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► **To cite this version:**

Sophie Brones. The Beit Beirut Project. Heritage Practices and the Barakat Building. Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, John Pedro Schwartz. Archives, Museums and Collecting Practises in the Modern Arab World, Ashgate, pp.139-155, 2012. halshs-01299379

HAL Id: halshs-01299379

<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01299379>

Submitted on 7 Apr 2016

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Article paru dans PEDRO SCHWARTZ, P., MEJCHER-ATASSI, S., *Archives, Museums and Collecting Practises in the Modern Arab World*, Londres, Ashgate, 2012, p. 139-155.

The *Beit Beirut* Project: Heritage Practices and the Barakat Building

Sophie Brones

The so-called Barakat building, the ruined yellow building at the corner of Damascus Street and Independence Avenue in the Achrafieh quarter in Beirut, has been dressed, since March 2008, with huge posters. The first poster announced the project of a Museum for the Memory of Beirut (*mathaf li dhâkirat Bayrût*) but has [since](#) then been replaced in May 2010 by another, featuring the *Beit Beirut* [the house of Beirut] project, which is planned to take place in 2013. Both posters represent stages of this long and tempestuous making of new cultural equipment for Beirut city. The future museum and urban cultural centre will be dedicated to urban memories and history from the nineteenth century.¹

This project paves the way [for](#) a new field of investigation in the anthropology of heritage and collecting practices. This paper examines the making of this museum [and](#) some of the questions raised by the actual project. The museum's shape, contents, purpose and symbolic features relate *Beit Beirut* to 'society museums', such as Quebec's 'Musée de la civilisation' or Berlin's 'Wall Museum' [and](#) represents a new challenge for Lebanon. Like other countries in the Middle East, Lebanon has built, since the second half of the nineteenth century, archaeological museums (the AUB Museum opened in 1868) and, later on, since the beginning of the twentieth century, museums of Islamic and Modern art, which have [also](#) been developed in the whole Arab world, as Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz remark in the introduction of this book. [But](#) the challenge of this project is about the way *Beit Beirut* will feature the Beirutis' 'own lives', as one of its main aims is to express local collective memories

¹ <http://www.beitbeirut.org/>

and stories and to build part of the museum discourses on the various interpretations of the public [sphere](#).

I will, thus, examine the strategies employed to repair – or not – the reality of changing and fragmented Lebanese memories. In particular, I will outline the public appropriation of this private building that was at the beginning kind of ordinary heritage building. Actually, both meanings of the word ‘heritage’ – inheritance within a family as well as the social construction of what is usually called ‘national heritage’ – are useful [for understanding about this specific case](#) different forms of appropriating the past as well as the underlying conflicts about the city’s identity. In the early years of 1990, after having inherited the building [in which the museum will take place](#), the Barakat family wished to convert it into an economic capital project. In addition, the public appropriation – through the battle for its preservation and its expropriation by the Municipality of Beirut – reveals a specific time and context in the [collective](#) memory at work in Lebanon and in Beirut’s heritage practices. Sustained by Beirut’s Municipality and by local heritage associations, this project benefited from a conjunction of interests and a favourable political context after the assassination of ex-Prime Minister Rafic Hariri which refreshed, [in a certain way](#), memories of the Lebanese civil war.

The museum building’s process constitutes a site for the negotiation of knowledge and ideas between various local and foreign actors. As a case study it allows for the examination and better understanding of the complex and diverse processes of memory and collecting practices in Lebanon, [in a distant position](#) from the traditional injunction of the ‘duty of memory’ or the visible ‘amnesia’ of political powers that are more often denounced through public spheres when talking about memory.² The intensity of emotions and debates which take place around this damaged building reveals how and in what context heritage is thought of and what of the

² I can, however, refer to a collective research in which I took part, led between 2007 and 2010 by the Institut français du Proche-Orient in collaboration with the St Joseph University in Beirut. See Franck Mermier and Christophe Varin (eds.), *Mémoires de guerre au Liban* (Arles: 2010). It gathered collaborations of almost [30](#) researchers, historians, political scientists and anthropologists.

Beirutis' 'own lives' is considered representative or significant by the actors in charge of the project. The analysis of this 'home-made' museum, still in the project phase, aims to focus on collecting as a process that brings together both politics and members of the 'civil society' and expresses an innovative vision of cultural urban heritage, thus reinforcing Beirut's [cultural and artistic](#) position within [middle-eastern](#) cities.

Focus on a Home-Made Museum: From a Private Residence to a Public Institution

Figure 6.1 The Barakat Building façade on Independence Avenue, Beirut, 2011.

Today, the Barakat building is still in ruins, waiting for the restoration process that [should be](#) undertaken [before the end](#) of 2012. As [with](#) many other damaged structures in Beirut, this still-standing building will assume a new purpose after restoration. Often, rehabilitations engage commercial activities, such as the restaurants *La Centrale* in Achrafieh, *Walimat Wardé* in Hamra, or the *L'albergo* hotel in the Sodeco area. [But](#) rarely do such structures serve cultural purposes, as in the case of the Barakat building. In this chapter, I will outline how this damaged building was transferred from its owners to Beirut's municipality, [integrating](#) it into the national heritage. This process is inherently linked to the story of the building's preservation from destruction which revealed the existing tensions between 'heritage preservation activists', the government institutions, and the [former owners of the building](#).

The Private Heritage of a Family

The Barakat family, [from](#) Beirut's Greek orthodox bourgeoisie, were the original owners of the building. They bought the land [on which](#) it stands (plot number 1237) in the early 1920s. The

ground and the first floor of the actual building were designed by Youssef Aftimos (1866–1952) and built in 1924. Youssef Aftimos had been the architect of the Municipality of Beirut since 1898. He also designed its building in Wegand Street in 1927, as well as the Grand Theatre in 1929. Moreover, he was behind the construction of the Hamidiyyé Clock (1898) and the Hamidiyyé fountain (1900) that are today located in front of the Grand Serail and in the Sanayeh Garden respectively. His facades introduced Beirut to the ‘néo-mauresque’ style. In 1932, Fouad Kozah, another famous Lebanese architect, designed the second and third floors of the building. The ‘yellow house’, as many observers call the building, is divided into two structures; one overlooks Independence Avenue and the other faces Damascus Street. They are connected together by a colonnade that opens up to the sky. Accordingly, one can see the cityscape beyond and across the verandas and openings from each and every room of the inside building. For Mona Hallak, the Lebanese architect who was one of the main actors of the preservation process, the building has a remarkable architectural transparency achieved by an ingenious site plan that opens up the building to both city and sky. It is an aristocratic building with rare and elaborate cement tile patterns enhancing the colourful atmospheres of the rooms: pink, yellow, green and blue walls in sun-washed spaces.³

Figure 6.2 Cement tiles remaining intact in the fourth floor of the building, 2011.

The owners of the building lived on the top floor until the beginning of the civil war in 1975. Residents and storekeepers rented apartments on the first and ground floor; a hair designer, Ephrem Zgheib, opened his shop again in 1998 after more than 20 years of absence.⁴ There was also a Palestinian family living in the building, as well as a dentist named Nejjib

³ Mona Hallak, *A Tribute to Beirut : The City and its People. The Museum of Memory, an Outline For The Rehabilitation and Development of Lot 1237 – Achrafieh* (Beirut, 2003).

⁴ Walter Singh-Bartlett, ‘Of Heritage, Money, and the Want of Political Will’, *The Daily Star*, (11/1/1999).

Chemaly, who died in 1973. The owner's grandson, the youngest of a seven-children family, got married in the building on [14 April 1975](#), the day after the official start of the civil war. He also wanted to settle down there, but the location of the building, on what would become the [main](#) demarcation line between East and West Beirut, made it one of the first buildings to be attacked by snipers and occupied by Christian militias, in particular the *Ahrar* of Camille Chamoun. Hence, the family and all the building's inhabitants abandoned their home early in the war. Up until the end of the eighties, the building was used as a defensive position for the eastern part of the city, and had [thus](#) been severely damaged during the conflicts, though not in danger of collapsing. Its actual structure and facade bear the traces of the war, bullet holes and shells that often crossed its walls and demolished its stairs and roofs. The inside of the building recalls its various strategic occupations through barricades of bags of sand and reinforced concrete walls that are still intact, indicating fighting strategies against the opposite part of the city. [However](#), this damage does not obscure the original architecture of the building and its past *grandeur*.

Figure 6.3 Sand stone fortifications in the [first floor of the building, 2011](#).

At the end of the war, the four heirs of the building entrusted its management to a lawyer who was also a member of the Barakat family. Many investors were interested in buying the land situated at the crossroads of two main axes of the city and close to the 'new downtown' of SOLIDERE,⁵ the private real estate company in charge of the development and rebuilding of downtown Beirut since the early nineties. Those investors made proposals to the family seeking to develop the land. In fact, at that time, the family had two alternatives: either to sell the building or to keep the land and destroy the building in order to rebuild a bigger and taller one. Furthermore, along with most owners of ancient properties in downtown Beirut, the Barakat

⁵ SOLIDERE: Société Libanaise de Développement et de Reconstruction.

family land had been expropriated by SOLIDERE after 1991. Having ‘lost’ their goods in downtown Beirut, they intended to benefit from their remaining estates. For this reason, one of the Barakat heirs justified his intention to sell the building and its land for three and a half million dollars with: ‘I don’t care who buys the house as long as it gets sold. We’ve already lost our capital in the downtown area; we can’t lose anymore.’ Rather than sell, the family could also have destroyed the building, [of](#) which only 4,500 m² were exploited, and rebuild another apartment building in order to gain 13,500 m² more, according to the actual building code dating from 1954. At the time, different architects submitted suggestions for several projects. One of them, Jacques Liger-Belair, who was a friend of the family, made plans for three different projects that would have avoided the building’s destruction: a luxurious hotel, an office, and a commercial building (*souk* for goldsmiths). In 1997, the family [asked for the demolition of](#) the building. [The works started but it -](#) was not long, however, before the ‘Beirut’s Heritage Preservation Activists’ began to fight for its preservation.

Public [Appropriation](#) and the [Creation](#) of a [National Heritage](#)

As is usually the case, the importance of preserving the building came to light only once it was directly threatened by destruction. The various strategies of the owners as well as those of the public powers, undertaken in conjunction with local associations, led to a kind of ‘struggle for heritage’. What is very particular and striking in this case is that the building rapidly became a new stake for Beirut’s municipality and Governorate. The ‘Heritage Preservation Activists’ got involved in the preservation process which led to the complete stop of the demolition. Among the small number of heritage preservation associations existing in Beirut, the *Association pour la Protection des Sites et des Anciennes Demeures* (APSAD) was particularly involved in defending the building’s existence. This association had been founded in the sixties by Lady Yvonne Surssock-Cochrane, a member of a Greek orthodox patrician family of the urban high bourgeoisie. In post-war Beirut, the Association developed a large preservation programme in

the city concerning the old mansions and buildings threatened by destruction because of the increasing speculation in real estate. [In their view, the ‘yellow house’ was an emblematic case.](#) A Lebanese architect, Mona Hallak, already a member of the Association, became personally engaged in the case and felt a particular personal interest in this building. She is one of the main figures associated with this building’s preservation and one of those more deeply engaged in this struggle, as I learnt when I began my research on the subject [in 2006](#); every person linked to the house’s history advised me to meet her. These suggestions were beneficial as she was the one who introduced me to the history of the preservation process through generously showing me all the archives she had collected during her years of struggle. However, it should be noted that other people, [in particular](#) intellectuals, architects, artists [that, in the Lebanese context, more often argue in favour of architectural preservation and expressions of memory](#) became interested in that building and contributed in their own way to the preservation process. Among them [was](#) a French photographer, Sophie Haluk, who studied the house and contributed to [the writing of](#) its memory by collecting oral stories from snipers who lived in the building during the civil war. Nonetheless, [Mona Hallak’s who was associated with this building through her personal efforts in preserving is still deeply involved in the museum building’s process.](#) She grew up in Beirut and was seven years old when the war started. After she graduated from the American University of Beirut she earned a masters degree in Florence in 1995. [This stay in Italy may have contributed not only to her sensitivity to architectural and artistic heritage but also to the interest of architectural safeguarding](#) She promotes a particular vision of heritage based on the principle that preserving the past should not only be guided by nostalgia, but should also integrate contemporary creation processes. Although this vision is not shared by all APSAD’s members, those who participated in the Barakat’s building transformation share Mona Hallak’s point of view. Between 1997 and 2003, [she](#) organized several public actions around the building (press articles, Internet site, TV coverages, lectures, public tours of the building, etc.). In 2001, in Le Grenier, an abandoned restaurant in the Ayn el-Mreissé quarter of Beirut, she organized

an exhibition of all the objects and artefacts she had collected in Doctor Chemaly's apartment and clinic.⁶ This exhibition gathered artists and intellectuals. Among the audience were Fouad Kozah, the building's second architect, the writer Elias Khoury, the political scientist and urban designer Mona Harb, the anthropologist Pascale Feghali and the artist Rabih Mroue.

Through the years, and thanks to Hallak's actions, all the 'publicity' around the building, and the awareness of legal authorities and media convinced more and more people about the necessity of preserving the Barakat Building. In a context where the legal framework about historical heritage preservation in Lebanon was under elaboration – as the current laws are those promulgated during the French mandate period in 1932 – the Minister of Culture was inefficient in preserving buildings from destruction. Even though the former Minister Michel Eddé (1992–1996) had decided, since 1996, upon the suspension of the demolition of 1,052 old Beirut houses that had been put under review, the next Minister, Fawzi Hobeiche (1996–1998), removed this decision. Hence, many private properties were then destroyed by their owners as they sold their lands, [the actual ratios for land exploitation being much larger than the ones dating from previous times](#). Then, since 2000, as Ghassan Salamé [was](#) at the head of the newly reformed Ministry of Culture [he](#) - reactivated the discussion about the new legal framework for historical heritage preservation in Beirut. Taking into consideration that no legal framework was yet voted in, the Barakat building's expropriation by Beirut's municipality was the government's last solution to avoid its destruction. In June 2002, Beirut's municipality – whose projects [were](#) mostly strangled by internal political conflicts – and in particular its director, Abd al-Menhem al-Aris, and the Governor of Beirut (*mohafez*), Yacoub Sarraf, allowed the transformation of the 'yellow house' into a 'museum'. Having purchased the lot for three million dollars, the municipality paid the owners three years later, two days before the 2006 summer war.

⁶ The installation was part of the Ayloul festival (8–12 September 2001) and the film *The Grenier Presentation* was run during the exhibition. It is today part of Mona Hallak's archives.

The Museum Project

Although the idea of creating a museum had been present throughout the years of struggle for the building's preservation, the need to convert the place into a 'public interest space', according to the expropriation decree, led Beirut's Municipality to think about establishing a museum. In 2003, Mona Hallak, who had supported this idea since the beginning of her fight, wrote an outline explaining the museum project.⁷ It included most of the outlined proposals to defend the preservation by different parties over the past six years. Among these were the Lebanese Ministry of Culture, Beirut's Municipality and Governorate, and the General Direction of Antiquities (GDA). The Italian government, through its embassy in Beirut, also joined the project in proposing the creation of an archaeological museum. In addition, the World Monuments Fund of New York offered to raise funds for the project.

The French part included the Institut d'Aménagement et d'Urbanisme de la Région Ile-de-France (IAURIF), the Association Internationale des Maires Francophones (AIMF), and the Paris Municipality. In September 2006, Bertrand Delanoé, the mayor of Paris, came to Lebanon for a meeting with the Commission des Relations avec l'Ile-de-France (CRIF) in Beirut's municipality, in which four members of the municipal council participated. Ralf Eid, who was one of the participants, invited Delanoé to visit the yellow house even though it was not in the mayor's programme.⁸ According to the municipal councillor, Delanoé was seduced by the architectural and emotional values of the building and offered to provide technical support to the municipality for the conception of the future museum. In March 2008, after two years of standby because of the political crisis in the country after the 2006 summer war, the project was given a new momentum by the Cultural Service of the French Embassy in Beirut (SCAC) which liaises with Paris's municipality experts. A group of Lebanese and French specialists was constituted around the contemporary studies department of the French research institute (IFPO).

⁷ Hallak, *A Tribute to Beirut*.

⁸ Interview with Ralf Eid, Beirut, 2009.

This group became, a few months later in 2009, the ‘scientific committee’ for the future museum.⁹ It includes some of the actors that took part in the struggle for the preservation of the building between 1997 and 2003, such as Mona Hallak and another architect and member of APSAD, Habib Debs, as well as architects, urban designers and archaeologists from various Lebanese universities: the American University of Beirut (George Arbid), the Lebanese University (Mosbah Rajab, Yasmine Makaroun) and the Lebanese Academia of Fine Arts (Serge Yazigi). The other participants included anthropologists and historians specializing either in Beirut’s urban and social fabric or in heritage restoration problems (Franck Mermier, the former director of contemporary studies in IFPO, Carla Eddé, historian and responsible of the History Department in St Joseph University, and myself), [as well as Carla Mardini, specialist of museum issues and Lynn Maalouf, journalist, activist, member of the Beirut office of the International Center for Transitional Justice and vice-chair of the administration council of Act for the Dissapeard](#). [Zeina Arida, director of the Arab Image Foundation also joined the committee in 2010.](#) -¹⁰

The current involvement of these actors in the project can be explained in light of their professional cultures as well as their personal trajectories and engagements. Both collective and individual strategies take place in the local context of preserving heritage in Beirut. In many ways, they illustrate the tensions which exist between the official, but nevertheless inefficient public powers and the non-governmental associations in which those persons are engaged. Some of the Lebanese members of the scientific committee got involved in heritage associations in reaction to SOLIDERE’s master plan for Beirut’s downtown reconstruction that

⁹ I have participated in the meetings of the scientific committee since 2008 as an associated researcher of the French Institute in Beirut (IFPO). I am grateful to all its members, and I want to thank, in particular, Franck Mermier, Martine Herlem, Mona Hallak and Habib Debs for their help during my research. I also thank Noha Sadek and Mona Hallak for their [rereading of this paper](#). Although I am associated [with](#) the scientific committee’s debates, the interpretations given in this paper are all mine.

¹⁰ www.fai.org.lb.

has taken place after the war and since 1991. This plan was based on a radical change of the social and physical ancient fabric of the district by erasing more [than 80](#) per cent of its historic architectural landscape. As architects and urban designers, some of the 'Heritage Preservation Activists' had their own ideas about Beirut's reconstruction. Some of them had also been involved in the project as consultants. However, their professional cultures were different from those of the big engineering agencies that worked with SOLIDERE, such as Dar al-Handasah.¹¹ They would rather work through their own private small agencies, and many of them are engaged in academia, holding PhD studies in Europe, the United States or Lebanon and now teaching in prominent Lebanese universities. The formal aspect of their own projects reveals the legacy of the modern period during which Lebanon had many local and foreign important figures. Aware of the need to safeguard historical architecture, they also promote contemporary creation involving original designs that are not mere copies of ancient or traditional styles.¹²

From the side of Beirut's municipality, expropriation was not only the more expensive solution but also the sole one for the preservation of the building. Therefore, this striking decision can be partially explained by the positive influence of Ghassan Salamé, the Minister of Culture of that period, and by the good relations of Mona Hallak with Yacoub Sarraf, Beirut's former governor. Moreover, the decision obviously represented a political opportunity for Beirut's Municipality which had been weakened by the war and had lost control over the city centre, far behind SOLIDERE, in the early years of post-war reconstruction in the nineties. The municipal council, as a forum for personal interests with [23](#) members chosen according to geographical and confessional criteria, brings together personal political allegiances, strategies and resources. The four municipal councillors from the municipality's offices linked to the Ile-de-France region (CRIF) had been assigned to work on the project and liaise with the Paris

¹¹ Eric Verdeil, *Une ville et ses urbanistes: Beyrouth en reconstruction*, thèse de géographie (Université de Paris I, 2002).

¹² Ibid.

municipality *via* the French Cultural Mission in Beirut. However, in fact, the Municipality lacked the necessary skills to carry out single-handedly such an architectural project. I observed during various meetings how difficult the evaluation of the needs of such a project seemed to be. For instance, in 2008, the Municipality ‘cleaned’ the inside of the ruined building, throwing away some of the original art deco coloured tiles that had been stacked by the demolition people in the upper floors, as well as many documents, objects, furniture, sniper barriers and other elements that could have constituted the main basis of the museum’s permanent collections. Nevertheless, the municipal councillors had shown great motivation in discussions with the scientific committee and in leading the project together with the *Mairie de Paris*’s members who provided technical support: a museum expert of Cultural Affairs Direction, a general coordinator from the General Delegation for International Relations, and a cultural heritage and architecture expert of the architect of the Heritage and Architectural Direction, also a member of a non-governmental association promoting [the architectural and cultural heritages of Paris’s suburbs](#).¹³ In 2010, after the 2009 municipal elections, M. Rachid Achkar and M. Nadim Abu Rizk replaced them at the head of the project for the Municipality.

Several meetings that brought together the main actors of the project took place in Beirut between 2008 and 2011. The Paris municipality had a specific role in providing an administrative framework for the project in response to the *cahier des charges* established by Beirut’s Municipality which selected in 2009 Youssef Haïdar’s agency among four architectural agencies and projects, although the scientific committee had required an international competition for the project. Youssef Haïdar had experience in the renovation and creation of museums in Lebanon, such as the Archaeological Museum of AUB and the Soap Museum in Saïda, South Lebanon. Decisions concerning organizing the collections of the museum have been elaborated by the scientific committee members together with the Paris Municipality members in 2008 and 2009. They guided the architect’s plans of the interior spaces and the

¹³ La Maison de banlieue et de l’architecture: www.maisondebanlieue.asso.fr.

organization of the exhibition spaces. But the general architectural project has been contested at several points by the scientific committee, which were summarized in a five-page report sent to the Beirut's Municipality in July 2011. It highlighted several problems related to the architectural treatment as well as to the general preservation scheme of the building.

Setting Up the Museum's Collections: Discourses and Values (2003–2009)

Considering 'objects do not speak by themselves' and that their analysis should be based upon the relations they have with their social context, as the editors say in the introduction to this book, it seems important to focus observations on scenographic and museographic practices as they constitute the shaping and framework of specific ideas and values. Nevertheless, as the collecting practices are still a project and as the museum is still not open to the public, I focused my analysis on discourses and values expressed throughout the various negotiations between the municipal council members, the architect in charge of the project, and the members of the scientific committee.

Most museums are constituted in order to exhibit specific collections. Accordingly, museums serve the purpose of exhibiting pre-existing collections, which, in turn, continue to 'grow older' after the museum's construction. In Beirut, for example, the National Museum was founded in 1927 to exhibit a small archaeological collection that resulted from the excavations of a French officer's mission in Lebanon (1919). Whereas various propositions concerning the future museum's role and function have been made since the Barakat building's expropriation, the problem of collections and that of the restoration of the building have been and still are the two main issues of the project. In her outline in 2003, Mona Hallak summarized all the proposals that had been made during the years of struggle for the building's preservation. Mona Hallak put them together to ensure that the Municipality could find in them ideas for the future museum. She supported the idea of displaying the many artefacts she had collected inside the damaged building since 1997, such as those of Dr Chemaly's apartment which she considered to

be testimonies and memories of the period from the forties to the beginning of the seventies, in addition to artefacts from more recent events in Lebanese history related to memories of the war. French actors, alongside Beirut's municipality, supported, in these early stages of the project, the creation of an urban design unit for Beirut's municipal frontiers. Then, since the museum project was publicized, independent actors, such as researchers and artists, also thought about the site and its function. All of their ideas converged around a common theme of reconciliation: the building's situation on the ancient demarcation line of the war could symbolically serve the dialogue between Lebanese communities. Mona Hallak quotes P. Dellport in her outline:

After six years of public campaigns by heritage preservation activists, the Barakat building will be expropriated by the city of Beirut as its Museum of Memory. The acknowledgment of the whole past needs to be a principle entrenched within the collective consciousness of all communities [...] making this recollection of the past visible, accessible and shared to contribute to the process of social reconciliation.¹⁴

The Governor Yacoub Sarraf's discourse was based on the same underlying ideas:

The city of Beirut shall expropriate lot 1237 – Achrafieh – and turn the Barakat Building into a museum, a civic cultural centre focusing on the history of urban development of the City of Beirut, offering people a place for interaction and debate in the heart of their capital [...] This unique piece of Levantine architecture with such an avant-garde concept of urban setting, at the intersection of Damascus Road and Independence Avenue, was built by the pioneer architect Youssef Bey Aftimos [...]. Having been used heavily by snipers during the war due to its strategic location on the dividing “green line”, the preservation of their nests still intact will add to the rehabilitation of this building a great symbolic value: a place for meeting and reconciliation, a space for memory so as not to be swept up by amnesia. This project is a unique opportunity to have a living museum dedicated to our urban history

¹⁴

Hallak, *A Tribute to Beirut*.

and collective memory, a witness to the rebirth of pre-war successful endeavours, an effort to which every citizen is invited to contribute.¹⁵

By denouncing obliviousness, these discourses serve those who call for remembrance in the name of the ‘duty of memory’. Their authors contribute to the work of memory that has emerged in the past few years, particularly in public spheres of contestation, artistic milieus and around the heritage preservation activists.¹⁶

What Should a Museum of Memory Be?

The previous ideas of an archaeological museum did not last long as the scientific committee, together with the Beirut Municipality, decided that the museum – and its collections – would be based on the existing structures, their history and stories. From that point of view, the use of the word ‘museum’ represented one of the problems the participants in the project had to deal with. For most of them, it seemed difficult to retain the use of this term in the context of an experiment: making a ‘museum’ without a pre-existing collection of objects of rich value. For that reason, during the first meetings of the scientific committee with the Municipality, some asked about changing the word ‘museum’ and proposed calling the future site *bayt al-madīna* [the house of the city]. But the word museum had been used in the expropriation decree and the participants in the project had to deal with it. As generally understood, the term museum refers to a place where ancient artefacts (or artefacts that are no more in use), artworks or everyday objects, are exhibited. Beirut has several museums: two archaeological museums (the National Museum and the archaeological museum of the American University of Beirut), a fine arts museum (the Sursock Museum), and private ones, such as the Robert Mouawad Museum (*ex* Henri Pharaon collection). These examples gave the frame for the museum’s conceptions for some of the project’s members [whereas some others were more aware of alternative forms of museums such as society museums or ecomuseums.](#)

¹⁵ Hallak, *A Tribute to Beirut*.

¹⁶ Marie-Claire Lavabre, ‘Paradigmes de la mémoire’, *Transcontinentales*, 5 (2007) : 39–47.

Which and Whose Memory?

In a contested social and urban space, the museum can be considered as an answer to a social claim. The word memory (*dhâkira*), which since 2008 has been in use by Beirut's Municipality on the poster covering the Barakat building's façade, constitutes another issue of the project. In the post-war years, debate about justice and reconciliation had partly been masked by the city centre's reconstruction under the direction of SOLIDERE, the private real estate company founded by the former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. This project faced a large public debate about social, economic, political and symbolic issues, and started the demolition, in 1992, of almost 80 per cent of the previous architectural buildings of the zone. Jad Tabet – a Lebanese architect who since the early nineties became personally and particularly involved in the challenges against SOLIDERE – said that the *Beit Beirut* project reflected the failure of 'heritage preservation activists' and heritage associations in protecting the architectural heritage of the city, in which the lack of support from the government was a notable influence.¹⁷ His underlying idea was other preservation processes could have succeeded for many other buildings than the Barakat building. He added that in his opinion, SOLIDERE is generally considered today as an example for heritage preservation even though it had destroyed the main part of Beirut's ancient heritage during the reconstruction process. He referred to tourist maps and publicity produced about the few archaeological sites that were converted to public spaces, the restoration of a limited number of monuments in downtown Beirut and the coherence of the urban fabric and landscape in this zone.

At the beginning of the discussions in 2008, the participants' conception of the 'object' of memory seemed to limit its scope to the Lebanese civil war period (1975–1990) whose traces are visible everywhere in and outside the building. Without consensual agreement on the country's recent history, the history of the war period represents a very complex issue. The Taëf

¹⁷ Round table *Mémoires de ville* in Beirut's French Cultural Centre, 28 May 2009.

agreement that marked the end of the civil war in 1989 remained silent about the war and its victims. It was followed in 1991 by an amnesty law which Paul Ricoeur interprets as an institutional form of forgetfulness¹⁸ as it omitted to pass judgement on political leaders for the war crimes committed by their militias, favouring instead their conversion into politics.¹⁹ In such a context, where justice has not played its role, healing seems impossible whereas collective memories are submitted to political leadership and community divisions.

As discussed during various meetings and expressed in the reports, the war period will be documented in the museum's interpretation as one of various episodes of Beirut's history. It will be emphasized through the material damage left inside and outside the building as well as through artefacts, such as the sniper's barriers and other traces of the militias' occupations of the building. The general idea is to highlight the war period as the building itself lived it, with evocations and reminiscences that the site, the building and the preserved damage will provoke. It had been decided that the main purpose of the museum will be Beirut's social and urban history and memories from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries, the civil war being no more than a part of the story. A part of the building will feature a permanent exhibition on the previous themes (first and second floors) and another part (third floor) will deal with temporary exhibitions concerning subjects such as everyday life in Beirut, trades, housing and living spaces, etc.

Collecting Memories

Furthermore, thought of as a place for debate and moving cultural purposes, the project is necessarily leading to the invention of new forms of collecting practices. Going through the building's stories is the first step for the permanent collections of the museum. The building

¹⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris, 2000): 588, cité dans Aida Kanafani-Zahar, *Liban, la guerre et la mémoire*, (Rennes, 2011): 37.

¹⁹ Aida Kanafani-Zahar, *Liban, la guerre et la mémoire*, (Rennes, 2011) : 38.

appears as both a container and content for the museum. Thus, the ‘yellow house’ becomes part of the museum collections. The basis of discussing memories should be the artefacts collected by Mona Hallak in the building since 1997. In Dr Chemaly’s apartment, the boxes containing spices, the dental cabinet, dental chair, his objects, instruments and papers (letters, visiting cards, pictures, cinema flyers...) allow the reconstruction of the familial and urban history of that period.²⁰

Different stages of the building’s history, such as its conception, its extensions, its destruction and reuse by militias during the war, are yet another story that the public shall hear. The avant-garde architecture of the building itself illustrates Beirut’s architectural heritage of the mandate period, along with the transformations it brought about, including the passage from stone to concrete, as shown in the building between the first and second floors. The biography of the master architect, Youssef Aftimos, is also linked to the history of the city during the Ottoman period and the French mandate period which only few history books refer to. All these elements that are contained by the building itself are proposed as primary material for the ‘memory’ collections. Discussions during 2010 concluded that these collections would be completed by various investigations led by specialists assigned by the scientific committee members on different subjects. The themes will generate the collecting of many different objects such as pictures, films, sounds of the city and everyday life objects from homes, works and public spaces. The museum also plans to go beyond its material frontiers by organizing events in other places of the city so as to compensate for the partitioning of the quarters in the city. Furthermore, all parties agreed that the building should serve not only as a museum but also as a centre for debate, research and knowledge on Beirut’s architectural heritage. For all these reasons, the building is meant to express a plural and contemporary local identity.

²⁰ Some of these objects were shown at the Unesco Palace in Beirut in an exhibition organized by the National Heritage Foundation (21_30 May 2008).

Regarding that programme, one ought to enquire about the main methodological issues for collecting. It, therefore, can be understood as an upgrading process: the way the museum upgrades objects that are or were already valued (in a positive or negative meaning) by their original owners. The process of collecting converts the value of objects into a monumental logic, which is understood in the terms of a remembrance project. In this particular case, as an ongoing process, special attention should be paid to the context of material and immaterial objects that will be collected. For example, collecting campaigns launched by the MuCEM (European and Mediterranean Civilizations Museum) of Marseille are made by social anthropologists in an ethnographic way, combining collecting of the objects with memories, stories, atmospheres and uses in which they participate, paying attention to the relations between objects and their users as well as the social context they belong to, and documenting them by videos, photographs and interviews.²¹ As for the importance of the object's original contexts, the oral story's subjective visions and the archive's production contexts, will this museum boast about calling itself an ethnographic museum? It may be so as it will exhibit objects from Beirut social practices that will partly be collected by anthropologists. More than exhibiting culture as in traditional folklore museums, the museum intends to assume the description of 'Lebanese lives' through cultural practices and productions.

However, the main issue this project faces is, in my opinion, the way it integrates the so-called 'cultural heritage'. As Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz say in this book's introduction, 'we must also bear in mind that remembering can itself be a form of forgetting, and collecting, a form of discarding.' As a response to 'achieving closure on the past' that goes with monuments, museums, historical sites and cultural heritage objects, the authors cite the anti-monument and the anti-museum experiences, such as those of the Berlin Jewish Museum in which empty space calls for remembrance and subjective interpretations of the past in a non-directive way. In the same way, the will of *Beit Beirut* to talk about itself as a 'living entity' and

²¹ www.mucem.org/

about heritage and political processes that made it a museum and urban cultural centre aims to avoid this enclosure of cultural heritage that makes, once the museum is created, an immobile and static object remaining outside the movement of life.

As demonstrated by the plurality of practices and discourses, heritage has become the focus of debates, collective involvement and reactions from many different actors in the local scene. The destiny of this building is also very particular, as it represents a rare example of the success of both Beirut's heritage preservation activists and its owners who wanted to sell their land, two sides that are generally opposed by their visions about transmitting heritage. Thus, it demonstrates the possible role of the Lebanese government in safeguarding parts of Beirut's architectural heritage. The various strategies outlined above reveal that the government, *via* the Municipality of Beirut, partly, but officially, can assume the responsibility for some of the country's collective memories that the 'yellow house' symbolizes on many levels. By exhibiting urban memories, as well as memories of war and division, the museum should provide a new context for examining historic events.

This 'home-made' museum questions the main issues around the contemporary 'creation' of museums in a post-colonial context as well as the central role of memory in the definition of current artistic trends in Beirut. According to Pierre Nora, the institution of the museum is produced by societies in which memory is in decline and societies that try to stay close to their past because they can no longer choose their destiny.²² But the Beit Beirut case study also allows an examination of how memory, specifically that of the war, has been used by many local different groups. It shows how public appropriation of the project by the various parties involved in it expresses the will to talk about the past as well as to invent new ways of considering the changing landscape of the city. [It](#) may give a renewed discourse about the war, contrasting with the general tendency of erasing its traces, as SOLIDERE has done in downtown Beirut. [Will the integration of](#) the war into a new cultural place in the city mean, in a

²² Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire* (Paris, 1984).

certain way, assuming it as a part of national history? [If yes](#), the museum could therefore answer one of the main functions of what Daniel Fabre considers a [capital city](#): a place where the ‘expectation of a collective destiny’ would be possible.²³ The main reason for that would be the way this museum renews its relationship to history by referring to collective memories, which have, until now, remained outside historical and political local discourses.

²³ ‘L’anticipation d’un destin collectif’ was Daniel Fabre’s formula in the introduction of the public forum *Capitales et patrimoine au XXI^e siècle*, Québec, Laval University (5–7 Nov. 2009).

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