



The 18th International Planning History Society Conference - Yokohama, July 2018

Urban forms at intersection of Imperialism and Colonialism: a perspective on Beirut

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Towards the end of the 19th century and the WWI geopolitical aftermath, Beirut presents a case along the Eastern Mediterranean at the intersection of two major colonial powers, the Ottoman Imperialism and French Colonialism. Dissociated from the province of Damascus in 1888, Beirut was elevated to the rank of provincial capital of *Wilâya*, the geographical borders of which spanned the equivalent of four actual countries. Following this administrative upgrade Beirut benefited from the *Tanzimat* reforms and the Sultan Abdul Hamid II jubilee in 1901. This paper will highlight the implementations of these political moments on urban forms and the urban landmarks for the ruler's glory. Under the French mandate, Beirut role shifted from being provincial capital of a *Wilâya* part of the Ottoman Empire, to being capital of a Republic country with newly defined borders. Preceding the French Colonialism, Sultan Abdul Hamid II envisioned Westernizing some of the Ottoman Empire cities to the image of the European urban model. Alternately, the French were very enthusiastic to modernize Beirut, their prime image in the Levant. At this moment, Beirut's urban fate was at the intersection of two visions of Westernization, the late Ottoman Imperialism and the early French Colonialism. An attempt to better understand the urban implications of this turn of century intersection, will be achieved by highlighting urban forms continuities and ruptures as a methodology observed in the broader geopolitical context. It is a chance to reflect on the modes of borrowing Western urban forms and examining the blurred boundaries of their planning, juxtaposition or imposition on an existing urban order. It will as well unfold in a parallel mode how each colonial power approached and applied different urban practices on their occupied territories.

Keywords: urban forms, colonial powers, Beirut, Westernization

Introduction

This paper will highlight Beirut's changing urban forms towards the end of the 19th century, at the intersection of Ottoman Imperial and French Colonial rules. Both ruling powers resorted to Western urban planning and practice for the improvement of cities under their rules, Beirut in this case. Preceding the French Colonialism, the Ottoman Empire envisioned Westernizing cities to the image of the European urban model. The different reasons lying behind the Ottoman will and urge for *Westernization* will be explained in this paper in the broader geo-political and administrative context of Beirut. The Imperial glory of the urban achievements didn't last long as the Ottoman Empire was fragmented and divided following the WWI geopolitical aftermath. At that turning point of history, the French ruled Lebanon and were very enthusiastic to modernize Beirut, their prime showcase in the Levant. Both the late Ottoman '*model of progress*' and the French '*mission civilisatrice*' in the Levant, Beirut being its *Vitrine du Levant*, placed Beirut among their strategic priorities¹. Accordingly, both ruling powers shared some of the urban *Westernization* features, which visibly transformed the city's landscape at the turn of the century. Applying *Tanzimat* reforms, the late Ottoman regime aimed at modernizing their major cities by *Westernizing* them. French urbanization intersected in many way this *Westernization* implications in particular at the beginning of the mandate. This paper will highlights points of convergence and divergence in the two modes of *Westernizing* for the production of city space. It will present an understanding of their urban visions and the effect of *Westernization* modes in the laying out of a Mediterranean city.

The literature on the changing geographical importance of the Eastern Mediterranean coast and the growth of cities along it has documented accurately the urban landscape of late 19th century Beirut, namely the scholar works of Hanssen (2005) and Çelik (2008). However literary works addressing the Mediterranean cities in their specific historic urban trajectory are still hesitant and thus far present an incomplete reading of the individual cities. This paper unfolds Beirut's urban transformation as a Mediterranean city, from a medieval Arabic city structure into a major port-city on the Mediterranean. The production of urban forms, their structural changes and their transformation will be approached under two main perspectives; the city as physical space and consequently as a dynamic model, and the city as part of a larger network and wider context. Observing the city as being a physical space consists of analysing the transformation of the city fabric, the evolution of the urban landscape and its



structural changes. Simultaneously, studying the city as part of a network leads to an understanding of the urban dynamics in relation to its broader geo-political context.

This paper highlights the urban forms transformations at this particular moments of history, when late Ottoman concerns about urbanism were Western-driven, followed shortly by the Westernizing practice of the French on their colonial cities. It is an opportunity to reflect on the modes of borrowing Western urban forms and to examine the blurred boundaries of their planning, overlay and imposition on an existing urban order. While the text doesn't draw primarily on the economic and socio-communal aspects, it doesn't imply by any means that they are of a lesser importance. It doesn't focus neither on the role of the political authority in imposing urban orders on occupied territories as a major indirect catalyst in shaping the city.

Contextualizing Beirut at the end of the 19th century

Beirut has been historically a city at the crossroad of different empires and played different administrative roles within different geographical boundaries and political dominations. Under the Ottoman rule, its administrative role kept on gradually rising while it was still part of the *Bilad al Sham* territories until the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the WWI aftermath. From a city under Ibrahim Pasha's rule that was annexed to the province of Damascus in 1864, it rose in the lapse of twenty-four years to become capital of *Wilaya* in 1888 (the total area of which was 30,500 km²), then capital of Greater Lebanon (Lebanon area, 10,450 km²) in 1920, as it is currently in its present-day borders. On a macro-scale, Beirut shifted from being a province within the *Bilad al Sham* territories under the Ottoman rule, into a capital within a State frontier under French rule.

Following the Sykes-Picot agreement, the Empire territories were divided into different states among Allied forces, and consequently the network of the Empire cities was modified and forced to function in a different mode, following a new geo-political context. Confined within the smaller geography of the state of Greater Lebanon, the French authority considered itself a 'mission' and a 'mandate' rather than a 'colonial' power. Earlier, when Beirut was upgraded to capital of *Wilaya*, it benefited from the *Tanzimat* reforms and the Sultan Abdul Hamid II silver jubilee in 1901, the implementations of which played the role of urban catalysts. Accordingly, Beirut became part of the network connecting the Empire's major cities. As the word *Tanzimat* mean literally 'reforms', urban reorganization, reordering and restructuring were instituted, inspired from Western urbanization concepts. Urban Westernization was thus practiced under late Ottoman rule in an ironic anticipation to the French production of urban space.

The slight overlap and intersection of these two urban moments will be tackled through this paper by presenting their effect on the city. During the early mandate period, the French continued working on the city image initiated by the Turks for the Sultan by carrying out the '*Foire-Exposition*' event of 1921. Similarly, they appropriated physically the public spaces of *Sahat* and occupied the architectural landmarks. They carried on the urban developments initiated by the Turks in the port sector and clearing of the medieval fabric of *Bayrout al-Qadima* which preceded their 'imported' urban practices. Though both powers sought Westernization in their urban design paradigm, the French character diverged substantially from the late Ottoman one. At a more advanced stage, the Mandate failed in fully implementing two successive master plans envisioned in 1932 and 1934 by French planners, respectively Danger then Delahalle.

The changing urban landscape

Several factors laid behind the rise of Beirut from a coastal medieval city into a major Port-City along the Eastern Mediterranean coast at crossroad between shipping lanes and the land routes for trade activity². This urban transformation was deeply rooted in the geo-political and administrative changes initiated during the late Ottoman period³. At that time, both Ottomans and French shared a particular interest in Beirut and worked on strategically improving the port and its surrounding area. The works on the port ran in parallel to the development of the infrastructural connections between Beirut and Damascus, a hinterland city without a seaport.

The Beirut-Damascus carriage road completed in 1863 bypassed the tortuous intramuros roads to reach the seaport and replaced the previous route that crossed *Sahat al-Burj* through *Bab al-Saraya* and *Bab el-Dabagha*. Beirut was throwing off its medieval character and moving out of its eroded walls around 1860. It grew in size along the main arteries to Damascus, Saida and Tripoli completed between 1860 and 1876. The two extramuros loose and undefined spaces at the boundaries of the medieval wall, known as *Sahls*, were urbanized gradually into *Sahat*. *Sahat al-Burj* (later to become *Sahat al-Hamidiyeh*) and *Sahat al-Sour* playing respectively the role of nodes to Damascus Tripoli and Saida. The first urban transformations started as early as 1892 with the arrival of Ismail Kemal Bey as the new *Wali* of Beirut *Wilaya*, being '*one of the leading Ottoman architectural figures in Beirut during Abdulhamid's reign*'⁴ who undertook major urban changes in the port sector. Between 1890 and 1895, a French company with local entrepreneurs undertook the port enlargement, followed in 1895 by the construction



of the 800 meters long Ottoman jetty. French authorities carried on the extension of the port between 1920 and 1929 which was strategic for the arrival of their military troops. Later on in 1934, they extended the jetty by 450 meters to mark the final change to the turn of the century Beirut waterfront landscape. The mercantile medieval port acquired a hybrid nature with the inauguration of *Orosdi Back*, the first large-scale department store along the wharf at the same year of the railway's in 1900, followed by the opening *Imperial Ottoman bank* in 1905. The advent of the coastal railway which was part of a larger rail network placed Beirut on the Muslim pilgrimage road as early as 1909 with the construction of the Beirut-Al Hijaz railroad⁵. *Locandas* and hotels multiplied along the waterfront, and the *Khan Fakhry Beh* and *Khan Antoun Beh* were different from the introverted nature of the medieval *Khan*, basically with their open ground level typology.

Urbanism transformed the port area and initiated the first piercings of big part of Souq streets in the city tortuous medieval fabric starting 1915 by the Turkish initiative⁶. The French influenced the Turkish will to modernize planning, since their presence infiltrated to Beirut since 1860, preceding their official entry to the country in 1918. They were blamed for their lack of concern for the three principles of modern urbanism, *hygiene, aesthetics and circulation*, characteristic of the French planning. Accordingly they initiated piercings the *Souq* for the purpose of ventilating the congested area. One piercing aimed at linking *Sahat al-Burj* to *Bab Idriss*, connecting the East and West sides of the city. The second piercing in the direction of the sea aimed at linking the port to the *Souq* area, ending by effectively destroying *Souk al-Fashkha*, *Souk al-Tawileh* and *al-Jamil*⁷. The rubble was used to backfill the seashore, changing the shoreline, visible in the map of 1876. Consequently, a bearing wall was constructed out of the backfill and seaside promenade of *Minet el-Husn*, which became the favourite destination for the Beirutis⁸. The French pursued the Ottoman idea of embellishment of this promenade to be named *Avenue des Français*, lined with casinos, elegant hotels, cafes and patisseries 'à la Française' and the first piece of art, le "Monument aux morts". Famous for its palm trees and wide pavement, postcards of *Avenue des Français* printed in 1925, were comparing it to *Promenade des Anglais* in Nice to promote French tourism in the *Levant*⁹. Nevertheless, *Place de l'Etoile* remains undoubtedly the proud product of this French Mandate period, following the 1932 Danger masterplan. Three concepts underlay the master plans, namely *Hygiene, Circulation and Aesthetics*, and formed the basis for the urban intervention. The destruction of parts of the *Souq* by the Turkish authorities paved the way for the final imposition of the geometrical star-shaped square on the *Bayrout al-Qadima* medieval fabric (*Figure 1*). This inspired *Haussmanian* intervention disrupted radically the previous city structure¹⁰ except for the strong resistance of the Christian authorities which saved the existence of two churches. This meant that two branches of the star had to be amputated.

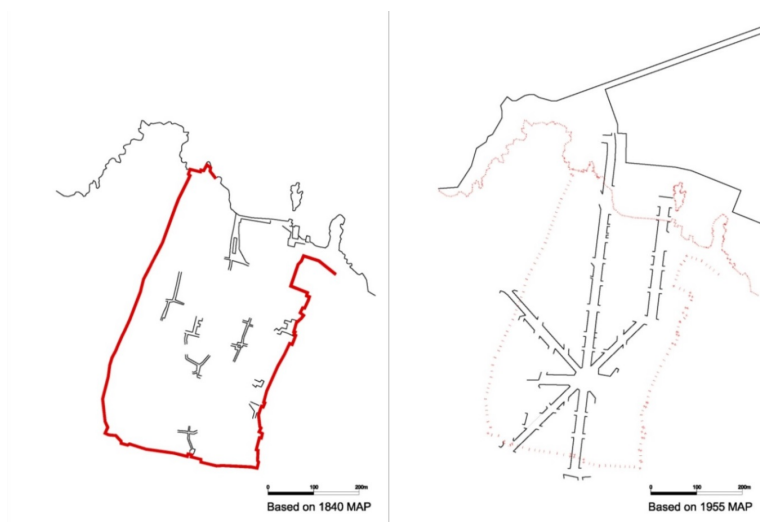


Figure 1: Fragmentation of the Souq structure to be replaced by *Place de l'Etoile* - Diagrammatic maps by author (extracted from author PhD dissertation, 2015)

The landscape and model of the city of Beirut were profoundly modified. The major development of the seaport drastically changed the medieval city landscape into a major Port-City. The subsequent structural changes in clearing the tortuous city fabric aimed at opening the old city in the direction of the sea, although its traces are still omnipresent. The Beirut-Damascus carriage road which bypassed the tortuous intramuros roads by running along the city periphery transformed deeply the city model. While the port became Beirut's major urban component the city dynamics shifted from the East to the West (*Figure 2*). Instead of reaching the port though via the Eastern *Bab el-Dabagha* and the tortuous narrow road, the wide and straight carriage road reached out the seaport from the West (*Figures 3 and 4*).

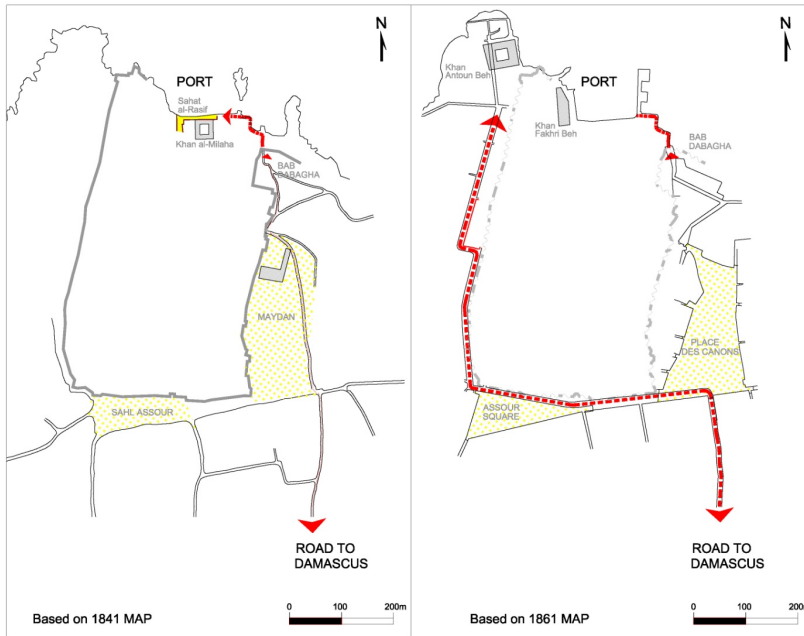


Figure 2: Shift from hinterland model to port-city model. Each map is the result of the overlapping of several maps, overlapped and combined by author.

[Base maps sources: 1841 based on Lloytved map and 1861 map based on Terre de Vincennes].



Figure 3: Initial east access to Port: Period between 1905 to 1925; Photographer Bonfils – Debbas Collection.



Figure 4: 1902, view from Grand Serail towards the port, new Damascus-Beirut road shown; Photographer Sarrafian – Debbas Collection.



The changing urban image: from *Wilaya* to Capital

Ottomanization after the *Tanzimat* went beyond the production of monumental effects and landmarks in the urban space, to achieve networking through communication and transportation. Whilst the French were confined within the borders of the state of Greater Lebanon, they boosted their image through internationalizing Beirut as their prime colonial city of the Levant. Transportation and telecommunication by means of the telegraph covered what had been the Empire Arab provinces¹¹ and brought cohesion to the Ottoman Empire territory¹². Infrastructural networking was developed with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 which revitalized the trade routes via the East Mediterranean and played a catalyst role in the emergence of Beirut as a port-city. As distances were shortened, Beirut's links to Istanbul and Damascus were not only infrastructural but symbolical as well. In the same year, the port railway was inaugurated, five tramway lines were inaugurated for this occasion and were operating by 1907, passing through *Sahat al-Burj*. The will for planning the square was both a tribute for the Hamidian image of Sultan Abdülhamid II and a display of late Ottoman westernization. The square was then named *Sahat al-Hamidiyeh*, known also as *Menchiyeh*, where the *Petit Serail* was built in 1883 at its end and occupied by the Turkish authorities. In addition to the port, this square served as the point of departure for the historic visit of German emperor Wilhem II to the Orient in 1898.

Architectural landmarks and monuments led to the fast transformation of the Late Ottoman cities landscape. The construction of public buildings on hilltops¹³, the urbanization of main squares in central urban locations, the construction of clock-towers across the Empire were physical and symbolic products of the Ottoman Empire's authority for unification across the Empire's territories and of the will to modernize the provincial capitals. In the year that followed the *Petit Serail*, the construction of the *Grand Serail* was completed in 1884 on Beirut's hill. On the same hill, a remarkable 25 meters high Ottoman clock-tower became the highest point in Beirut. The 8-meter ornamental *Hamidiyan fountain* was inaugurated in the middle of *Sahat Assour*, as another tribute for the Hamidian image. In the urbanized squares or *Sahat*, ornamentation replaced functionality which characterized the fountains of intramuros *Sahat* where women used to meet and collect water at the *Souq* intersections.

Beirut's Ottomanized model, the "the jewel in the crown of the Padishah" as German emperor Wilhem II called it, became the "Vitrine du Levant" as the French envisioned it at the heart of their "mission civilisatrice" in the Levant¹⁴. While the late Ottoman rule showed a concern for embellishment and monumentality as a tribute to the Hamidian rule in the first place, the French worked on further promoting the city as their image. Beirut gradually became the "Pearl of the Middle East", often known in the sixties as 'Paris of the Orient' or 'Switzerland of the Middle East'. After the visit of the German emperor to Beirut in 1898, the 'Foire-Exposition' event of 1921 was another milestone in its urban history (Figure 5). The idea behind the exhibition was to affirm political goodwill for the newly established Greater Lebanon, and trust between France and Lebanon¹⁵, the French being aware as well, that the region was traditionally based on trade. The 'Foire-Exposition' emphasized the importance of the city by the construction of the *Pavillon de l'état de Damas* in the heart of the city in the *Place des Canons* (previously *Sahat al-Hamidiyeh*) and gave it a more 'cosmopolitan' character (Figure 6). Beirut exposed itself as the primary French colonial city of the Levant, reflecting the cultural image of the French presence. At an international level, this event marked the importance of Beirut in the hierarchy of the colonial cities.

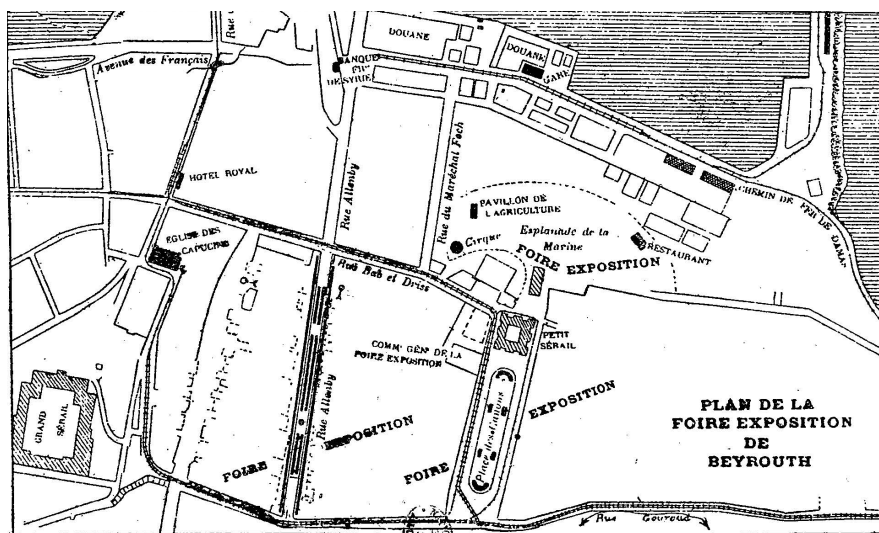


Figure 5 – Fairground Map: showing the 'Foire-Exposition', its location and indicating the transportation, roads, esplanades and even hotels (hotel Royal)

[Source: Haut Commissariat et la République Française en Syrie et au Liban. *La Syrie et le Liban en 1921. La Foire-Exposition de Beyrouth. 1922.*]



Figure 6: *le pavillon de l'état de Damas*

[Source: Haut Commissariat et la République Française en Syrie et au Liban. *La Syrie et le Liban en 1921. La Foire-Exposition de Beyrouth. 1922.*]

Conclusion

The premise that it takes powerful moments of history to bring deep changes to the city¹⁶ lies at the heart of the deep formal and structural changes of Beirut's fabric. This moment of deep urban transformations at the end of the 19th century coincided with several catalysts such as the opening of Suez Canal¹⁷, the administrative upgrade of Beirut to *Wilaya* and the Ottoman will to bring urban order as per the *Tanzimat* reforms. However the most important feature was the transformation of the city as a model, and not only as an urban fabric.

Even though the production of *Westernized* urban spaces converged at some early moments of their overlapped influence, Empire and Colonial rules diverged ideologically in their approach. The primary Imperial incentive at that time was reordering state control by connecting the fragmented territories of the Ottoman Empire and creating an unprecedented infrastructural network among Arab provinces connecting to the holy cities of Al-Hijaz (Mecca and Medina), followed by the economic concern. The modernity of this approach diverged from the French Colonial concern for boosting a cultural image of civilization. This search for an image that transcended the geographic limits, might be generated from the fact that French Colonialism in the Levant had to rule over a divided fragment of the Empire territories, which became moreover separate countries. The end of WWI marked the end of the Imperial and Colonial urges for expansion over broader geographies, to be replaced since then by different forms of control.

Two premises can conclude this paper, one concerning the process of urban *Westernization* and another one concerning the creation of city image and the representation of power. It can be concluded that French *Westernization* consisted of introducing imported urban forms and applying them on an urban fabric based on *Souq* structure, thus a different process of self-regeneration based on trade. Imperial *Westernization* consisted of a concept or ideology for modernizing through regenerating the existing urban landscape. The second premise on image and representation of power presents an interesting contrast between the Empire monumentality and the Colonial representation of cultural power using the '*Foire-Exposition*' event for changing city image. The French promoted the image of Beirut as a city of culture on the international scene inasmuch as the Ottomans used the cities to honour the image of the Sultan and the Empire. The Empire achieved a coherent City-Port model in Beirut whereby the implementations of French urban concepts and forms emanating from a different cultural process, were less successful.

Though this paper doesn't cover all the necessary aspects for an urban comparative between Imperialism and Colonialism, it may serve as a starting-point for further understanding the production and transformation of Mediterranean cities. At the crossroad between East and West, Mediterranean cities are the complex outcome of several urban models juxtaposed on top of each other, under different political rules.



Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Image sources

Figure 1: diagrams by author. Source: author PhD dissertation, 2015

Figure 2: diagrams by author. Base maps sources: 1841 based on Lloytved map and 1861 map based on Terre de Vincennes.

Figure 3: Photographer Bonfils – <http://www.thefouaddebbascollection.com/>, Accessed June, 2015.

Figure 4: Photographer Sarrafian – Debbas Collection.

Figure 5: Source: Haut Commissariat et la République Française en Syrie et au Liban. *La Syrie et le Liban en 1921. La Foire-Exposition de Beyrouth*. 1922.

Figure 6: Source: Haut Commissariat et la République Française en Syrie et au Liban. *La Syrie et le Liban en 1921. La Foire-Exposition de Beyrouth*. 1922.

Endnotes

¹ Jens Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut: The Making of an Ottoman Provincial Capital*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 13.

² A. Battégay, J-C David and F. Métral (ed.), «Formation et transformation des identités urbaines et de l'organisation des villes en Méditerranée orientale et au Moyen-Orient», *Monde Arabe Contemporain : Territoires et Mobilités*, Cahier de recherche N°5 (Gremmo, 1996): 7.

³ Moreover, Beirut benefited as well from the shipping revolution and introduction of steamship to improve the port. The opening of the Suez Canal revitalized the trade routes via the Eastern Mediterranean and led to the emergence of port-cities like Beirut and Haifa.

⁴ Jens Hanssen, "Your Beirut is on my Desk: Ottomanizing Beirut under Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876-1909)", in *Projecting Beirut: Episodes of the Construction and Reconstruction of a Modern City*, ed. H. Sarkis and P. Rowe (Munich: Prestel, 1998): 52.

⁵ Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut: The Making of an Ottoman Provincial Capital*, 252.

⁶ Marlène Ghorayeb, *Beyrouth sous mandat français, construction d'une ville moderne*. (Paris: Karthala, 2014), 23.

⁷ Hanssen, "Your Beirut is on my Desk", 52.

⁸ Fouad Debbas, *Beirut Our Memory, An Illustrated Tour in the Old City from 1880 to 1930*. (Beirut, Lebanon: Naufal Group, 1986), 109.

⁹ Aurélie Delage, «La rue: espace public, quel(s) public(s) ?», *Tracés. Revue de Sciences humaines*, 5 (2009): 61-74. URL <http://traces.revues.org/3163>; DOI: 10.4000/traces.3163.



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¹⁰ Marlène Ghorayeb, «Beyrouth sous mandat français, construction d'une ville moderne», *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée*, N°73-74, (1994): 338.

¹¹ Zeynep Çelik, *Empire, Architecture, and the City: French-Ottoman Encounters, 1830-1914*. (University of Washington Press, 2008), 28.

¹² Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut: The Making of an Ottoman Provincial Capital*, 39.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 241.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁵ The idea is underlined as a celebration of sacrifices and a compensation for the support to General Gouraud, put forth in the following terms:
Pour saisir ainsi le sens et la portée de cette publication, il faut évoquer la Foire-Exposition de Beyrouth qui apparaîtra désormais à tous ceux, Syriens, Libanais ou Français, qui ont travaillé aux côtés du général Gouraud dans les heures militantes de 1919, 1920 et 1921, comme une consécration de la Paix gagnée après tant de sacrifices.
La Foire-Exposition de Beyrouth 1921 n'a été qu'un prologue, car dans tous les domaines des actes s'accomplissent qui s'imposent.
Mais le général Gouraud l'avait aperçu dès septembre 1920, elle a été plus, elle a donné confiance.

As documented in the conferences related to the decision to set the exhibition in, Haut Commissariat et la République Française en Syrie et au Liban, *La Syrie et le Liban en 1921. La Foire-Exposition de Beyrouth. Conférences. Liste des récompenses*. (Paris: Emile Larose Libraire-Éditeur, 1922), 2-4.

¹⁶ Ali Madanipour, "Roles and Challenges of Urban Design", *Journal of Urban Design*, Vol. 11. No. 2, (June 2006: 173–193), 176.

¹⁷ Beirut benefited as well from the shipping revolution and introduction of steamship to improve the port. On another hand, the opening of the Suez Canal revitalized the trade routes via the Eastern Mediterranean and led to the emergence of port-cities like Beirut and Haifa.