

sous la direction de
LAMIA HADDA
SAVERIO MECCA
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STEFANO GALASSI
DANIELA PITTALUGA

Villages et quartiers à risque d'abandon

*Stratégies pour la connaissance,
la valorisation et la restauration*

TOME 1


FIRENZE
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International Fairground of Lebanon in Tripoli



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A MODERN NEIGHBORHOOD FOR PROSPERITY. THE CASE OF THE INTERNATIONAL AND PERMANENT FAIR OF LEBANON IN TRIPOLI BY OSCAR NIEMEYER


The
elliptical
site of
the Fair
between
Tripoli and
El-Mina
(© Google
Earth Pro
10/2020).

Joe Zaatar
Politecnico di Milano-Italia

In 1962 and following his great accomplishment in Brasilia, Oscar Niemeyer was officially invited to design the International and Permanent Fair of Lebanon in Tripoli. Back then, the idea of modernization emerged from President Fouad Chehab was meant to strengthen the territory and inhabitants. The nearly completed Fair that spread over 756.000 square meters in a prominent location is now falling to pieces. The complex architecture in reinforced concrete that was designed and built, represents an era and a vision that existed in this part of the world. Today, Lebanon is hosting a significant number of displaced refugees and going through an economic crisis, a devaluation of its currency, a popular revolution, and the Covid-19 pandemic that reared its ugly head in Lebanon in the first quarter of 2020. Things even got worse on the 4th of August with the catastrophic explosion that stunned the Lebanese capital of Beirut and inflicted damages beyond imagination. In the city of Tripoli, while we are witnessing an unprecedented increase in poverty and hostility between neighborhoods, we ask if this unique modernist neighborhood can be part of solutions for an equitable distribution of wealth and conviviality among stakeholders. What could be done with this particular neighborhood in this social, political and economic context?

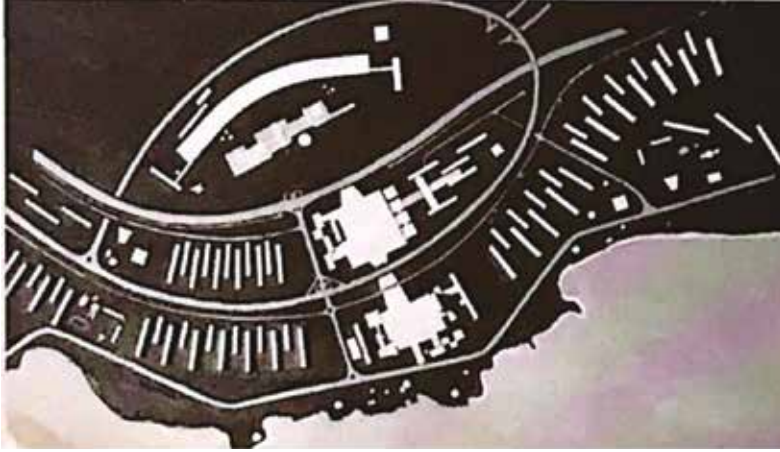
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The name Tripoli came from the Latin Tri Polis, which refers to three quarters separated by defensive walls and hosting three different settled populations (Bearman, 2000). Tripoli is a historic town of the Mediterranean coast in the Levant, actual Lebanon. Under the Ottoman Empire that lasted over 400 years, it was an important chief town called Elayet (Governorate) with its active port of El-Mina. In the 19th century, before the end of the Ottoman period and during the new age of westernization, the town was downgraded to a Sanjak center under the Vilayet of the modern Beirut. The new town retained this status until the British forces took the Levant in 1918. A year later, the transfer of power to the French led to the creation of the State with extended frontiers under the name of Greater Lebanon. The city of Beirut situated at 85 km south of Tripoli was its capital.

In 1943, Lebanon became independent in the so-called modern period. In the early 1950s, the capital Beirut was open to progress due to exchanges with other similar cities (Kassir, 2003). The city looked modern and eager to greet new developments. It had started to fill



The study model by Guy L. Dimanche (collaborator of Oscar Niemeyer) in 1962 (© Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, N°105, 1963, p. 96).



empty spaces with modern, imported, and indigenous architecture. Due to rural migration, the big city of Beirut and Tripoli (at the north) were growing without any well-thought urban planning. During his mandate from 1958 until 1964, President Fouad Chehab wanted to create a nation-state by implementing strong controls on the territory and its development. The region of central Lebanon with its capital Beirut enjoyed a privileged position compared to the urban and rural “suffering” zones on the north, east, and south. In 1959, Louis-Joseph Lebreton, director of the largest public research organization in France and the IRFED¹ was engaged to assist the President in the study of the territory and population. Lebreton had a humanistic approach to the subject as he wrote it down in the introduction of his report: “...le développement doit être intégral c’est-à-dire de tout l’homme et de tous les hommes...” (Lebreton, 1960). The main work was to provide an overall orientation for the Lebanese economy with a view to long-term economic development and social justice. The study was subject to the scrutiny of authorities and officials as an effective instrument in the development of “a prosperous and radiant Lebanon”. Accurate research was needed for Lebanon’s entry into the international development culture. Similar to Professor François Perroux and fellow Giorgio Ceriani Sebretondi, Lebreton believed in a development that is no longer just economic, but also institutional, social, and cultural. This progress took on the characteristics of a process that is no longer only for the Western world, but for the whole planet, in a track that un-knots up to the development of the people.

¹ Known as International Center for Development and Civilizations.

To plan the growth, President Chehab needed many experts. Back then, the French Lebret noticed that the human rights in Lebanon were absolute and no discipline had decisive value. The general framework of the country was made of societies within families (as clans) or political groups (nationalism versus Arabism, and cold war). Characterized by individualism, it obstructed collective life by the absence of collaboration. Moreover, the invited European experts came usually from a rational and disciplined world. Their concepts, theories, and methods did not apply to a radical individual and liberal society that used to consider every constraint as injustice. These experts invited to design, draw, trace, plan, and recommend what is valid, could not do it without the state's intervention. Therefore, the operation had a huge concern to resolve the issues, which prevented the formation of a fraternal feeling between the Lebanese. Lebret was sure that only the state was able to put in place the fundamental infrastructures at a fast pace and lowest possible cost. Only the state, through coordinated objective measures, could lay the development foundations for the planning. The admiration for this difficult task was needed from everyone, even if this state had deficiencies, inexperience, and internal oppositions (Lebret, 1960).

The lack of statistical documentation and comprehensive studies were a major difficulty for Lebret's investigation and mission, both for the conduct of the surveys and for the pursuit of general studies. However, he accepted the assignment and signed the contract on October 23, 1959. President Chehab was challenged in creating a national cohesion between the different people of his young nation. He was focused on how to develop a civic sense in citizens who belonged to various religions, social classes, had different origins and political views. He felt that trust in the state could be built progressively if people from various demographics felt to be largely recipients of the national economic solidarity. For this reason, Chehab reviewed the structure of national income and reconsidered the distribution of the state resources.

In the 1960s, economic, social, administrative, and cultural development for Lebret was only possible through human development. Development had to enhance the value of all subgroups of the population, which intended to integrate technical progress into its life while at the same time intensify its proper human quality. The first work of IRFED in Lebanon could only be a comparative study of living standards between different regions, the secondary poles, the cities, and their neighborhoods. In 1960, North Lebanon was rich in agriculture but suffered from poor water, electricity, road, and communications infrastructure, especially in its most remote areas. For instance, the route connecting the North region to Beirut was built in 1909. The North region was one of the four regions that significantly lagged behind. Lebret classified it in category B which corresponds to under-development, with a general

average of living standards below 1,5². The analysis method used for the capital of this region was a view of its social structure in many neighborhoods, ranging from poor to more affluent communities. Back then, the Fair was an idea in the mind of the President and his cabinet; he was still formulating the laws³, decrees, councils, and Ministries to build the structure that will support its creation and management. The expropriation of the lands would start in 1961.

In Tripoli, the careful survey of Lebret focused on five districts chosen according to the differences in their social strata:

1. The district of Moutran is predominantly affluent.
2. The old city center comprises 40% to 50% of the middle and working class.
3. The Bab al-Tebbane neighborhood is comprised of 90% of the working class.
4. Baal Saraqbe (today is known as Jabal Mohsen) is represented by 10% of low-income families.
5. El-Mina represented a mixed population, 30% of the middle, and 60% of the popular class.

None of the districts was adjacent to the orange groves between Tripoli and El-Mina. The site of the Fairground was going to replace the fertile citrus plains that existed even before 1906⁴ (Jidejian, 2006). Baal Saraqbe neighborhood was built around orthogonal streets with residential buildings hosting few commercial activities. Bab al-Tebbane and Baal Saraqbe were centers of migrants, mainly Palestinians and Alawi. Lebret mentions evident deficient factors in the habitat of these two neighborhoods. He wrote: numerous unhealthy sources of contamination, like stagnant water, garbage dumps, and precarious toilets. The elevated number of housing in Baal Saraqbe inflicts inhuman promiscuity, with poorly ventilated units that have insufficient sun exposure, and are minimally equipped with water and sanitation facilities. In Bab al-Tebbane the habitat although more recent, showed an overall deficient level, such as a multiplicity of sources of contamination formed in particular by deposits of garbage and precarious toilets. Made of popular housing in its great majority, it forces certain promiscuity and unhealthy sanitary equipment. Despite the proximity to the old city center, there is a total absence of a pluvial network, parking, public places, green spaces, and a scarcity of police officers... The

² Mission IRFED LIBAN 1960 classifications: average < 1.0 corresponded to non-development. Average < 1,5 corresponded to under-development. Average < 2.0 corresponded to partial under-development. Average between 2.0 and 2.5 corresponded to developing. Average > 2.5 corresponded to advanced development. Archives Phoenix U.S.E.K. Liban.

³ Law 4027/1960 implemented by decree.

⁴ In 1906, during the Late Ottoman period, the German Karl Baedeker published the cartography of Tripoli and El-Mina revealing the "orangers" plains in the middle of both towns.

old city center dating from around 1650 retains a ruined character, with old, dirty, lively, and noisy souks and two-story buildings that lean against one another. The habitat also showed deficiencies in terms of the available space per person, which rarely exceeds eight square meters. In addition, the installation of sanitary facilities was generally primitive. In El-Mina, the habitat with three hundred years dwellings is between the port and the boulevard Port Saïd. Even with sufficient available space to build, due to the high number of people per family, the number of square meters occupied on average per person rarely exceeds eight. The protection of the facades and the roof is missing and the sanitary installation is generally defective. Finally, Moutran district was the place of exclusive residences of foreigners, diplomats, and wealthy people. The habitat was excellent even in the new modern stores.” (Lebret, 1960).

The very great disparity between the working-class and low-income classes on the one hand and the middle strata, on the other hand, turns out to be extremely evident in Tripoli. The habitat was an issue for all three classes, and its repercussions from personal hygiene, cleanliness, care, and nutrition-safety were extremely relevant to the inhabitants’ life. After the accurate studies that took into account the real conditions and needs of all social classes, the existing idea of a Fairground merged with a middle-class mass housing plan was blooming. A neighborhood for the prosperity of the citizens of Tripoli, the second biggest city in Lebanon, was becoming a priority in the presidential agenda.

In October 1961, the Lebanese President received a presidential brochure from his Brazilian homologue Juscelino Kubitschek about the inauguration of the modern capital Brasilia. A series of pictures in black and white showed the before and after but also the acclamation of the crowd for this great accomplishment. At that point, President Chehab and his government reaction to urban vulnerability was through scientific analysis, justice and fair distribution of wealth, and technical intervention in the expression of that time. Modernism in architecture was associated with ideal visions of human life and the belief in progress. For Chehab the innovation was well timed at one point in the social and technological evolution of the country, and it responded to the needs of the population. In 1962, the modernist Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer was invited officially to design *in loco*⁵ the International and Permanent Fair of Lebanon in Tripoli. In his first proposal, he envisioned to start the project from the seacoast toward the orange groves, or vice versa. He came out with a combination of poetic buildings for the Fair, inspired from a Wassily Kandinsky abstract drawing, 60 middle-class mass housing, and annexed services and infrastructures for the circulation (see

⁵ Oscar Niemeyer came for the first time by boat to Lebanon from 24 July until mid-September 1962.

image 1). Niemeyer established a hierarchy within the lines of circulation, the center for the Fairground, and the west side a radial organization for the residential sticks immersed in the vast landscape. The Fair remained more or less in the same initial location but the housing development was completely omitted in the second phase. This might have happened most probably for budget reasons or found rejection from some counterparts (such as the order of engineers and architects). In October 1963, the first stone was laid down and works were meant to end by 1966, and then postponed to 1967. After that, the date for inaugurating the Fair was targeted to spring 1969 at the first stage, and a second period to 1976. Without a doubt, we know an inauguration year was never reached due to the war.

Like other previous modernist and modern projects in Lebanon, the Fair represents the language and beliefs of modernism. Designed by the famous Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer and realized with the expertise of local engineers, the result is a variation obsessively faithful to the original concepts. Oscar Niemeyer used to interact with structural engineers like Joaquim Cardozo, and he found the same experts in Lebanon. Dr. Nazih Taleb used to sit for hours with him in his office in Verdun Beirut to discuss engineering issues and theories. The architect did not have to bring his engineers from Brazil. I wonder if this project can be slightly considered as autochthonous; designed and built by Oscar Niemeyer with the assistance of local engineers⁶.

Today, the nearly completed Fair spread over 756.000 square meters (see image 2) is still falling apart. This complex architecture built in reinforced concrete was almost completed and ready for inauguration in 1976. It represents an era of optimism (answers to important questions) that existed in this delicate part of the world. The long war from 1975 until 1989 had stopped its inauguration, use, and worsened its original condition. After 1994, when the Fair stopped being a military barrack, some catalog books of exhibitions in Europe and Lebanon re-mentioned its existence and opened the debate toward the intellectuals. Since 2005, the Fair is in the list of World Monuments Watch. In 2007, at the centenary of the living legend architect Niemeyer, particular attention from the Media brought to light the Fair and the mystery behind it. It became an attraction for western tourists, an opportunity for local and foreigner speculators, and even a place to raise some extra cash for its few employees. In 2016, The European Commission funded a project to support the carpentry private sector in Lebanon as a non-profit initiative inaugurated in 2018. In 2018, UNESCO had the site for nomination for the World Heritage list. The

⁶Dar Al-Handassah Consulting Engineers, Associated Consultants Engineers, and Bureau d'études techniques Noel AbouHamad. DAR AL-HANDASAH (Nazih Taleb & Partners) replaced the first firm after 1971.

same year, The Getty foundation with UNESCO Regional Bureau started financing a group of professionals from the U.S.A. and Lebanon to study “a general conservation policy to (...) develop the guiding policies that preserve what is significant about the Fairground, (...) and identify possible adaptive reuse strategies towards the compatible development of the Fairground”⁷. Until now, their work remains in progress. Today, the work on the Fair is still on hold and every year the funds from its custodian⁸ decrease. It is not open to the public.

In October 2019, the American sanctions on Syria followed by the collapse of the Lebanese economy, with its banks seizing the savings of the clients under the endorsement of the Government(s), have stimulated people to protest in the streets. The revolution, known as *thawra* in Arabic, has been calling loud from Beirut and Tripoli (gaining the name of the bride of the revolution) for the resignation of all politicians. It is composed of the middle and working classes fed up with corruption and patronage. They claim a drastic change in the ruling class composed of war leaders and followers. In 2020, the leader of the Party of God H. Nasrallah invited the Lebanese to “industrial and agricultural Jihad... and to look at the East”. Admittedly, the supporters of his cause will follow his ideological message, but doubts arise among the rest of the people. Indeed, following this call, things worsened economically, even more, confidence no longer exists among various Lebanese and external fronts. Neither did the East provide financial aid nor were the Lebanese able to reconnect with the West, creating an impasse in any physical, material, and monetary exchange. The slight growing local production at new prices, quadrupled or even quintupled, which has demonstrated flaws in the country’s system. Added to this, the Covid-19 health crisis makes the daily life of residents heavy to bear. On August 4, 2020, the explosion at the port of Beirut of the most powerful non-nuclear blast in history placed the country on its knees in the indifference of its ruling class.

In Lebanon, we are witnessing an increase in poverty, and the situation in Tripoli is directly affected. Could the Fair be part of the stakeholder’s requirements (the one of the revolution) for more state services and major conviviality among multiple identities? To alleviate the pain could there be more?

Looking today at the distribution of Niemeyer’s architecture in the elliptical masterplan, it seems an avant-garde idea that fits in the global pandemic. The distribution of the 17 buildings with these cosmic dimensions and large green areas in between can be suitable for the distancing strategy to fight Covid-19. This unique neighborhood has enough space to receive thousands of visitors with appropriate distancing, both indoor and outdoor. The Fairground,

⁷From Unesco.org

⁸Ministry of Economy and Trade of the Republic of Lebanon.

open to the city, would provide public spaces, non-existing in other neighborhoods, to host a considerable number of citizens if they stick to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. Most of the Fair's abandoned buildings, being from the international style of architecture, reveal certain flexibility. So they are adapt to host new functions, complementary to the exhibition. Some utilities from the 17 sustainable development goals could be suitable for its reuse. The list starts with **No Poverty**, **Zero Hunger**, **Good Health and Well-being**, **Quality Education**, **Gender Equality**, **Clean Water and Sanitation**, **Affordable and Clean Energy**, **Decent Work and Economic Growth**, **Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure**, **Reducing Inequality**, **Sustainable Cities and Communities**, **Responsible Consumption and Production**, **Climate Action**, **Life Below Water**, **Life On Land**, **Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions**, and ends with **Partnerships for the Goals**. The objectives highlighted in bold can find easily a placement in the Fair to serve the citizen's requests. The majority of the Fair's buildings in reinforced concrete created more than 55 years ago is suffering decay and poor maintenance. Only **Conserving Concrete Heritage Experts** should be the ones to intervene (noninvasively) to return it safe and bring it to its original shape. This neighborhood was made to become the place for Tripolitans, Lebanese, and all foreign-persons together. The antithesis of all that came after Chehab's mandate to feed personal, internal, and external political interests. The Fair representing rationality, justice, and progress for Lebanon was attacked for years, as the Lebanese people. It is their exact image protesting in the streets against oppression. The Fair is their Cultural Heritage. The people have the right to reclaim it and make it a living sustainable organism for the first time. Only actions coming from the ones who act fairly would save this modern Heritage.

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