

Aga Khan Travel Grant 2019

Reviving Cosmopolitan Beirut

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Prior to the onset of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), Beirut boasted a vibrant art scene. The war took its toll on the city's infrastructure, leading to the relocation and shutdown of the existing galleries and art institutions. After the war, with the lack of traditional exhibition spaces, Beirut's artists and artist collectives mobilized abandoned historic buildings and the city's public spaces with exhibitions, installations, and performances all throughout the 1990's. It was a means to reclaim their city. A lineage of artistic and cultural institutions dominated Beirut's art scene, one after the other, making it more visible, open, and diverse. These developments offered a much-needed space for reflection and experimentation (Theatre de Beyrouth, Ayloul Festival, Ashkal Alwan...) and led to the abundance of art and cultural institutions with different images, directions, and affiliations.

Art and architecture are inextricably linked in postwar artistic practices in Beirut. The mutually-beneficial relationship between art and architecture remains present to this day, coming forth in the collaborations between artists and architects in the formation of art and its institutions. Art in Beirut is now being revived along different tracks, in tandem with its complex geopolitical identity. My research argues that artists, gallerists, and architects collaboratively assert a certain message and image of Lebanon, by creating a nostalgia appealing to certain moments in Beirut's past (or the prospective future). Their images and visions are embodied in the design and operation of the physical space, whether in urban terms or architectural ones, such as display strategies, accessibility, proximity to other institutions, and audience.

I am grateful to the Aga Khan Travel Grant for providing me with the opportunity to travel to Beirut in summer 2019 and conduct the necessary fieldwork for my thesis. My main question was whether there is a relation between the art and architecture that an art space promotes, and whether they can be viewed in the service of promoting a certain image of Lebanon's history. Thus, I began by identifying all buildings of historic value that are being used as art spaces after the civil war (roughly 1990 onwards), to examine whether or not there is a relation between the architecture, art, and the symbolism engendered by these decisions.

At the onset, I would like to recognize the difficulty faced in finding information for this thesis for a number of reasons, such as the lack of proper archiving, prior research on such topics, the effects of the war on the status of the existing archives, and the recency of the phenomena I am tracing. As such, fieldwork in the form of interviews with architects, artists, and gallerists was necessary to provide much-needed information and insight into the operation of these art spaces, the processes by which artists and architects are chosen, and the rhetoric used to project the image of the institution, whether through the spatial experience, media, or other outlets. The phone calls, site visits, and interviews proved pertinent to the development of this thesis.

My site visits to the *Agenda Culturel*, a listing of all cultural activities in Lebanon since 1994, allowed me to identify the pivotal spaces of art exhibitions since the end of the Lebanese Civil War. The *Annahar* newspaper archives (images and newspaper clippings) were crucial to understand the different dynamics of the geographic locations under study, the state of the art world and its institutions since the end of the war, and the reviews of art exhibitions. I also made

use of the libraries and collections of the Lebanese American University, the American University of Beirut, Ashkal Alwan Association for the Plastic Arts, Sursock Museum, and the Arab Center for Architecture.

I categorized the different art spaces according to their architectural styles, to see if the choice of a certain historic architecture embodies a yearning towards a particular historic epoch in Lebanon’s past. I tracked the architecture of the different art galleries and institutions and supplemented it with the kind of art they exhibit, to create preliminary categories. These categories broadly split into the traditional French mandate buildings, the modernist buildings, the industrial spaces, and the contemporary (st)architecture. I argued that each category vies for its own identity of Lebanon, be it Beirut the French, Beirut the Prewar/Modern, or Beirut the Postwar/Postmodern.

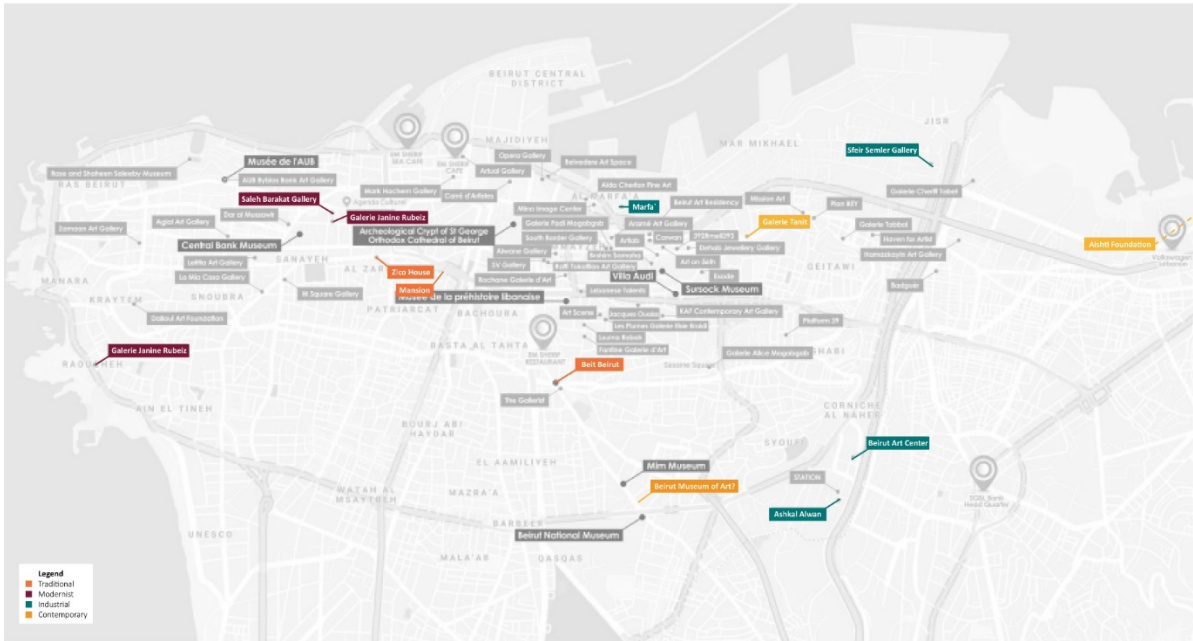


Fig. 1. Map showing the initial art spaces under study. Created by the author.

	Traditional Lebanese Architecture	Modernist Architecture	Industrial Architecture	Contemporary (St)architecture
Public	Beit Beirut Cultural Center (built 1924) 2016 Sodeco	Saleh Barakat Gallery (2016) (& Agial Gallery-1990) Hamra L.E.F.T. Architects	Sfeir Semler Gallery (2006) Quarantina Bernard Khoury	Aishti Foundation (2015) Seaside Road, Antelias David Adjaye
Private	Zico House (Built 1935) 1994 Spears	Dar El Nimer (2015) Hamra	Ashkal Alwan (moved in 2010) Jisir el Wati Youssef Tohme & Anastasia el Rouss	Beirut Museum of Art Controversy APEAL Foundation (2015) Sodeco
Civil Society	Mansion (built 1930s) 2012 Zokak El Blat	Lucien Cavro/ Renovation: Serge Brunst		Galerie Tanit (2007 & 2017?) Mar Mikhail Jean Marc Bonfils
	Villa Paradiso 2013 Gemmayze	Galerie Janine Rubeiz (continuation of Dar El Fan 1967) Raouche Karim Bekdache Architects		

Fig. 2. Chart showing the preliminary categories: traditional Lebanese architecture, the modernist, the industrial and the contemporary (st)architecture. Created by the author.

After narrowing down on some representative art spaces for each architectural category, I contacted the directors of spaces, curators of the exhibitions, as well as architects and designers in charge of the design or renovation. I prepared an interview guide that included questions on the description of the institution, spatial experience, artists and collaborators, catalogues, and press reviews, to name a few. I would like to thank all those who welcomed me, granted me their valuable time, and provided me with much insight into the uniqueness of each art space, its design and operation. The interviews, documentation, and fieldwork allowed me to delve further into the different categories.

I proceeded to choose the modernist architecture category as the main topic of my thesis. The modernist category presented the most interesting and glaring case of a concordance, or complementarity between the art, the architecture of the gallery, the gallerists, and the artists. Modernist architecture, which characterized the emblematic postcard image of prewar Beirut, came to represent Beirut's cultural Renaissance. I focused primarily on three modernist art spaces, which lie in the same geographic location of Ras Beirut, itself the prime representation of the image and relationship to the open and secular Beirut of the 1960's and early 1970's. The three case studies that represent this trend or tendency to regain cosmopolitan Beirut are Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Saleh Barakat Gallery, and Dar El Nimer for Arts and Culture.

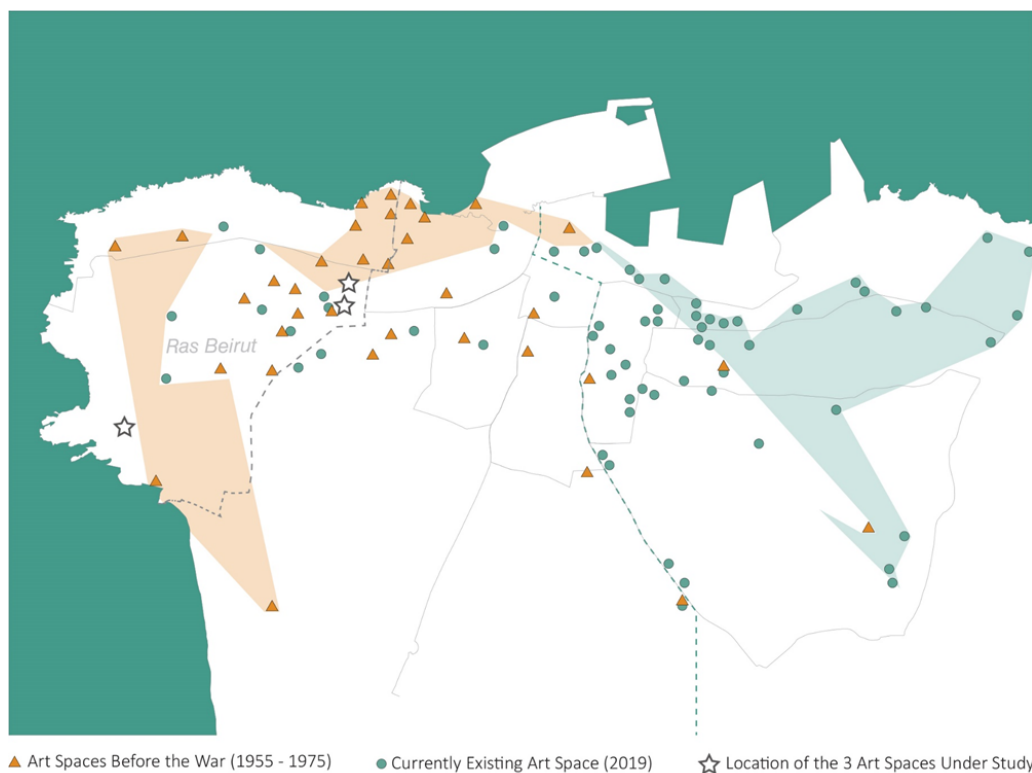


Fig. 3. Map showing the concentration of art spaces before (triangles) and after (circles) the Lebanese Civil War. It shows how the hub of the art world moved from Ras Beirut towards the Eastern parts of the city and the location of the three art spaces under study (stars). Created by the author.

Galerie Janine Rubeiz/ Dar El Fan

Janine Rubeiz was a highly ambitious, rich Christian Orthodox woman, who came from a background in set design, theater and architecture. In 1967, she single-handedly established the first local cultural center in the Arab world to integrate a totalistic view of culture, serving as a meeting point of poetry, theater, music, art and political debates. Her socialist tendencies came through in her institution and were supported by the Socialist Progressive Party, of which she later became the Commissioner of Women's Affairs and Vice president. Dar El Fan was set in a traditional Lebanese home, and from 1967-1976 hosted over 240 conferences, 60 poetry nights, 90 exhibitions, 150 film screenings, and 6 theatrical plays. Lecturers and exhibitors included famous architects such as Le Corbusier, Hasan Fathi, artists and art historians such as John Carswell, writers like Gibran Khalil Gibran, politicians, and artists such as Huguette Caland, Chafic Abboud, Aref Rayess, and Jamil Molaeb.

Dar El Fan lay on the demarcation line between East and West Beirut, and was destroyed by militia groups in 1976. However, during the war, Janine worked adamantly to revive culture, motivate artists and their audience, and organize events in a fickle, life-threatening environment. In this transitional period, she sought other spaces to host exhibitions such as the modernist spaces of the Carlton Hotel and the Glass Hall of the Ministry of Tourism. However, in 1987, Janine opened her own home, transforming half of her apartment into an art gallery. Her home was built in the modernist style in the 1950's and located in Raouche, one of the main luxurious, modern hotspots of Ras Beirut and one to feature extensively in films, postcards, and the like.

Upon Janine's death in 1992, her daughter Nadine Bekdache, renovated and launched the whole apartment space officially as the Galerie Janine Rubeiz. As Lebanon and the art market were showing signs of improvement, Nadine opened a new space, with a small, white cube gallery, on the ground floor of the same modernist building. In the renovation of the space, the architect aimed to redesign it in a cinematographically modernist way. The result is a simple, art gallery, with a white "neutral" space, that showcases the art of Lebanese artists specifically, and aims to preserve long-term collaborations and nurture artists, some of which have even exhibited in Dar El Fan in its heyday.

Saleh Barakat Gallery

Saleh Barakat Gallery is gallerist and art historian Saleh Barakat's second gallery space. After 25 years of establishing Agial Art Gallery, a larger neighborhood proximity space was required to host retrospectives for his now famous artists. In an interview, Barakat noted the need for a white cube space to the art world's shift towards scenography, branding, and the interchangeability of the role of galleries and museums. He advocates for a Levantine identity and promotes Lebanese and Arab art almost exclusively. The modernist space he renovated is the Cinema Clemenceau and former Masrah Al Madina, both important cultural historical landmarks inextricably tied to Hamra's Modernist Golden Age. Barakat recounts his childhood memories watching alternative films in Cinema Clemenceau, and stresses the importance of saving a historical cultural landmark, even if as a gallery space. Although Barakat was one of the main actors who initiated the conversation for a platform for contemporary art in Lebanon and curated the first exhibition that tries to bridge the gap between prewar and postwar artists, he is openly biased towards "classical" art.

Dar El Nimer

Dar El Nimer is a not-for-profit art foundation established and funded by Rami El Nimer, to showcase cultural production from “Palestine and beyond”. It opened its doors in 2015 in Clemenceau, one block away from Saleh Barakat Gallery in Villa Salem, designed by French architect Lucien Cavro in 1936. It is the first residential building in Beirut to incorporate a free plan. The multi-apartments villa was transformed into its third and most public program yet, Dar El Nimer, after being a residence, a resto pub, and a place for random exhibitions and art auctions over the years. Dar El Nimer came at a time when the Arab identity was being redefined, with the Arab uprisings and crises in the Arab world. It aims to tell a different narrative of the Arab world and finds it their duty, responsibility, and passion to present a different historical narrative of the multilayered cultural and artistic history of the region, by showcasing artists from the region and Rami El Nimer’s private collection.

In conclusion, this research tracks the individuals and architecture of these three art spaces, to argue that in the architecture and art they choose, there is a nostalgia towards the prewar cosmopolitan Beirut. I argue that the demographic effects of immigration and internal migration as a result of the Lebanese Civil War, lasting roughly from 1975 to 1990, the introduction of Solidere, and the boom in the Dubai art market, led to a change in the postwar artistic scene. Although collectives tried to revive art and abandoned spaces in Beirut, by turn of the century, due to limited means and the need for different kinds of spaces (white cube/industrial), they moved towards different areas. Thus, the individual efforts of these galleries provided much-needed exhibition space in white cube galleries stationed in modernist buildings in Ras Beirut, echoing the glory days of prewar cosmopolitan Beirut. Modernist buildings are the prime examples and containers of the image they are trying to resurrect, and Ras Beirut is the perfect embodiment of this image. The modernist structures that were left untouched, are able to be “rescued” and accommodate the art institutions seeking to exhibit more classical or traditional art forms like painting and sculpture. It is precisely this stability, financial security and clear program that ties back to Lebanon and the region that has enabled these spaces to bear a resemblance to the former cosmopolitan Beirut, represented by the architecture of that period. All three galleries are funded by individual owners, focus on Lebanese and Arab artists, and show a sentimentality towards the area. They exhibit modern and contemporary art from the region almost exclusively, a great time to do so, given the growth of the market and scholarship on Arab art. These galleries mobilize modernist buildings to resurrect the Ras Beirut of their childhoods: the modernist cultural hub of the Arab left intellectuals.