arcades, cornice line, maximum window-wall ratio and natural stone finishes, in addition to a palate of render colourings.

In the CDB the new buildings are built within an existing architectural and urban fabric that led the designers to work with care and intelligence to preserve the traditional character. In the meantime they tried to express the features of the contemporary Lebanese community through their designs. SOLIDERE played an important role in the reconciliation between the heritable architectural features and the absolute modernity which is reflected in the western oriented styles with the use of modern materials and construction techniques. The company interest in the distinctive architectural character and consistency among the new projects led them to issue design principles and criteria to guide the designers.

If we look at the architectural identity of the CDB we can distinguish three different architectural images. The first image is reflected in the restored buildings. These buildings which have been built in the early 20th century during the French mandate were badly affected in the civil war. The architectural character of these buildings expresses the European architecture of the late 19th century and early 20th century. SOLIDERE has given a special interest to the restoration process of this valuable legacy of the city. Figures (6) and (7) show two different examples of the restored heritable buildings in the CDB.

Figure 6: Restored heritable buildings in the CDB
Source: the author
Figure 7: Restored heritable building in the CDB
Source: the author

The second architectural image of the CDB is reflected in the modern architecture. Modern architecture indicates the western trends that evolved in the west and copied blindly into the local context without any adaptation to the local values and conditions. By local conditions we mean the social, cultural, economical, and environmental considerations of the Lebanese community. Due to the application of inappropriate western theories and technology, the architectural features of these buildings reflect the western model. In the CDB, This model lacks the following considerations: (1) integrating modern technology with the local context, (2) the appropriate use of architectural elements in integration with the mechanical means to adapt to the local climate, (3) the use of local and traditional materials, (4) contemporary expression of the design principles of traditional architecture, (5) understanding the local environment and heritage, and (6) integrating the innovative approaches with the local context. At this point, it is important to indicate that the western theorists and scholars review, examine and criticize their trends. Manfredo Tafuri criticizes modern architecture and claims, "The crisis of modern architecture is not the result of tiredness or dissipation. It is rather a crisis of the ideological function of architecture" (Tafuri, 1976). Followers of the western trend in the Arab world used to copy the western model, and then copy the revised and modified version, and so on. They are just receivers of what the west produce. Figure (8) shows example of the modern architecture in the CDB.

Figure 8: Example of Modern Architecture in the CDB
Source: The Author

The third architectural image of the CDB is reflected in the neo-traditional architecture. The main reference of this image is the legacy of the early 20th century architecture in Beirut. This emphasizes the importance of this legacy as a source of inspiration. The followers of this trend try to address the cultural crisis and the loss of architectural identity through adopting the heritable approach. The features of this trend is based on the use of spatial values and architectural vocabularies and elements of the European architecture of the late 19th century and early 20th century in Beirut which was imported to the city during the French mandate. Approaches of dealing with this legacy ijin addressing the issue of identity in the CDB will be discussed in the following part of this research. Figure (9) shows example of the neo-traditional architecture in CDB.

Figure 9: Example of the Neo-Traditional Architecture in the CDB
Source: The Author

7. Approaches for Dealing with the Architectural Legacy

If we focus on the image of the neo-traditional architecture in the CDB we can realize that the architectural legacy of the city has been dealt with in two different, but related approaches. The first approach is based on the absolute adoption of the traditional model. In this approach, all the architectural elements, vocabularies, and details of the traditional model are copied without any intervention. The second approach relies on researching and studying the architectural legacy and learning from its experiments. Through this approach, the designer incorporates the appropriate historical elements and functional design to attain the contemporary needs of the users. The designer draws inspiration from the forms of historical architecture without copying its elements. Figures (10) and (11) show examples of the two approaches.
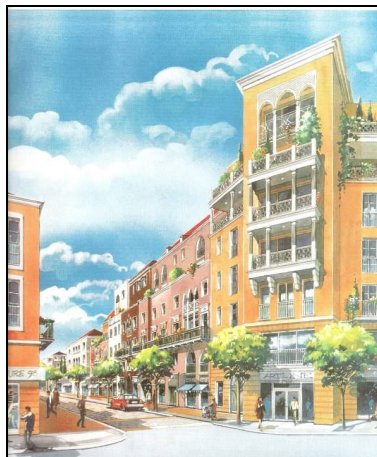

Figure 10: Example of the Absolute Adoption of the Historical Model
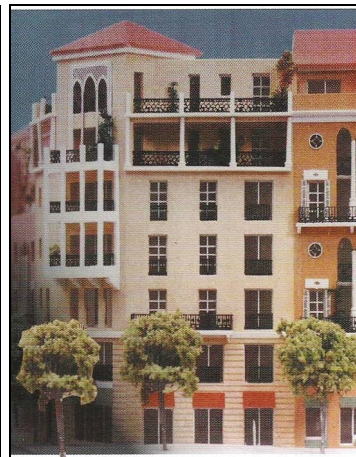*Source: Albenna (2000)*
Figure 11: Example of the Perfect Re-Use of the Historical Model
Source: Albenna (2000)

At this point, it is important to indicate that the source of innovation in the second approach is based on the perfect use of the traditional model rather than the blind copy of its features which is adopted in the first approach. The perfect use of the model reflects a sound understanding of its distinctive elements, vocabularies, and spirit (Abdelsalam, 2002-b). The perfect re-use of the traditional model could be adopted at two levels. Firstly, the re-use of traditional thoughts, which is manifested in spaces organization, and secondly, the reuse of traditional elements such as balconies and courtyards. By copying the model, we mean copying the architectural vocabularies and details from their original context and paste them in the new projects. To avoid superficiality in the architectural expression, while dealing with the architectural legacy, the designer has to go far beyond the surface treatment of facades by incorporating principles and values of the architectural legacy. These principles and values should be reflected in visual and non-visual applications in the building (Abdelsalam, 2003).

8. Conclusion

We can summarize the conclusions of this research as follows:
- The colonial architectural legacy is a significant motive in the process of shaping the contemporary identity of Beirut as an example of the Arab cities.
- There are two approaches for dealing with the issue of architectural legacy in addressing the dilemma of contemporary identity in the Arab city. The first approach is based on the absolute adoption of the historical model, where all the

architectural elements, vocabularies, and details are copied from their original context and pasted in the new projects. The second approach is based on the perfect re-use of the historical model, where the model is researched, studied, and analyzed to learn from the experiment. The perfect re-use of the historical model could be adopted at two levels: (a) the re-use of the traditional thought, and (b) the re-use of the traditional elements.

9. Recommendations
- In the design process, the two concluded approaches of dealing with the issue of architectural legacy can guide the designers in dealing with the issue of architectural identity in the historical context.
- The research recommends the use of the two concluded approaches as guidelines and principles that the cities municipalities and governmental organizations can rely on while dealing with new developments in the historical contexts.
- In architecture education, the two concluded approaches can be used as the main themes in training and teaching the students how to deal with the architectural legacy while addressing the issue of contemporary identity.

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