

Architecture in the Arab Levant  
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The Arab Levant or al-Mashreq is an area nowadays consisting of Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories and Syria. Around 1914, the destiny of this particular region at the verge of the fall of the Ottoman Empire was being shaped by two major facts: The Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 that divided the zones of influence between the British and the French, and the no-less important Balfour declaration of 1917 that prepared for the creation of Israel. In the aftermath of World War One, Syria and Lebanon were placed under the French Mandate starting 1920, while Jordan, which would be founded as a country in 1924, and Palestine, went under British rule.

The unfolding history took the four countries in political directions that molded their architecture in different ways. The Naqba in Palestine with the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 on one hand, and the difference in political regimes in the other countries, shaped them differently.

Lebanon

Lebanon can be presented in summary as a synthesis of broad influences. In a country located at a crossroads, the multidirectional flows of people, goods, ideas and cultural practices have naturally shaped architecture and enriched it in many ways.

From traditional architecture to modern times, a common thread exists; a constant will to assimilate and integrate the new whether in terms of constructional methods or cultural innovation. This desire for modernity favored an architecture culture heavily characterized by adaptability and resourcefulness, resulting in skillful craftsmanship and building competency.

In the early 20th century, pioneers of architecture included engineers working for the Ottoman authorities, architects who came on archeological missions during the Mandate and engineers educated in Lebanon who pursued further studies or architectural training abroad. Following Independence in 1943, and starting with the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts, various local schools of architecture, which kept ties with foreign institutions, were created. Enriched by varied experiences and openness to diverse sources, architecture in Lebanon became multi-faceted. Over time, the best examples have proven to be those that have appropriately responded to local living practices, both indoors and outdoors, dealt with climatic conditions, and innovated in response to aspirations for modernity.

Mandate Architecture of the 1920's and 1930's

During the French Mandate over Lebanon (1920 - 1943), a colonial Orientalist style laced with Art Deco connotations was developed by local engineers and architects, mainly in the Foch-Allenby district in the center of Beirut. Standing strictly aligned, respectful of a determined height, coherent with arched galleries, these buildings are built with well-crafted local yellow stone, stylish iron handrails on cantilevered balconies. Among the important landmarks of the period are the Municipality of Beirut by Youssef Aftimus, and the House of Parliament by Mardiros Altounian. The competition for the National Museum of Antiquities of 1928 resulted in the attribution of the project to a team composed of Pierre Leprince-Ringuet and Antoine Nahas. The Art Déco building had better chances than the two finalists consisting of neo-Beiteddine and neo-Persian proposals.

Pioneers of Modern Architecture and the 1940s

The Hôtel St. Georges designed by French architects Poirrier, Lotte & Bordes with local engineer-architect Antoine Tabet, is a pioneering structure of the time (1932). With its long spans, straightforward layout, exposed concrete structure and filling, horizontal dominance and sobriety, Hôtel St. Georges soon became an icon.

Following the construction of the first cement factory in the country in 1931, the 1940's were characterized by the transformation of building techniques as stone gave way to concrete. The typical central hall house with its triple arched openings underwent various transformations, surviving until the late 1940's. While concrete eventually replaced stone as the principal construction material,

the gradual process resulted in a rich period of coexistence and witnessed a simplification of detailing. Richly textured finishes of float-rendered or Tyrolean plastering replaced ornamentation.

1950's and 1960's

The 1950's and 60's correspond to the maturing of modern architecture that slowly developed since the French Mandate. Once liberalism and private enterprise were confirmed after Independence (1943), the service sector developed rapidly, making Beirut a regional center for trade, banking, advertising, air-sea-land transport, communication and tourism. Because of Lebanon's democratic regime, Beirut attracted artists and intellectuals from the Arab world fostering cultural exchange and the general cultural activity lent architecture an impetus for exploration. During this booming period, a general desire for modernity was found both in private and government-sponsored buildings.

Celebrating the onset of the 1950s and launching a successful collaboration between a Polish architect and a Lebanese team, the AUB Alumni Club by K. Schayer with B. Makdisi and W. Adib is a straightforward functional building reminiscent of Schayer's earlier work in Poland. With its syntax of richly textured intersecting planes, its delicate cap and its L-shaped layout integrating the garden, the Alumni Club was indeed a pioneer. Soon after, the team produced many distinguished buildings on the Raouché Corniche, such as Hôtel Carlton, built between 1955 and 1957.

Collaboration between foreign and Lebanese professionals also proved fruitful when American architect Edward D. Stone designed Hôtel Phoenicia (1954-1961) with Ferdinand Dagher and Rodolphe Elias. An elegant building that came to terms with the spirit of the time as much as it was tailored to the place, the Phoenicia soon became an icon of International Style architecture adapted to a Mediterranean climate. Whether in circumstantial collaboration or in permanent teams, local engineers and architects were more than merely supportive staff for their foreign partners and contributed significantly to the making of modern architecture. They were familiar with the administrative bodies, the networks of practice, expertise and the availability of materials, and they were architects in their own right, generally having run a practice before they teamed up with foreign architects. The Holiday Inn Hotel (1965 - 1974) by Lebanese architect Maurice Hindié with French architect André Wogenscky is another example of such partnerships. Teaming up with local architects, French architect and planner Michel Ecochard contributed to the dissemination of a local version of Modern architecture that he did not envisage in opposition to tradition. As he would demonstrate in many buildings, his embracing of Modern architecture was accompanied by a close understanding of local conditions pertaining to materials, building techniques, climatic response and last but not least, local practices. Far from normalizing the cityscape, the response to climatic conditions and orientation offered opportunities for a variety of creative designs with distinctive skins. From the west-oriented protective claustra of the Dar Assayad printing press by Schayer-Makdisi-Adib to the north-oriented curtain wall of the Horseshoe Building by the same team, rational choices prevailed.

Urban quality is found in such buildings as Centre Sabbag, a commercial center, cinema and office building by Alfred Roth and Alvar Aalto (1967 - 1970). The L-shaped building frees the street side corner of the plot creating a piazza for pedestrian use. Like many important operations, the project was carried out with a group of Lebanese consultants, technicians and superintendents. The list of successful examples of the period includes the Starco Center, by the Swiss firm of Addor & Julliard between 1955 and 1961. It was a state of the art commercial center and office building that recreated on the ground and mezzanine levels the atmosphere of the souks.

The prolific career of Joseph-Philippe Karam offers the most exuberant designs, displaying an extensive use of color and a wide array of finishing materials. In 1968, Karam designed the Samadi-Salha City Center, a movie-theater recognizable with its concrete eggshell. The well-executed surface of the cinema was made possible by well-trained carpenters who adapted their skills to become concrete form-workers. Other elegant roofs are found in factories sheds, namely the state-owned Tobacco factories such as the one by