

LOCAL MODERNISM IN DANGER UNTIL THIS DAY. THE CASE OF THE LEBANESE PAVILION IN THE INTERNATIONAL PERMANENT FAIR OF LEBANON IN TRIPOLI BY OSCAR NIEMEYER.

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ABSTRACT.

The paper's aim is to present the architecture of a Modernist building belonging to a monumental complex from the 1960s, designed by Oscar Niemeyer, and built in Tripoli, Lebanon, by local progressive engineers. Several authors published papers concerning this International Permanent Fairground complex, yet a specific understanding of some of its iconic buildings is missing from the literature. The Lebanese Pavilion building is part of my PhD project, which I started in 2019 in the school of Preservation of Architectural Heritage at Politecnico di Milano (www.dottorato.polimi.it). In this building, the form-evolution of Modernist pioneer Oscar Niemeyer reaches out to local architecture and its most diffused visible element, transposing it from tradition to his own Modernist style, through aesthetic and technology.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1962, when Lebanon was known as Switzerland of the Middle East for being an attractive touristic destination, the idea of a new International Permanent Fair of Lebanon in Tripoli was starting to emerge. The Lebanese government wanted to select an author for the Tripoli fair. The position was awarded to the famous Brazilian modernist architect Oscar Niemeyer.

The elliptical plot size of 755.346 square meters in which 64,000 are built-up-area while the rest is for green and reflecting pools was not at all a common project to the Middle East. Tripoli, the millennial city was projected to become also a modern Mediterranean city.

In 1975, the civil war started in Lebanon and all secondary works were halted. In 1976, the Syrian army took possession of the Fairground, they were the first to use for decades the almost completed buildings until the 1990s.

After that period, many attempts to revitalize the fair were proposed throughout the years. They were mostly ill-advised projects that would not touch the existing buildings but invade the green areas from which they will benefit a great view to the deterioration of Niemeyer's Architecture.

A project meant to bring different Lebanese communities with foreigners together under trade, hospitality, entertainment, and many more attractions, became during the war a shelter for warlords. A utopian idea suffused by modern values, transformed by military leaders into dystopian, has left different buildings standing vacant today, with war scars, time scars, fenced all around, threatened by many twisted ideas and left to the Mediterranean environment and atmospheric agents, is in need of attention.

Today after 58 years, as we stand in front of this Tripolitan monumental (in parts) in-operational horizon, victim of pre-war, war and post-war wrong decisions, could we do something to save it?

2. FORM-EVOLUTION

In Tripoli, Lebanon (Western Asia, Middle East facing the Mediterranean Sea), one of the International Permanent Fairground buildings is unique in Oscar Niemeyer's architecture. Several publications can be read on the Fair, yet a specific understanding of some of its iconic buildings is missing from the literature. The complex, designed and built from the early 1960s until the mid-1970s, has a number of distinctive buildings. The Lebanese Pavilion (Fig. 1), in particular, brings a unique style for the local Modernism through form-evolution and new techniques of construction making use of reinforced concrete.

We have seen Oscar Niemeyer in the past replicating the same forms of buildings in different places with various functions, slightly modified in terms of their size, their openings or their organization. This is most probably, because he did not want to design, like his Modernist colleagues, a Functionalist architecture: "[...] when a form creates beauty it has a function: the most important one in architecture."¹ Niemeyer favoured Venustas over Utilitas. It is the reason why his buildings had a certain unseen liberty and creativity, when compared to other architects of the same period.

Additionally, in different projects around the world, he invented new forms to common elements of architecture, whether universal or local ones. For his project Palacio Da Alverada in Brasilia (1958-1961) he drew the progression of a global element; the Column through three different ages: Greek, Modern, Modern Free-Formism² (Fig. 2). He invented a new form for an age-less element like the column, and gave it a sculptural presence, the fruit of his imagination; he thus came up with an architecture of extreme plasticity combined with exceptional technical skills. His invention, which looks more like a buttress, stands at the same level as the historical heritage, for its form (and function).

The Lebanese Pavilion in the International Permanent



Fig. 1. Oscar Niemeyer, Lebanese pavilion in 2019, Tripoli, Lebanon. © Joe Zaatar

Fair of Lebanon in Tripoli is one of these rare inventions, where Oscar Niemeyer grabs a key element from local Lebanese architecture and projects it into his Modernist vision.

Since the second half of the nineteenth century until the end of World War II (between the late Ottoman Empire and the French mandate periods in Lebanon), the dwellings of the upper-class of Beirut, Tripoli, Zahle and other cities were changing. This part of the society, continuously in contact with the Western world for trade, started adopting new elements and materials in their buildings coming from occidental culture. The exchange gave birth to a new architecture called today the Triple Arch House.

The Triple Arch House origins come from the central hall Venetian Palazzo for the main façade, the tiles from Marseilles for the new pitched roof, and the balconies/terraces from the European noble floors, all three parts of Western culture.

In his book, *The Dwelling in Lebanon* (Beirut, 2000), Jacques Liger-Belair mentions Hilde Zaloscer's article (Cairo, 1954) on Renaissance Venetian palaces characterized by the triple centre windows for which corresponded at the same

period, the Levant Liwan marked by a single arch. In the early Venetian Renaissance, the triple centre windows were to bring more natural light and air to the interior through a vast hall. References mention that for each triple arch corresponded a hall for visitors called Salon, around which rooms were allocated.

In the Cinquecento, a particular type of hospitality building with triple centre windows appears in the floating city. Later on, around the 1860s, the new wealthy merchants of the Levant coast from Tripoli to Sidon have probably been in contact with this particular architecture in Venice to exchange their luxurious commodity of silk. From the canals level, these exporters would unload goods to be piled up in storage rooms, and load their boats with merchandise to reach back the ships in front of the island. They could also stay in the common vast hall or the private rooms on the upper floor. Following some evidences³, these typical places of Venice were called Fondaco, a terminology that comes from "funduq" which means hotel in Arabic. Very few examples of these public buildings are left; throughout the years, some were transformed into private palaces while others

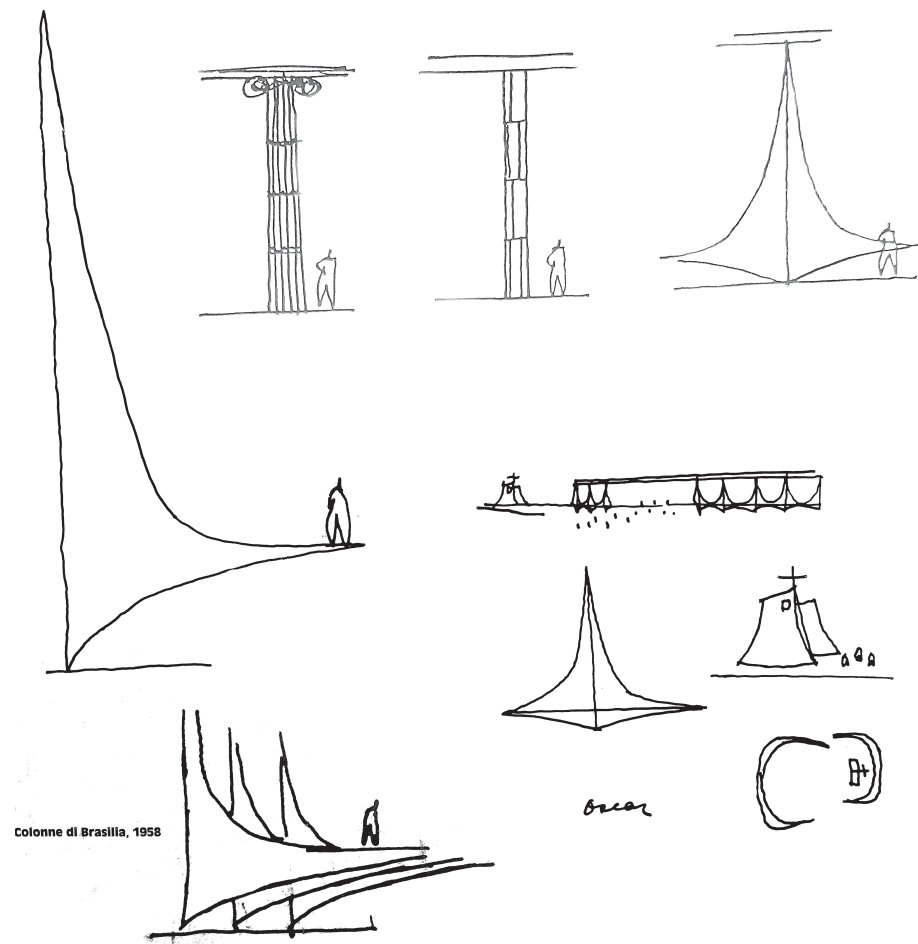


Fig. 2. Oscar Niemeyer, evolution of columns, Brasilia, Brazil, 1950s. © Jean Petit, Niemeyer architetto e poeta, Forces vives, Fidia edizione d'arte, Lugano-Milano, 1995, 37.

were burned or demolished. Today, in Venice, at least one example can attest to this past, the Fondaco degli Arabi (in English hotel of the Arabs). It still stands in front of the canal with the triple arched window and projecting balcony at the first floor. When it became a private residence it took the name of Palazzo Mastelli del Cammello. This type of mansion was specific for each community; every foreign visitor would stay, by law, with his fellow citizens. The rich merchants of the Lebanese coast saw and experienced a new mode of living every time they would reach Venice. In particular, I believe that the Venetian triple centre windows of the Fondaco are partly behind the Lebanese Triple Arch House origins.

Since the 16th century, Venice had several wars against the Ottoman Empire but they remained trade partners. When the Empire started to decline around the 1820s, the commercial exchange between the East and the West remained ongoing, notably with the Venetians merchants. In the East, there was a growing feeling favouring the introduction of western influence in the Levantine tradition

among the wealthy families. This situation gave them the possibility to improve their lifestyle. Like their counterparts in Venice, they could afford a Triple Arch House for their new or existing dwellings, reorganizing and reshaping their daily lives. The adaptation of Venetian triple centre windows in Lebanon gave birth to many variants with different forms and shapes. A clear preference in this part of the region was to pointed arches coming out from the Islamic world, centuries ago, for aesthetic and structural reasons. Oscar Niemeyer's first visit to Lebanon was along the three coastal cities of Beirut, Zouk and Tripoli where he saw the widespread Triple Arch Houses. Having reviewed the classical order and evolution before inventing a new Modernist column for Brasilia, he could not resist repeating the same approach for the pointed arches. Oscar Niemeyer saw the pointed arches as a typical local element to enhance and evolve, and was pleased to place it within architecture of the Fair. The reuse of this recognizable Lebanese element would support the Nation-State ideal that was behind such a project.

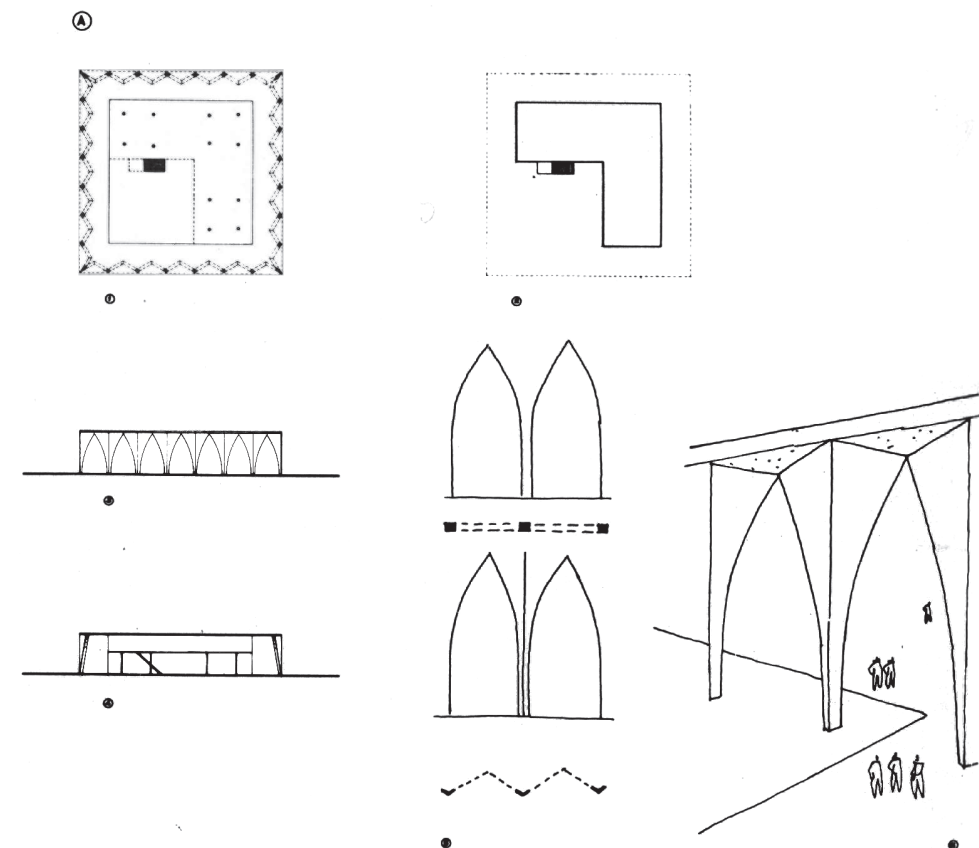


Fig. 3. Oscar Niemeyer, Lebanese pavilion sketches and drawings from the Presidential portfolio presentation in 1963. © Joe Zaatar

3. THE NOBLE MESSAGES

In 1961, after the inauguration of the newly built Brasilia, Oscar Niemeyer received an assignment abroad in Lebanon. The dream of improving society through new architecture was still thriving in his mind. The vision of the President of the Lebanese Republic Fouad Chehab to develop the decentralized cities of his country was essential for the creation of a fair Nation-State. Both men convinced by the Fairground project, wanted to bring modernity to Northern Lebanon, to resolve social problems, inequalities and reduce the widening income gap between different cities and regions in Lebanon. Tripoli, the millennial city, was projected to become a modern city that can compete with any other one.

The difference between this fair and all other previous ones around the world, is that this one

*[...] pays attention to the fundamental principles of unity and harmony demanded by any comprehensive architectural project [...] The Lebanon International Fair will be the first to be based on criteria of unity and plastic equilibrium.*⁴

Oscar Niemeyer designs his buildings in his own typical

style, the one he calls freer kind of modernity, if we want to compare his curves to the squares that characterized Le Corbusier most designs. The peculiarity of his work is above all a research that attributes to the buildings a new perception, going beyond the limits of the constructive logic of the time. His modern intervention with new clean lines renders his spaces an essential architecture, stripped of ornaments but with lines infused with technology. In the International Permanent Fair, he created icons where a pyramid, a sphere, an arch, a disc, a bow, a square and other forms are special volumes by their size, thickness, perception, location and technique of construction. He manages to give a new meaning to beauty by making reinforced concrete a noble material; it is no longer a support product that should be covered, instead, it proudly assumes the dual role of structure and coating at the same time.

As he did in the late '30s in Brazil with Lucio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer was preoccupied for this particular building in merging innovation to traditional architecture. The Lebanese Pavilion message and image behind this conception had to show Lebanon's heritage par excellence in a Modern expression. The success behind this form-evolution would answer significantly to the President expectations, address



Fig. 4. Oscar Niemeyer, Lebanese pavilion column conditions in 2019. © Joe Zaatar

to all Lebanese communities an important patriotic message, and trace a road on how architectural tradition can be projected to the future. In Tripoli, the second biggest city in Lebanon, he merged for the Lebanese Pavilion the portico concept of the Itamarati palace of Brasilia to the local pointed arches. The modification of this universal element (the portico in Brasilia, the portico in Tripoli, and then the portico in Segrate) into something local reduced the contrast between the Fair and its context.

4. THE THEORY

Each arcade is around 35 meters long standing on eight thin columns. As if the concept was not elaborate and modern enough, he drew a vertical line in the middle of two arches and then stretched the top of it to the exterior, curving smoothly the surface (Fig. 3). The result also transformed the squared columns in plan into rhombus ones. From the inside, the apex of the arches meets the flat roof with only

eight centimetres of reinforced concrete. From the outside, the façade and the portion corresponding to the roof are one curved skin, inviting the visitors to pass over the bridge. Large overflow outlets protrude from the top of the façades, two on each side, to evacuate immediately any rain flow to the reflecting pool and avoid major weight on the structure.

To build this perfect square with a slim roof without any supporting internal columns in 1964 required the skills of special experts. The engineers who could take up the challenge were the consultant Dr. Nazih Taleb (PhD engineer in cylindrical shell from Princeton University USA and founder member of Dar Al-Handassah Consulting Engineers) and the contractor Mr. Emil Khat (civil engineer from American University of Beirut) with his future partner Mr. Milad Moawad. Back then, the Lebanese Government represented by the C.E.G.P.⁵ assigned the consultant to undertake the complete detailed design and tender documents of this avant-garde building, from the preliminary drawings and study model of Oscar Niemeyer, and allocated the contractors to excel in the

realization. Both missions were accomplished.

When Dr. Taleb had to speak during an interview about the structural design of the Lebanese Pavilion, he brought up the notion of Timoshenko.⁶ The theory of plates and shells gave him the possibility to reduce to a thin body the surface of the roof of this architecture. Applying this concept provided him a slim roof with slender columns and seven spans for each side of this perfectly squared building. The Lebanese Pavilion mathematical formula is closer to the Dome's Experimental Theatre than any other building in the Fair, since they share the same notion, large span with reduced thickness. Until today, I have not found documentation to explain further how this particular structure was designed. A study is underway to interpret the built structure.

Today, 57 years later, the Lebanese Pavilion is still under threat, just like the rest of the buildings in the Fairground, by distorted ideas that come from speculative minds, the coastal weather conditions, the lack of maintenance and lately the local economic downturn. Besides vandalism and looting during the civil war (marble, mirrors, tiles, wood panels, sanitary, steel partitions, wooden doors, electrical boards, copper cables, water pumps, etc...), the concrete and iron rods of different structural parts suffer from progressive deterioration (Fig. 4).

5. CAN WE SAVE MODERNISM IN LEBANON?

To conclude, no intervention from inside or outside Lebanon until now has been able to save this unique Modernist complex. Some Lebanese interventions to revive the raison d'être of the complex were made in the past, holding some promises at the time, but quickly faded. For instance, the launching of the Fair by the late Prime Minister Rafic Hariri during 1994 and 1995 under the direction of Tripolitan former Minister Mustafa Derneika was a promising project. The issued decree numbered 86/1995 granted the exclusivity to the Fair to host all national exhibitions and the team on board had the potential to involve foreign and local investors to make out of the Fair a living organism for the reason it was created initially. Still, it ended few months later with the same Hariri inaugurating surprisingly at Solidere, in downtown Beirut, the Biel Fairground, putting an end to this optimistic revitalization. Another past episode is the deformation of the abandoned Collective Habitat building into a commercial hotel. Besides violating the original architecture of Oscar Niemeyer (without his approval), the hotel ended up bankrupt around 2017. Recently, a consistent European fund promoted the revival of the Tripolitan carpentry industry in crisis. The project consisted also in placing it in the most neglected building within the premises of the Fair, the Reception building. After renovation, the intervention seemed like a good practice to replicate in other buildings of the Fair. Besides understanding how the intervention was done, the concern is that at the end of 2020, the European Commission did probably stop funding this project and the

unprecedented Lebanese economic crisis will likely put an end to this mission and leave the building abandoned again. Not even the Conservation Management Plan, under study by UNESCO and financed by the Getty foundation since 2018 would safeguard the complex. The actual Institutions and Governments are not interested in or prepared for such a worthy effort. The problem relates to the "Unmodern" Lebanese Governments that followed President Fouad Chehab's mandate. Until now, they have had other priorities. In October 2019, a popular revolution exploded in many piazzas and places all over Lebanon. The Thawra (means revolution in Arabic) reached in mass many streets and squares to claim the resignation of all politicians and occupied abandoned places to debate the crisis. The pandemic Covid-19 situation have almost suppressed the revolution. Would the post-Covid-19 and the idea of progress that was behind the Fair attract them to give a new meaning for that exceptional place?

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- Interview conducted and registered by the author on Friday 20 December 2019 in Dr. Nazih Taleb's office in Beirut.