

# Beyond Ruins Reimagining Modernism

Edited by Raafat Majzoub and Nicolas Fayad



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## Reimagining Modernism

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# Table of Contents

**12**

Foreword

Farrokh Derakhshani

**16**

Introduction

Raafat Majzoub

## **CONTEXT**

**22**

Exhibiting the State in the City

Fadi El Abdallah

**32**

It Shouldn't End Like This

Nora Akawi and George Arbid in Conversation with Raafat Majzoub

**40**

The Forgotten History

Bernard Khoury

## **BRACING**

**72**

Modern Memoir

EAST Architecture Studio

**88**

The Scaffolds of Modernism

Aaron Betsky

**94**

A Regenerative Invitation for the Tripoli Fair

Sarah Mineko Ichioka

## **PRESERVATION**

**106**

Architecture in Scale  
A Discussion with Ana Tostões and Farès el-Dahdah

**118**

Collaborative Conservation: Revitalising African Modernism  
Aziza Chaoui

## **MANUAL / ANTI-MANUAL**

**138**

*Traduttore, Traditore*: Reflections on Collective Restoration  
Jozef Wouters

**150**

Organic Regeneration: Muharraq as a Resource  
Noura Al-Sayeh Holtrop

**160**

Practice as Context  
Civil Architecture

## **ADDITIONS / MATERIALITY**

**174**

Stone Matters  
Elias and Yousef Anastas

**184**

Small Touches, Big Hopes: Renovating an Icon of Global Modern Architecture in Tripoli, Lebanon  
Sibel Bozdoğan

**204**

Activating Heritage  
Nader Tehrani in Conversation with Nicolas Fayad

## CULTURE

**222**

Life amid Ruins  
Costica Bradatan in Conversation with Raafat Majzoub

**230**

Convened by Buildings and by Building Alike  
Sumayya Vally

**244**

Architecture as Archive  
Marco Costantini

## SPECULATIVE FUTURES

**256**

MetaNiemeyer  
Charles Kettaneh

**270**

Play is Progressive  
Amale Andraos in Conversation with Raafat Majzoub

**284**

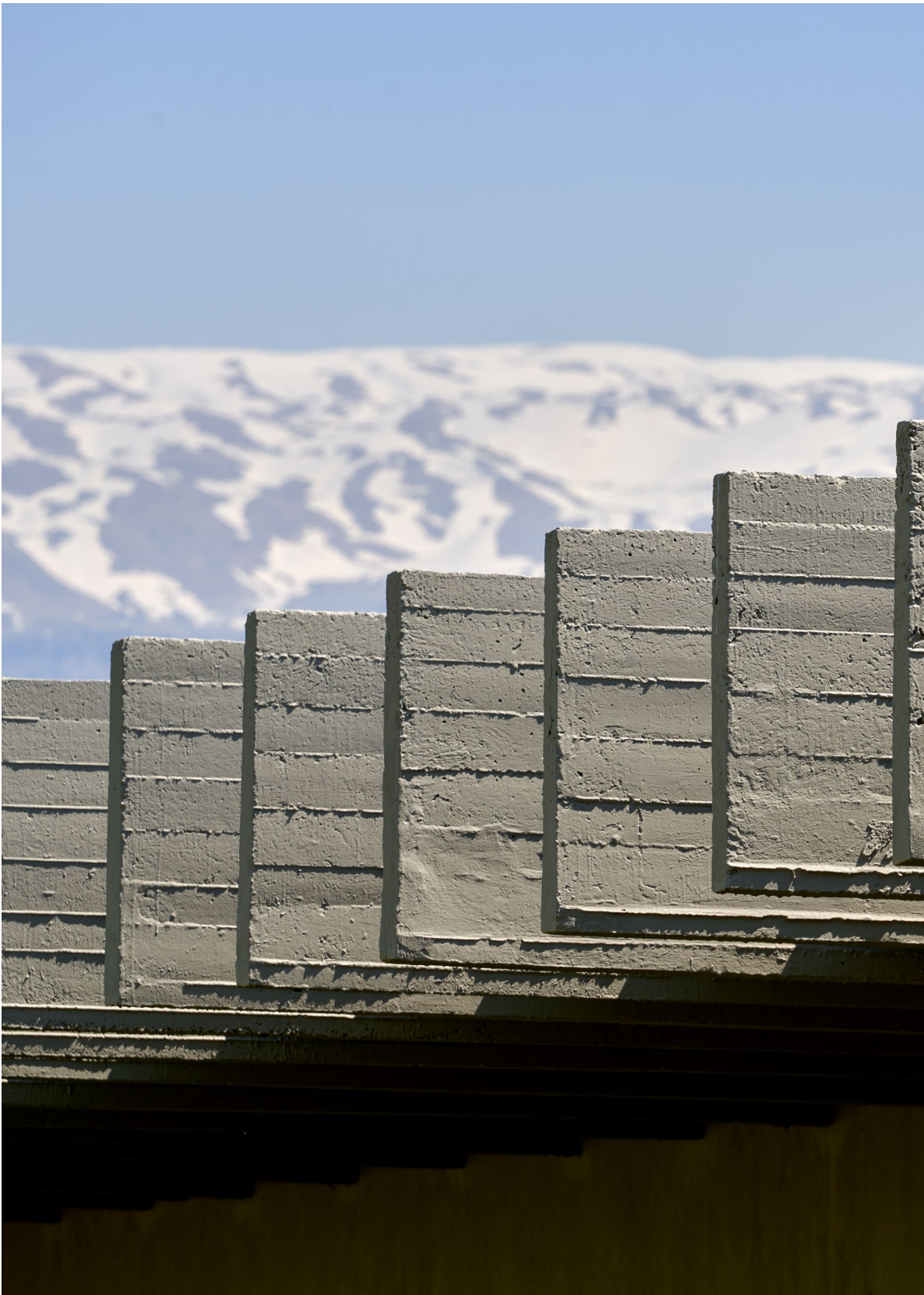
Restitution against the Ruins of a Modern Temptation  
Akram Zaatari

**296** Contributor Biographies

**303** Image Credits

**304** Imprint











Foreword

Farrokh Derakhshani



**The Rachid Karami International Fair in its huge scale and its vicinity to the city and the sea**

In search of modernisation, numerous countries in the early twentieth century called upon “international” architects to design iconic projects as representations of the “new nation”, in order to reinforce their vision for generations to come. In the majority of cases, the political leaders could not see the completion of their dreams due to political changes, lack of resources, or natural and man-made disasters, or due to simply not understanding the realities of their time.

Large spaces were allocated in the vicinity of historic cities for these new schemes. In numerous cases, during the standstill state of these projects, the rapid formal and informal expansion of the cities encircled these sites, building up on gardens and the agricultural lands. The unfinished buildings turned into ruins, but they saved important locations in the middle of the urban agglomerates, creating opportunities for public and green spaces in service of all citizens. The Rachid Karami International Fair, designed by Oscar Niemeyer, never saw its planned grand opening in the 1970s. What was designed and built from 1962 to 1979 was mummified for four decades, until the renovation of a small portion, the Guest House, by EAST Architecture Studio

brought life back to this abandoned place – giving hope to Tripolitans that soon the entire complex might be open, accommodating the new functions needed today. A lively place for public events and festivities for all.

The Rachid Karami complex is a good example of our “recent heritage”. The notion of “heritage” as described by westerners has tended to address only whatever was created up to the nineteenth century. On the other hand, in the countries which were once colonised, anything created that differed from traditional examples was considered alien and not a part of their culture and heritage. Even in the West, movements such as Docomomo paying attention to modern heritage did not start until the late 1980s; and the term “recent heritage” covers new interventions in the built environment since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, using non-traditional architectural vocabulary of a place, new construction technologies, and universal values. Gladly in recent decades this reading of heritage has changed, and the good examples of the built environment – regardless of time, place, and author – are part of societies’ collective memory.

Restoration, conservation, renovation, rehabilitation, reconstruction, and adaptive reuse are different terms used for interventions in the existing built environment, regardless of the age of the building. The triennial Aga Khan Award for Architecture, since its inception in 1977 by His Highness the Aga Khan, has been in search of exceptional achievements in the field as examples to be showcased. During the first Award Cycle, culminating in 1980, the Master Jury recognised projects focused on restoration and on an informal settlement upgrading along contemporary buildings. At the time, such projects were not acknowledged as inclusive forms of architecture by the mainstream architectural community. Hence, the Aga Khan Award’s recognition played a crucial role in broadening the scope of international architectural discourse, emphasising the importance of inclusive and socially responsive approaches in the field. In consecutive Award Cycles, focusing on area conservation and reconstruction among premiated projects continued to expand the discourse. In the most recent Award Cycle (2020–22), a number of projects dealing with the “recent heritage” were included in the jury’s selection, and the renovation of the Niemeyer Guest House, conceptualised and carried out by EAST Architecture Studio, was among the six recipients of the 2022 Aga Khan Award for Architecture.

In the spirit of seeking contemporary and innovative solutions for the challenges of the built environment today, particularly those confronting new generations, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture aims to recognise projects that give hope and inspire. The design solutions implemented in the Niemeyer Guest House, along with the activities it accommodates, is one of them! It not only addresses current architectural and social needs, but also serves as a beacon of inspiration, demonstrating the transformative power of thoughtful and visionary design.



The Rachid Karami International Fair from above



Please scan the QR code to view the Aga Khan Award for Architecture visual portraits of the Restoration of the Great Omari Mosque, Saida, Saleh Lamei-Mostafa (1989); Samir Kassir Square, Beirut, Vladimir Djurovic Landscape Architecture (2007); Issam Fares Institute, Beirut, Lebanon, Zaha Hadid Architects (2016); Renovation of the Niemeyer Guest House, Tripoli, EAST Architecture Studio (2022), all recipients of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in Lebanon.

# Introduction

## Raafat Majzoub

There is something flattening about the word “ruin” when speaking of buildings. It reduces their present stories to ontologies of their past—levelling a contemporary experience into heritage. In buildings and works of cultural stature, the connotation of decay embedded in “ruins” invites an impetus to heal and fix them. To stunt their decomposition. To enable them to be experienced as protected facilities or within facilities that protect them, or protect us from them.

What is particularly exciting about ruins, however, is that moment before they are expropriated into “facilities”, when they are still liberated from the legitimising power of function. Before being recruited as heritage, ruins are traces of both the past and the future simultaneously. Their legitimacy comes from the imagination afforded by their existence, such as where the visceral experience dominates the logical, seducing us to dream about possible futures beyond the existing contracts with reality.

Even more exciting are ruins within ruins, ruined buildings in ruined systems, as is the case of most postcolonial nations struggling to move forward from the exploitative legacies of their oppressors. While political unrest could obliterate or render these buildings dispensable, it also freezes real-estate markets that, along with the challenging sluggishness of urban planning and policy, provide a latency whereby these buildings transform into landscapes seeded with traces of the historical transformations of their worlds. The lack of preservation guidelines provides the space to reinvent the brief of how to move forward. There is no manual, and acknowledging the risks that come with it, the anti-manual is a site of critical creative reimagination.

In 2022, an almost invisible, reversible adaptive reuse of the Niemeyer Guest House at the Rachid Karami International Fair in Tripoli, Lebanon, won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. Designed by the Beirut-based EAST Architecture Studio, the project is a case study of an architectural intervention that becomes a scaffold bracing the life of a building rather than claiming to restore it to its original architectural intent.

In the present volume, we inspect this metaphor of the scaffold through conversations with experts that challenge classical, top-down strategies for architectural preservation, not only by adopting grassroots alternatives, but mostly by re-examining the logical frameworks that define our cultural relationships with transformation. Architecture as a scaffold acknowledges both power and transience as mutually inclusive. It does not aim to mummify a building in/to a facility, but rather respectfully facilitates its growth with additions that enable the natural respiration of its essence and materiality.

One of the recurring lessons from our contributors is that a scaffold necessitates a form of partnership, and that it can never exist alone. It reminds us to acknowledge the architectural intervention as a temporary participation in an ongoing transfer of human knowledge and planetary intelligence. With this framework, there is no ruination, only milestones and opportunities to reflect and speculate on futures that are more intersectional and just than the ones before.

How can we conceive of such progress in a context that places so much value on the image? What is the value of nation-building at a time of ecological crises on a planetary scale? Where does the investment in heritage preservation fit into the strained budgets of postcolonial economies? How can we envision new modes of authorship that acknowledge collective participation? And how can new methodologies reshape future approaches to preservation?

We begin to address these considerations in the first chapter, *CONTEXT*, where **Fadi El Abdallah** draws a parallel between the relationship between Tripoli and the Fair and that of Tripoli and the State. **George Arbid** and **Nora Akawi** continue to excavate this relationship, and discuss the reverberations of a failed nation-building megaproject, notwithstanding the evocative nature of such failures for the imaginations of generations of architects internationally. **Bernard Khoury's** "Episode 5: The Forgotten History", taken from his unpublished book *Toxic Grounds*, introduces fiction as a scaffold for engaging with Lebanon's modern heritage.

Opening the second chapter, *BRACING*, **EAST Architecture Studio** situates preservation as a scaffold towards the construction of relevant and contemporary lived experiences through architecture. **Aaron Betsky** defines imaginative reuse as an adaptation "not by merely placing the new in, over, or through the existing, but through an intuitive form of excavation that collages what is found with the new". **Sarah Mineko Ichioka** builds an ecosystem of peers and case studies around the renovation of the Niemeyer Guest House as an invitation to consider preservation as an ecologically regenerative practice.

A conversation between **Farès el-Dahdah** and **Ana Tostões** opens the *PRESERVATION* chapter, delving into the history of building protection, the links between Niemeyer's Tripoli and Brasília projects, and the critical relevance of heritage preservation in the Global South amid socio-political and economic challenges. **Aziza Chaouni**, in turn, through examples of her own work on modernist heritage in North Africa, shares strategies for building cooperative legacies that outlive the project management lifespans of preservation projects and ensure lasting growth through self-determination.

A main pillar of our argument in this book is our mindfulness of the pitfalls of turning any strategies into shortcuts or standardised guides. In the chapter *MANUAL/ANTI-MANUAL*, we consult the work of **Jozef Wouters** who uses scenography as a scaffold for collective labor, particularly in his project *Soft Layer*, which was initiated as a performance to preserve the historical *Dar Baïram Turki* in the Medina of Tunis. **Noura Al-Sayeh Holtrop**, through her work on the *Pearling Path* project in Muharraq, reflects on the importance of "considering heritage, as an opportunity to rethink the present" outside an immediate economic need to profit from history, in order to afford preservation work the "possibility to imagine different futures". **Civil Architecture** unpack their position that an architectural practice "must generate its own context" through a

collection of their publications that is part of a "recursive operation of research, arguments and theoretical frameworks which in turn produce architecture".

In the *ADDITIONS/MATERIALITY* chapter, we consider the stratification of matter and skill that occurs with historical practices. **Elias and Yousef Anastas** speak to the interconnectedness of material, economy, and culture through stone in Palestine through their project *Stone Matters*. **Sibel Bozdoğan** asks, "What exactly is the 'original' to be preserved when most modern buildings and complexes are added on and transformed several times along the way?" **Nicolas Fayad** and **Nader Tehrani** discuss cultural continuity and authorship in the translation between heritage craft and contemporary architecture, and speak to the architectural project as a site of humility, learning, and knowledge exchange.

Opening the *CULTURE* chapter is an interview with **Costica Bradatan** on translation and failure in lieu of architecture's role as a narrator of civilisation, unpacking preservation as a grounding human instinct. **Sumayya Vally** uses her *Serpentine Pavilion* to illustrate how she considers architecture to have "a profound role to play in expanding the cultural domain by simply listening to the contexts within which we work." **Marco Costantini** compares the *Corn Foundation* in Beirut and the *Niemeyer Fair* in Tripoli, proposing buildings themselves as public cultural archives that "testify to the crucial role that architecture plays in the collective memory of a nation and the importance of preserving its most striking witnesses."

In the last chapter, *SPECULATIVE FUTURES*, **Charles Kettaneh** expands this conversation to include the domain of the virtual, and explores the potential of digital platforms to democratise and reclaim neglected architectural spaces. **Amale Andraos** discusses with us the evolution of public spaces in the modern Arab city and the architect's responsibility to redefine the brief. Lastly, through an examination of film, art, and architectural works, **Akram Zaatari** establishes that "the wider avenue of restitution is a creative practice and not an expression of nostalgia for origins or authenticity", a crucial key to operating beyond ruins, into imagination.

Through this framework, *Beyond Ruins: Reimagining Modernism* presents preservation as an architecture of relationships, mediating the importance of knowledge transmission through buildings and the significance of understanding their contemporary relevance in relation to the transformations of their provenance. Our contributors challenge us to encounter opportunities to reimagine the notion of heritage – not as a fixed point in history that needs to be protected, but as a dynamic, evolving grammar that needs to be made accessible. As a mediator, preservation has a responsibility – surpassing the built form – to translate this grammar into a language that enables multiple actors on social and ecological levels to co-author their shared futures.

CONTEXT



Exhibiting the State  
in the City  
Fadi El Abdallah

Many residents of Tripoli can sum up their demands from the Lebanese state under three headlines: the fair, the refinery, and the seaport. Some might add an airport in Qoleiat, north of the city, to the list of stalled projects. But residents' criticism focuses mainly on three key failures: the failure to restore the operations of the oil refinery, which used to transport Iraqi oil to Europe until it was halted due to disagreements between the two ruling Ba'ath Party regimes in Iraq and Syria; the failure to ensure that international exhibitions are held exclusively on the grounds of the Rachid Karami International Fair in Tripoli; and the failure to develop the city's port, despite its location and capabilities, which are superior, according to the Tripolitans, to those of the Beirut Port.

These are three indicators of the existing relationship between the Lebanese state and the people of Lebanon's "second city" – or its "true city", if we follow the opinion of Issam El Abdallah (1941–2017), a southern poet who sees Beirut as a "sprig of villages", a gathering of smaller towns rather than a real city with cohesive historical and social continuity. More precisely, these are the signs held up by Tripoli itself as evidence of the deprivation imposed on it by the state, preventing it from utilising its resources. However, the truth may be less a calculated decision on the part of the state and more indicative of its confusion on how to deal with Tripoli, compounded by the city's own confusion about its "Lebaneseness", as becomes evident from tracing the story of the fairgrounds itself.

The land that would eventually house the fairgrounds, purchased by the state in the early 1960s, was mostly owned, it is said, by the Karami family, adding financial wealth to their prominence and prestige. The establishment of the Fair is a legacy of the Fouad Chehab<sup>1</sup> era and his attempts to modernise Lebanon's institutions, as well as attempts to expand the parameters of state attention to the regions beyond the Beirut–Jounieh and Beirut–Damascus road axes, the two areas to which it had long been confined.<sup>2</sup>

The Fair space was officially established by decree in 1960. Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer completed his designs shortly thereafter, which strikingly contrasted with the city's traditional architecture. Construction of the fairgrounds began in 1967, around the time of the June War,<sup>3</sup> and halted in 1975 with the onset of the Lebanese Civil War, which lasted until 1990.

The two dates are significant in their own right: the 1967 defeat, of course, resulted in a shift of influence from the region's official armies to the Palestinian guerrillas, and it was followed by the Cairo Agreement in 1969<sup>4</sup> and the end of the reign of Fouad Chehab's successor, Charles Helou. The Cairo Agreement moved the arena of guerrilla action to the Lebanese border, the first sign that the right to bear arms would no longer be the sole purview of the state, as well as a beginning of the collapse of the doctrine of Chehabism, which had tried to keep Lebanon isolated from and neutral in regional conflicts, as part of an agreement with Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser.



Figure 1. Tripoli Bab al-Raml Cemetery

No doubt that the choice of Niemeyer himself, famous for his designs in the new Brazilian capital, reflected a desire to modernise a city that was famous in Lebanon for its conservatism and traditionalism like most second cities in comparison with the capital. In neighbouring Syria, efforts to modernise were more frequently focused on the capital, Damascus, compared to Aleppo. Damascus had a higher concentration of wealth, foreign communities, and diplomatic ties.

At the time, the fairgrounds demarcated the city from the southwest, and for a long time it was surrounded only by orchards that later became Tripoli's richest, most affluent neighbourhood known as the *maamad*, Arabic for "fair", given that it had been built overlooking it. Now, however, if you look at a map of "the balad", as Tripolitans call their city, you'll notice that the urban expanse has extended south of the Fair, and a newer rich and affluent area has emerged known as "Damm wa Farz", literally, "annexation and sorting", denoting the legal process of reallocation of land, whereby smaller plots were annexed and larger ones sorted, part of the massive movement to monetise agricultural land during the post-war real-estate speculation boom of the Rafik Hariri era.

The city seems to swallow its fairgrounds, just as it swallowed the Bab al-Raml Cemetery (fig. 1). This cemetery, with its marble tombstones carved with verses from the Koran, had long bordered the city. Nearby were hills of red sand that, according to local legend, would one day be roused by a fierce, howling wind and blown over the city, settling over it and heralding its end.

Like the cemetery, the fairgrounds have become a witness to what is no longer there, or perhaps never was, a forgotten realm within the belly of the city, a blind unseen spot, a gap in time from which we look towards another, infinitely distant era.

The state tried to extend a bridge of modernity to its second city, which, since the establishment of Greater Lebanon, had refused to belong to it, for reasons that are worth understanding. Tripoli was the capital of an Ottoman province that extended well into what we today call Syria, and its familial, commercial, and sectarian allegiances made it much closer to Homs, Hama, and even Aleppo than to Metn, Keserwan, and the mountainous heart of the Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate,<sup>5</sup> which the French would seek to expand by creating Greater Lebanon, with borders specifically designed to protect the mountain's Maronites from concerns of further famine like the one seen during the First World War.

The creation of Greater Lebanon served not only to sever relations between Tripoli and its extended interests in Syria, but also to subjugate a Sunni city to a state created by the French for the Maronites. That would happen at the same time when other confessional states were created: the Alawite state, the Jabal Druze state, and the two Sunni states of Damascus and Aleppo. The modern Syrian state would be born from the Syrian rejection of these four states and their great revolt (1925–27).

Tripoli originally opposed the creation of Greater Lebanon and its annexation into it until the French army violently imposed that reality on the city. Although some of the city's elites, especially the clergy, later became involved in the Lebanese political community, beginning with Sheikh Muhammad al-Jisr and moving on to Mufti Abdul Hamid Karami and then his son Rachid, after whom the Fair was named upon the latter's assassination, the deep state met the city with a similar rejection. In fact, the project of the Fair may have been a reconciliatory offering of sorts.

After the end of the war, the situation became even more schizophrenic. In 1995, the state recognised the "exclusivity" of the Tripoli Fair, agreeing that it would be the sole space to host international exhibitions, but also maintained that it would lose that exclusivity if it failed to organise at least one international exhibition per year. While one or two major exhibitions have indeed been organised over the past thirty years, far more international exhibitions have been held in Beirut, compounding the sense of injustice among Tripoli residents.

The lack of interest in developing the city's port, following the destruction of the Beirut port in the 4 August 2020 explosion, suggests that this sense of discrimination is only set to continue and deepen. There seems to be no reason for not developing the port other than the fact that, unlike Beirut, Tripoli is beyond the reach of Lebanon's multiple sectarian parties. In a city that is largely mono-sectarian, it is difficult for rival sects to jostle for control over its docks and use it as a corridor for their weapons, explosives, and contraband.

I don't recall ever setting foot on the fairgrounds, nor do I know anyone who did, not my friends nor my parents' generation. It simply stood there, like ruins, until I left the city at the age of twenty-five for Paris. I never even visited the book fair when they moved its location from Al Rabita Al Thaqafiya<sup>6</sup> to the Rachid Karami fairgrounds, nor do I remember any truly important fair that took place there.

Instead, what I have in my memory are fleeting scenes: maybe Facebook photos of a choral concert near a theatre reflected in a body of water, images that could be memory or a dream of strange-looking buildings we see in passing as we drive around the Fair to get to the port or to the Beirut highway.

Back in the day, when citrus groves still dotted the area around the Fair, the air was perfumed with the scent of orange blossom. I fondly recall the sight of morning joggers weaving their paths around the fairgrounds, and I occasionally joined them. I also remember traces of unresolved grief and unhealed wounds from times when a car veered off the road and struck a jogger.

It was the vast parking lot surrounding the Fair, not the fairgrounds itself, that was a vibrant space in the city! That is where most of us learned the basics of driving, and in its empty rectangles the official driver's licence exams were held (fig. 2). Sometimes the state examiners would suggest, with innocence and ease, that the young person could, in exchange for a simple fee, return without even doing the exam at all and find the driver's licence waiting for them at home with their parents. And sometimes, if they were related to or close in any way to the state examiner, the fee wasn't even necessary!

From behind the walls of the fairgrounds, a trail of monuments looked down on us, joggers, student drivers, state examiners with their faces accustomed to the humiliation of bribery, boyfriends seeking a dark space in which to hide away with their girlfriends at night, Red Cross paramedics rushing to the site of a traffic accident. We paid no heed to any lingering trace of past dwellings, and no one halted us to lament their absence.

In October of 2019, before Covid and the economic collapse would hit, during a moment of unprecedented hope, tens of thousands of citizens, maybe even more, came together in the streets. They swept the roads clean, they decorated the unfinished and abandoned buildings from a bygone Ba'athist era, when the city had lived under a twenty-year occupation by the Syrian army and its intelligence services. They sang, danced, and cheered, created a code of conduct for the protesters, and produced monologues satirising politicians in a proudly local dialect. Meanwhile, all of Lebanon delighted in a new image of Tripoli, a city previously dubbed the "Kandahar" of Lebanon, mentioned only in relation to the frequent clashes between Bab al-Tabbaneh (Sunnis) and Baal Mohsen (Alawites) against the backdrop of the Syrian revolution against the Assad regime.

When the "revolution" began in Lebanon, rife with scenes from previous uprisings such as the March 14 and You Stink movements in 2015 and 2016, that is, rich in a folklore of songs,



**Figure 2. Driving practice in the parking lot outside the fence of the Rachid Karami International Fair**

flags, general cheerfulness, and elegance in dress and speech, Tripoli joined in, full-throated, at a time when other areas, especially Beirut, seemed to be under the threat of repeating the “glorious” days of May.<sup>7</sup>

Tripoli affirmed its belonging to the nation, and others hailed it as the “bride” and capital of the revolution – a striking paradox. A century after the country’s creation, Tripoli embraced its Lebanese identity at the very moment the nation seemed to falter and fade. As what remained of Lebanon dissolved, the future stretched into an uncertain and shadowy expanse, devoid of any glimmer of hope.

But even in that moment, in the fervour of newfound belonging to the nation, the fairgrounds remained a stranger apart, with the old central square known under multiple names – Statue Square, Abdel Hamid Karami Square, Al-Nour Square, Square of God – becoming the central theatre of protest and gathering (fig. 3). The fairgrounds remained empty, abandoned and threatened, endangered, as UNESCO put it, “given its alarming state of conservation, the lack of financial resources for its maintenance and the risks inherent in development proposals for the complex that could jeopardize its integrity”.<sup>8</sup>

The Tripoli Fair project was approved during the time of Fouad Chehab, who was the patron of a massive modernisation movement and process of institutionalisation in Lebanon. The Chehab era saw the establishment of the Banque du Liban, the Civil Service Council, the Central Inspection, Social Security, and other such institutions. He was seemingly highly aware of the importance of strengthening ties specifically between Tripoli and the nascent Lebanese government of the time. Mona Fayyad<sup>9</sup> notes that Chehab didn’t make visits to events or inaugurate institutions during his presidency, so as not to be accused of favouritism or of reportedly neglecting certain regions in favour of others. According to Fayyad, he made only two exceptions to



**Figure 3. People demonstrating at Al-Nour Square in Tripoli, on 9 November 2019, the twenty-third day of protests against government corruption**

this rule: one visit to the south upon the death of a former Speaker of Parliament, and one visit to Tripoli to unveil the statue of Abdel Hamid Karami, which was later replaced by a sculpture of the word "Allah" during the time of the extremist "Tawhid Emirate" in the 1980s. Fayyad recalls that this was undertaken explicitly to say to the people of Tripoli, though not in these exact words, "Here you are, once again Lebanese", referring to the aftermath of the 1958 Mini-War<sup>10</sup> and the Tripolitans' unitary tendencies with Nasser's Egypt. He also requested that the statue be turned to face Beirut, the capital of the country.

These two facts are inseparable: the fairgrounds were one of the "institutions" of the Chehabist era in the new state; and, like the face of the statue of Abdel Hamid Karami – father of Rachid Karami, whose name the fairgrounds would later bear – it was another sign emphasising the link between Tripoli and the state capital.

That link was only finally secured by Tripoli's own full-fledged declaration of belonging to Lebanon in 2019. Before that, there is a noticeable difference between Tripoli's experience and that of Beirut, before, during, and after the civil war. In his article in *Al-Anbaa* newspaper,<sup>11</sup> Tawfiq Sultan mentions how Camille Chamoun, then president in the 1950s, grew angry at news of the development of the Tripoli port, favouring the exclusive development of the Beirut port. During the war, Tripoli had only a few rival militias fighting over power of the streets of the city, and unlike Beirut, it remained undivided. It did however fall under Islamist religious control, and the Syrian occupation took it over relatively early as compared to Beirut, especially the east Beirut. There is also considerable difference between what each city experienced after the war, with Beirut being the focus of all major reconstruction efforts.

These differences in experience between the capital and the ancient city, and the subsequent entrenchment of post-war sectarian quotas on national resources, may have contributed

to the failure of completing the process of linking Tripoli to the state, a process that had to be undertaken in terms of "modernisation", especially in light of the founding myth of the Lebanese state as a bridge between European modernity and the Arab interior.

But the process of Tripoli's modernisation is actually older than the Lebanese state itself. As early as the days of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, the Ottomans began attempts to modernise "the most beautiful city on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean", as it was described by some travellers. The inauguration of the clock tower in the city's downtown "Tall" area symbolised a new relationship with time, while Azmi Bey built a road that would bear his name, linking Tripoli to its port and turning it into an important commercial market that for the first time divested from the usual logic of the interior markets in the Islamic and Levantine metropolises. The Mamluk initiative to rebuild Tripoli without defensive walls, after its recapture from the Crusaders, may have been the precursor of a new relationship and more modernised way of conceiving of military affairs and defence engineering; in contrast, Beirut, for example, remained behind its walls until the mid-nineteenth century.

During and after the French Mandate in the 1920s, attempts on behalf of the city's inhabitants, individuals and investors both, converged within the space of modernisation that overlooked them, and some semi-demolished buildings at the southern entrance to the city still bear evidence of the factories, industries, and warehouses that were established to manufacture biscuits, soft drinks, and other such things that the city had never enjoyed before. Cinemas and theatres opened up their doors (fig. 4), stages upon which Umm Kalthoum sang in the early

**Figure 4. Empire Cinema, on Al-Tall Square in Tripoli, is one of the city's first cinemas, built in 1932 and renovated in 2022.**





**Figure 5. Concrete fence surrounding the fairgrounds**

1930s, giving further evidence of the deep ties that have linked Tripoli to Egypt since the Ottoman era. Ibrahim al-Ahdab (d. 1891) wrote scripts for the plays of the Damascene Abu Khalil al-Qabbani that were staged in Cairo; Sheikh Ali Mahmoud sang the words of Sheikh Mahmoud bin Abdullah al-Shahal al-Tarabulsi (d. 1907); and Abdel Salam al-Nabulsi (b. Tripoli, 1899 – d. Beirut, 1968) launched his career in the Egyptian film industry, paving the way for Mohammed Jamal (b. Tripoli, 1934 – d. Los Angeles, 2023) and Walid Tawfiq (b. Tripoli, 1954) after him. Despite the complaints of deprivation against the Lebanese state, Tripoli was in a state of constant flux, witnessing significant changes in women’s status and education, new areas of entertainment and consumption, and increased migration, especially to Arab countries.

Ottoman modernisation was quickly integrated into the city’s fabric, allowing it to break out of the confines of the souq, to expand, connect to the port market, and to adopt new approaches to engineering, construction, and commerce. While the Lebanese state did not actually accomplish much in the city, Tripoli didn’t seem to accept any of the crumbs on offer either. The fairgrounds remained empty, and the new “Olympic” football stadium, built during the Hariri era to host the 2000 Asian Cup matches, remained far from it as well, perched at the edge of the sea. The “Olympic” stadium had been intended to replace the “municipal” stadium as it was known, which abutted to the old city’s neighbourhoods north of the Mitein road and adjacent to Zahiriya and the northern orchards on the banks of the Abu Ali River.

It would be simplistic to place the blame for all this exclusively on sectarianism. Part of it, of course, stems from Tripolitans’ nearly century-long yearning to belong to a place beyond Lebanon and their reluctance to take advantage of the few opportunities they have been offered, preferring instead to complain constantly about injustice. But none of that exempts sectarianism, of course.