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► **To cite this version:**

Éric Verdeil. Methodological and Political Issues in the Lebanese Planning Experiences. Conference City Debates, The Lebanese National Master Plan, City Debates 2003 Proceedings, 2004, pp.16-22. halshs-00002801

HAL Id: halshs-00002801

<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00002801>

Submitted on 7 Sep 2004

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Please quote as : Eric Verdeil, "Methodological and Political Issues in the Lebanese Planning Experiences", *Conference City Debates, The Lebanese National Master Plan, City Debates 2003 Proceedings*, M. Harb (ed.), Beirut, American University of Beirut, 2004, pp.16-22

Methodological and Political Issues in the Lebanese Planning Experiences

Eric Verdeil

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This paper is intended to provide a brief reminder of the main Lebanese planning experiences that have ensued during the last forty years. The National Lebanese Master Plan that is being presented in this seminar is not the country's first attempt at such planning, although the national scale has barely been considered. In this introductory paper, I will focus on reviewing previous planning efforts and attempt to explain the ways in which they "failed". The episodes in planning that I will begin with are the French IRFED mission (1959-64) and the master plan for Beirut and its suburbs designed by urbanist Michel Ecochard (1963-64), the two initiatives that were undertaken under the presidency of Fouad Chehab. I will then examine the metropolitan master plan for greater Beirut (1983-86) led by the Institute d'aménagement Urbain pour l'Ile-de-France (IAURIF), the same firm that is currently leading the LNMP in association with the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) and the Directorate General of Urbanism (DGU).

The question I wish to address first is: why is it interesting to deal with the past and with those old experiences of planning? I do not want to judge the previous attempts from a technical or political point of view and say whether the plan was good or not. My purpose is not to draw lessons from those experiences by giving good or bad points to the government, the consultants or anyone else. I do not have the professional qualifications to do so, nor do I think that any experience repeats itself. The context in which the master plan of today is taking place is in no way comparable with the time of Chehab nor with the time of the war. Hence, my interest in studying past planning experiences is not to replicate their good components and overcome their limitations in order to improve the process of planning today.

In the traditional approach to planning, one may be tempted to place the technical dimension of the work under the responsibility of the consultants who are expected to design a "good"

plan face to face with the political dimension, which is the responsibility of the government. However, this would offer a wrong image of the complex interactions between the consultants and the government. It is too simplistic to identify methodology (not to say science) as the attributes of the planners as opposed to politics as the attributes of the government.

By examining the three major planning experiences in Lebanon, I would like to identify some methodological choices that were marked by specific political significance when they were made. Most of the time, those choices were not imposed by politicians, but resulted from an interpretation of the demand that was formulated, as well as of the political context in which the choice was made in order to get the planning proposals accepted. My purpose is to investigate a selection of these methodological choices made within specific political contexts, to determine the way in which they influenced the development and urbanization of Lebanon.

IRFED

IRFED and its director, the Dominican Father Louis-Joseph Lebret, are probably among the most famous names associated with the era of strong reforms that occurred during the presidential mandate of Fouad Chehab¹. The president initiated major administrative reforms, aimed at liberating the administration from corruption and from the intervention of the local politicians. He also promoted the social and economical development of the country, and asked the IRFED team to identify “the needs and possibilities of the country.” His famous report of 1961 served as the basis for setting up a five-year master plan. Father Lebret was a development economist whose books and methodologies were praised at the time, although they are no longer of relevance today. His theories can be summed up as *économie humaine* and *développement harmonisé* (human economy and harmonized development). Through these concepts, he wanted to establish the necessity of achieving a balanced regional development. He aimed for balance: between economic sectors (agriculture and industry on the one side, trade and finance on the other) and between regions (urban centers and rural peripheries).

The methodology and proposals of the IRFED team were original. Their survey of 60 villages and of the major Lebanese cities detailed in depth the socio-economic situation of the population. It was the first time such data had been made available, and this resulted in regional development indexes that allowed a comparison of levels of development. In addition to formulating the five-year plan, which included an agenda of public investments, IRFED mapped out the levels of equipment in each locality, according to a grid.

I have shown elsewhere how these innovations were not fully accepted or understood by some Lebanese experts. In addition, the administration was not yet ready to implement the projects proposed by IRFED. In fact, a national administration school was created at the time in order to train experts in these new methods.

Another major novelty of Lebret’s practice of planning was the organization of a public campaign to promote his ideas. Lebret held several public conferences that attracted large audiences, and his first report was published, translated and distributed widely. In accordance with Chehab’s wishes, it was necessary for Lebret to raise the questions of development and

¹ Elements of IRFED’s projects are presented in my paper: Eric Verdeil, “Politics, Ideologies and Professional Interests : Foreign versus local experts in Lebanon during the mandate of Fouad Chehab”, in Joe Nasr, Volait Mercedes, eds., *Imported or Exported Urbanism?* , Londres, Wiley, 2003, pp.290-315.

planning in the public sphere and initiate wide debate among the people. The goal was to gain the support of a major section of the public, in order to confront the wariness of the Lebanese technical milieu toward IRFED's ideas and methodology, as well as to counteract the strong resistance of the traditional politicians and businessmen opposing Chehab.

As long as President Chehab remained in office, IRFED enjoyed full and continued support. However, as soon as Chehab's mandate was over, the IRFED plan was quickly replaced by others. The team and its projects became symbols of Chehab's policies and were among the first to be eliminated when the balance of power changed. This does not mean that IRFED's work had left no impact; it remains until today a major planning reference for many public officials who began their careers at that time. The "polarization grid" also served more or less as a direction for public investment up until the war. Nevertheless, IRFED's approach to planning shows the danger of linking planning to a specific political stance or politician—how the change of power can backfire and demolish what had hardly been established.

Ecochard

Michel Ecochard's case shows a very different attitude with respect to the relationship between the planner and the government. In summary, let me say that Ecochard knew very well Lebanon, its government, its politics and its technical experts. He had been commissioned to develop master plans for Beirut in 1941-43 and for several other cities at the end of the 1950s. He also worked in Lebanon as an architect. The study of the master plan for Beirut and its suburbs was the end of a long and hazardous process, in which Ecochard and other Lebanese engineers, architects and planners joined in lobbying strongly in favor of it. The plan began with partial studies for the governmental city and for the highway network. In contrast, IRFED's successive reports and proposals had reflected the implementation of a pre-established process that Lebanese experts and the government had less control over, owing to their lack of experience.

Ecochard's plan in itself represented an innovation, in the sense that no other master plan had ever been issued at the scale of the whole agglomeration. But the methodology implemented by Ecochard was far less ambitious than that of IRFED. Ecochard's diagnosis report consisted of information gathered from various administrative sources, without having made reliable systematic surveys. Estimating the future population size was the result of various projections, without explicit reference to data contained in IRFED's proposals and hypotheses. Also, no estimates were made regarding the labor force and the economic development of the city. This was mainly owing to the disinterest of and lack of sufficient funding on the part of the government.

The master plan relied mainly on a physical assessment of the city's growth. Establishing a detailed map of the city was clearly the most valuable document provided by Ecochard. It allowed his team to identify the extension zones. They attributed to each zone a certain density, and determined the population that could be fitted in each. It is a rather simple and robust methodology, based on the physical capacity of the agglomeration. Local experts who were able to understand this agreed with it. It could be summarized as "filling the holes."

One of the main innovations of the master plan was the planning of new towns (*villes nouvelles*) in Bir Hassan and Chiah, surrounding the governmental city. This project was a development of previous options proposed by Lebanese planners, as well as by Ecochard

himself. As for the road network at the scale of Beirut and its suburbs, it also integrated segments of previous plans. In fact, in its methodology as well as in its spatial choices, Ecochard's master plan was warmly welcomed among his colleagues, because it matched their own experiences and reflected their own ambitions.

The reception of the master plan by the politicians and the society was not as warm. Ecochard is famous for the numerous conflicts he has had in Beirut and in Casablanca with landowners, the government and administration representatives. In Morocco, he was fired because his activism had put the French Protectorate and landowners in an indelicate *face-à-face*.

What about the 1963 master plan? It is well known that Ecochard strongly rejected the final decree, because it did not retain his major projects for the new towns and because the floor to area ratio (FAR) had been raised. Nevertheless, I would like to argue that Ecochard sought a kind of compromise in getting some of his ideas accepted, in order to leave a strong imprint on Lebanese planning. I have discussed elsewhere the debate between Farid Trad and Michel Ecochard related to the question of density in the zoning ordinance. Ecochard considered he had been betrayed in the governmental decree; but for Trad, even the density proposed in the draft master plan was too high. Ecochard, taking into account the expectations of landowners, had already been attempting to reach a compromise². Other evidence leads to the same conclusion. Ecochard, who was also commissioned to coordinate the master plan for the renovation of the commercial areas of Ghalghoul and Saifi, defended his proposal by claiming the following:

“Le parti que nous avons choisi démontre que même en appliquant les conceptions contemporaines d’urbanisme, nous sommes arrivés à avoir autant de surface de planchers construits que l’aurait permis la loi actuellement en vigueur”³.

(The orientation we have chosen shows that even by using contemporary urban design concepts, we were able to achieve the same built-up area allowed by the current building law)

This clearly shows that one of Ecochard's objectives was to reach an agreement about density. In order to have his master plan accepted, he gave up some of his deepest convictions. Ecochard was particularly known for his social commitment, specifically for his housing policies for the poor. In his draft report, he wrote that Beirut was the capital of social injustice—this sentence was later deleted. This is further evidence of his attempt to compromise between his planning ideals and the political constraints⁴.

As a result, it must be stressed that if Ecochard's master plan was altered in the process of the final approbation, some of its main patterns still rule today's planning regulations in Beirut, forty years later, particularly those related to the road network and the zoning ordinance.

² Eric Verdeil, “Politics, Ideologies and Professional Interests : Foreign versus local experts in Lebanon during the mandate of Fouad Chehab”, op.cit., pp.310-315.

³ République libanaise, CEGPVB, *Aménagement du centre-ville (quartier Ghalghoul et quartier est de la Place des Canons) Rapport justificatif*. M. Ecochard, G. Banshoya, architectes urbanistes coordinateurs, Beyrouth, 13/4/1964. A more developed analysis of that source is provided in Eric Verdeil, *Une ville et ses urbanistes : Beyrouth en reconstruction*, PhD in geography, Paris Pantheon-Sorbonne University, 2002, pp.403-407.

⁴ Ibid, p.259-260.

SDRMB (Schéma directeur de la région métropolitaine de Beyrouth)

The SDRMB was elaborated during the war, in the aftermath of the Israeli invasion and during Amin Gemayel's mandate. The final document was completed in 1986, but was not officially approved. Later, in the early 1990s, it was heavily debated during the beginning of the reconstruction process. The SDRMB represents an extreme case regarding the questions I am discussing today.

The planners conceived the SDRMB as a technical and methodological experiment. They spoke about the methodologies of uncertainty: uncertainty because of the context of war, which made available data rare, less accurate, and subject to rapid change. The data in question concerned population statistics, dwellings, economy, etc. and the war had changed the initial terms of reference. President Gemayel, who launched the project, was marginalized; various militias gained ground; and the work of the planners turned into an exercise of political prospects. The physical consequences of political alternatives were analyzed, in order to find a compromise between the different spatial claims made by the various militias. For instance, the location of an industrial zone in Choueifat between the Shi'a and Druze areas best illustrates the overlap of technical and political stakes. It served as a buffer to the Druze militia that would not have accepted the growth of a Shi'a neighborhood in proximity to their territory. Conversely, the poor groups in the Shi'a southern suburb sought employment in the industrial zone⁵.

Planners were not allowed to deal with the primary subject of the reconstruction process, the central business district of Beirut, which was being studied by OGER, the Hariri firm. Several attempts to eradicate the informal illegal settlements of the southern suburbs of Beirut were carried out by the Lebanese army. Planning projects directly supervised by Gemayel, who considered the area to be one of the strongholds resisting his power, were developed. Gemayel's team directly monitored the sea reclamation project between Bourj Hammoud and Dbayeh—which was considered a priority even before he became president.

The SDRMB was widely ignored at the time. It was a brilliant intellectual exercise, but the political leaders did not care about it, even when they knew it existed. Later, there were debates about the SDRMB within the community of planners. The plan was criticized for its implicit acceptance of the political de facto order of the war. One of the mostly contested issues was the creation of regional centers in Nahr el Mott, Khaldeh, Hazmieh and Laylaki—sites that matched with the militia in each. But I will not discuss this here⁶.

I believe the SDRMB exemplifies the way planners can deal with the political constraints they confront. It almost became a caricature, or a fiction, because the plan had no consequences on the ground and was never officially endorsed. In fact, the master plan was sometimes presented in some administrations as a reference or served some individuals in government, but it acted mainly as an element of or for debate.

The main legacy of this project is found in the involvement of IAURIF in the Lebanese scene. The experience, personal relationships, shared conceptions and methodology, and its

⁵ Jacques Piétri, Gérard Mérand, Fouad Awada, "Beyrouth ou les méthodologies de l'incertitude", *Les Cahiers de l'IAURIF*, n°81, 1987, pp.33-48.

⁶ See Eric Verdeil, *Une ville et ses urbanistes*, op.cit., pp.398-419.

knowledge of the country enabled IAURIF to be commissioned for important postwar reconstruction studies: the Demarcation Line, the Transportation Plan, the Coastal Environmental Assessment, and the Development and Reconstruction Plan for South Lebanon.

Conclusion

The three planning projects discussed here display the different roles and commitments planners can hold within the political context.

Father Lebret chose to stand very close to the power of Chehab, who relied very strongly on his expertise. However, he experienced difficult relationships with some Lebanese experts who misunderstood his methodology and with political and social opponents to Chehab's reforms. As long as Chehab was president, IRFED benefited from his support and was able to develop plans. However, as soon as Chehab left, IRFED became an orphan, was quickly sacked and its five-year plan was profoundly altered. Lebret's ambitious planning methodology did not leave a significant imprint on private or public economic policies, nor on the achievement of a national master plan.

Ecochard had less ambitious projects, partly because he knew the country and partly because he was not given the means to achieve much more. It is easy today to critique a master plan which was the first of its kind and which was supposed to be revised in 1985, which was never done. However, Ecochard managed to impose, even despite the protests, some major elements of his proposal. He was able to do so because of his ties to Lebanese experts and his ability to know which compromises could be reached.

As for the IAURIF and the team responsible for the SDRMB, they were in a completely different situation, as the government they worked for did not last very long. The team had to draft a plan that fitted both the current situation as well as the anticipated balance of power and the set of interests involved in the urbanization of Beirut.

Methodology, in each case, included a set of technical tools that were sometimes very ambitious. It implied also dealing with sensitive political issues in order to make the proposals acceptable. The righteousness of the choices is very important, because for such master plans the terms of references are often quite vague. The proposals result more from the perceptions of the consultants and their capacity to "feel" the opportunities and possible margins of maneuvering.

IAURIF today is in the same situation that Ecochard previously had been; it knows the country and its political context very well and is working with Dar al Handasah, the most prominent and influential consulting firm in the country. However, it has not been provided with a clear vision of what the country should look like in 2020. The cases of Ecochard and SDRMB show that their situation is very common in Lebanon, as it may also be in many other countries. That is why it will be interesting to learn how the IAURIF team presents its mission, what major stakes it is focusing on, which opportunities it intends to rely on, what margin of maneuvering it has, and which public administrations does it need and trust to work with on such a project.