

Cairoobserver قائروبيانات

[Looking to Beirut from Cairo \(Part I\)](#)

This is the first of a two part reflection on Cairo via Beirut.



Comparative urban perspectives can be helpful. Beirut, only a short one hour flight away from Cairo, offers some interesting possibilities for reflecting on Cairo's urban condition. Cairo has been the victim of city-pairing that has been less productive or informative, take for example the concept of "Dubalization" flaunted for a decade and even championed by some Egyptian architects and architecture academics in their envisioning for Cairo's urban future or their attempts at grasping the city's urban development from malls to the never-off-the-ground attempts at high rises along the Nile. In retrospect, looking at Cairo via the Dubai lens was little useful in understanding the city's transformations over the past decade.

Beirut on the other hand complements Cairo and as a point of reference could be useful in understanding the trajectory of Cairo's urban culture. The majority of this two-part reflection will function as a kind of condensed partial list of observations and a descriptive attempt at capturing some of the many facets that I find compelling in Beirut, particularly while keeping Cairo as my frame of reference. So to be clear, especially to my Beirut friends, this is really a post about Cairo, and I don't claim to offer a comprehensive view of Beirut and I won't be attempting to capture Beirut's complexity since I only know it as a repeat visitor moving

within a very particular geography within the city. To be more precise this is a post about the impact of bourgeois society in each city.



[Zaituna Bay, a waterfront marina development with a public boardwalk, restaurants and shops.]

Beirut and Cairo have a long history that ties them together. Families from Lebanon immigrated to Egypt over a century ago where they along with Syrian families formed a lively Shami-Egyptian community. Egyptian and Lebanese singers, writers and actors exchanged ideas, collaborated and traveled between the two countries frequently. Egyptian intellectuals fled to Beirut in the 60s. Cairo- and Beirut- based architects were in dialogue. Cairo-based Antoine Selim Nahas, one of Egypt's leading modernist architects who is of Lebanese origin, co-designed the Beirut's archaeological museum ([National Museum](#)). The building features a facade inspired by Ancient Egyptian architecture.

There are obvious differences between Cairo and Beirut: Beirut is a city of two million while Cairo is home to twenty million. Beirut is geographically limited with the Mediterranean coast on one side and mountains on the other dotted with villages and small towns that serve as suburbs. Cairo, however is flat for the most part with no natural limits defining its edges which has led to a horizontal expansionist urbanization that has more than tripled the city's footprint in the past two decades alone.

However, I attribute the contrast between the two cities to two major differences: (1) the relationship of the state (and the military) to the city and (2) the relationship of private capital to the city, in each case respectively.



Instability: In recent months it has been amusing watching the Egyptian middle and upper class freak out about power cuts, worsening traffic (was it really better before?), and the overall state of political confusion. (Yes these are developments that deserve serious political mobilization to prevent them from becoming the new normal). But, in Beirut the power is cut daily for three hours on a set schedule, which has created a market for power generators for those who can afford them. Still, electricity bills are astronomical in Beirut compared to Cairo. Traffic can be bad here too, and there is nearly zero public transport infrastructure and a taxi ride is minimum \$7 (LE50). The city has a massive refugee population, a history of civil war, and [car bombs](#) still happen, not to mention [Israel has bombed the city](#) recently and got away with it. Political life in Beirut is too complicated for me to grasp but I think it is safe to say that it does not amount to political stability.

Yet the city is thriving and its middle class is relentlessly making it work. There is a sense of resilience that is unmatched in Cairo where famously during the early days of the revolution some faced very middle class problems like being unable to order [pizza delivery](#). What have the Egyptian middle and upper class done to Cairo during the -now viewed with nostalgia-political stability of the past 30 years? Political stability in Cairo turned it into a segregated food court out of American suburbia. The more interesting bourgeois venues were few, overpriced and made exclusive even if what's on offer was nothing more than dressed up mediocrity. Overall there has been relatively little investment by Cairo's bourgeois into the urban core with much of private investment being directed with state policy towards the desert fringe, thus fragmenting the potential for the formation of a powerful urban bourgeoisie proud of their city (a social, economic and political entity that the authoritarian state might have to please).

Despite political instability Beirutis have created an interesting city for eating, drinking, shopping, walking, and creating. And despite the security challenges of that city there isn't the kind of obsession with walls/fences protecting the privileged few from the rest (for contrast see any major hotel in Cairo or the city's premier shopping destination City Stars Mall). Entry to the swimming pool of the St. George Club costs \$30 yet it is directly visible and open onto the publicly accessible and free waterfront boardwalk of [Zaituna Bay](#) (pictured above). There are no walls, no bomb-sniffing dogs and no tens of underpaid security guards.

Beirutis aren't waiting by the sidelines until things calm down to do the things that make the city a destination for its own residents and visitors. Beirutis are consumers but of a different kind than Cairene consumers. Yes there are international chains in Beirut but there are many

more alternatives, indigenous forms of commercialism driven by strong concepts and individualism.



Concept: Strong design concepts lie behind Beirut's various commercial establishments. Take for example [Urbanista](#), a popular recent addition to Gemmayze. The restaurant/cafe has a spacious interior with modern decor that is eclectic and is at once international and contemporary Lebanese. There is a little garden in the back and free internet throughout. Every detail in the space is designed with attention, from reused and reclaimed parts and pieces of furniture to exposed brick, industrial lighting, and polished concrete floors, this is an urban hangout, hence the name. At the entrance there are some items for sale, some local design items others international imports, all items that cater to the "young urban professional." In addition to the design and high concept the food and drink are top quality. Urbanista offers its clients an experience, something that I find to be lacking in many similar establishments in Cairo where often there is high concept but low quality product or mediocre concept and product. Urbanista, and establishments like it in Beirut, is driven by an owner with vision and hands on management.

Another example is the recently opened [Jai](#), a chef-operated delivery and catering service specialized in east Asian dishes. Chef Wael Lazkani, a well-seasoned and traveled chef who cooked at some of the world's top restaurants decided to establish a business in his hometown Beirut. His concept is a delivery/catering kitchen with a table that seats 4. The kitchen is in a storefront open onto the street so passersby can see and smell the delicious Asian flavors

being cooked up as they walk by. The well-designed kitchen is inviting, clean, modern and most importantly the food is ridiculously delicious and affordable. There are dishes on the menu of Chinese, Indian, Thai and Indonesian origin but they are all done with chef Wael's creative design. The food is inventive and not obsessed with "authenticity". Creating a kitchen without a full seated restaurant reduced overhead and management costs and creates room for the business to grow. The chef himself runs the kitchen from opening to closing, making Jai another example of Beirut's labor of love.



Another concept-driven owner-run establishment is [Papercup](#), a bookshop specialized in books on art, architecture, design, photography, and fashion. The shelves are stocked with a beautiful collection the likes of which I have not seen in Cairo despite the recent surge in bookshops. The magazine rack is impressive with particular attention to art/architecture magazines emerging from the region lately, many of which are out of Beirut. The shop has a few tables and the owner, who was working there when we visited, offers an incredible service of ordering anything that isn't on the shelves with complimentary shipping. Delicious coffee is also served. The design of the shop is simple, clean, modern, making use of typical Beirut cement tiles and the shop identity/logo/concept is manifest in specially-designed lighting fixtures.

These are just three examples of this kind of individualized entrepreneurship that shapes Beirut. Although Cairo has recently witnessed the emergence of concept-driven spaces of consumption they tend to still function within the dominating business models in Egypt: franchising/fast food, which are less about placemaking and creating a unique space and more about creating a product that can be multiplied endlessly, which is far less charming.



[The office of the Arab Center for Architecture in Sassine, Beirut]



[Arab Image Foundation premises in Gemmayze]

Sharing Knowledge: This week Lebanon participated in International Archive Day, in which several Lebanese institutions opened their archives to the public to stimulate interest in the work carried out by these institutions and to stimulate interest in history in general. Two of

the participating institutions are the [Arab Center for Architecture](#) and the [Arab Image Foundation](#).

The Arab Image Foundation, established in 1997, is the leading photography collection and archive in the region. The non-profit organization has been collecting, restoring, digitizing and archiving photographic material for over a decade and making their material available to researchers as well as producing exhibitions and books that publicize their work and the region's photographic history. Their beautifully designed facility is inviting and the staff are helpful. Visiting the AIF it was difficult for me to understand why such an organization does not exist in Egypt. There are separate attempts, such as the state's [CULTNAT](#) project which has tried to digitize Egypt's photographic heritage but after years of that program they have little to show for it and there is no physical archive nor did the organization engage the public in any meaningful way. Then there are Egypt's hoarders, both Egyptian and foreign, who collect and accumulate all kinds of heritage material including photography which they never share waiting for the moment THEY will write this book or create that exhibition, none of which materialize. There are few exceptions in Egypt such as [AUC's exhibitions on Van Leo](#), but again AUC is already in a universe within a universe, closed onto itself and such exhibitions on campus premises pale in comparison to the efforts done by AIF. What is so inspiring about AIF is that everyone working there is passionate and that there is an understanding that there is a need to make this photographic heritage seen by the public sooner than later. This has led to unexpected collaborations such as the organization's recent collaboration with [Samandal \(see picture below\)](#), Beirut's graphic magazine, where the Samandal team was invited into AIF archives and produced an entire issue based on photographic material from the collection. The issue included an index of the original photographs.



[The Arab Center for Architecture's exhibition titled "Modern Design and Architecture in the Arab World: the Beginnings of a Project," the exhibition was held in a modernist house in the center of Beirut and the owner allowed the ACA to transform the space for the exhibition in exchange for a symbolic gift, essentially the ACA was not burdened with renting the space.]

The Arab Center for Architecture was established in 2008. Founders were George Arbid, Fouad El Khoury, Nada Habis Assi, Bernard Khoury, Hashim Sarkis, Amira Solh and Jad Tabet. The center is mainly focused on recuperating the heritage of modernist architecture in Lebanon and beyond. The young organization recently acquired a space that functions as their office and archive where material collected can be sorted and stored. Last month the ACA put on its [first public exhibition](#), curated by ACA with architect Mazen Haidar as assistant curator. The organization and the exhibit show the level of serious engagement with questions related to modern heritage, modernist architecture, research and architectural history. All questions that should concern Egypt's many departments of architecture and its many decedents of famous architects who practiced in Egypt just two generations ago leaving behind massive archives and collections. Why has there been no such organization established in Egypt? While the scale of building and modernist architecture in Egypt far surpasses anything found elsewhere in the region, what we have left as a public and as researchers is nearly nothing. There are architect's archives in private hands but they are decaying and unreachable. The Egyptian National Archives has not presented itself as a reliable place for collections to be deposited nor has it sought such collections. In the meantime there were no efforts to do as the Lebanese have done and establish a serious independent center for architecture that focuses on this important heritage so closely related to questions of history and identity relevant to the present.

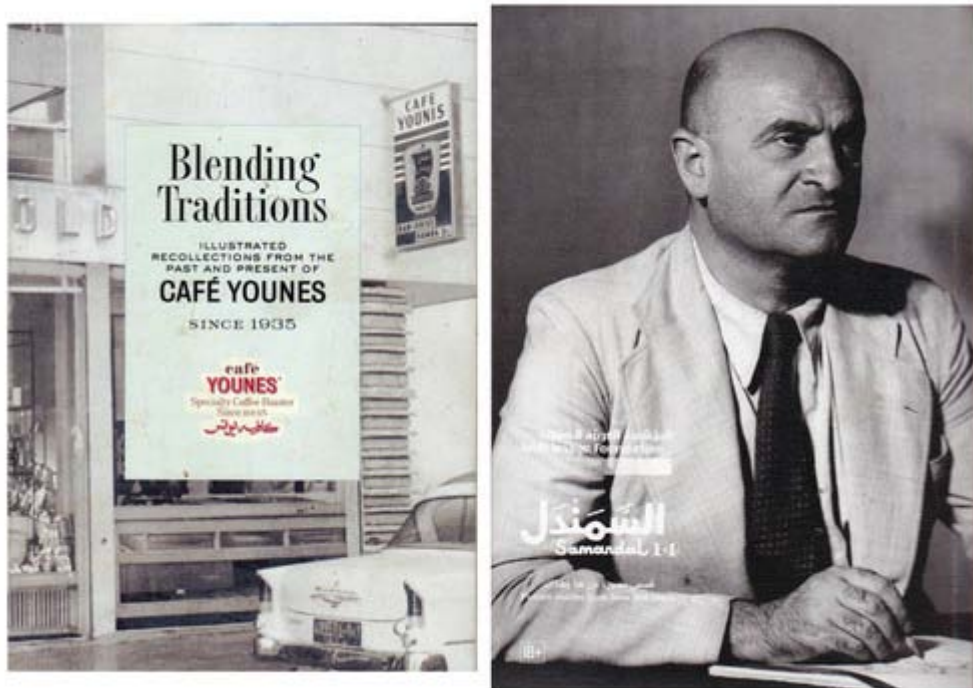


[Ashkal Alwan space in Jisr el Wati during their [Home Works Forum 6](#) program]

Working together: Coming from Cairo to Beirut I always sense an enviable sense of collaboration. Perhaps because the city is relatively small and because everyone seems to know everyone, people seem to work together more. Collaborations happen within arts and culture field but also across fields. A space established by one group can be easily transformed to be used by another group for another purpose temporarily. Collaboration does not mean that artists, architects and others have lost their competitive edge.

For example during last month's Home Works Forum organized by [Ashkal Alwan](#), the program incorporated some of the city's many spaces and venues such as Babel Theatre, [al-](#)

[Madina Theatre](#), [Metropolis Empire](#), [Beirut Art Center](#), [98 Weeks](#), and [Artheum](#). Other art galleries organized shows to coincide with the forum. More generally collaboration is felt in Beirut in the sense that persons and organizations work together, share facilities and equipment and support each other. See for example the [We Are Working network](#), a directory of arts and culture organizations working in Lebanon. This sense of collaboration is now extending beyond the city and the country into a regional level with the establishment of the [Modern Heritage Observatory](#), an initiative led by Beirut's AIF and ACA along with the Association for Arabic Music and [Cinematheque de Tanger](#).



[Samandal

(right) a graphic magazine out of Beirut. Shown here is the special issue that resulted from the collaboration between Samandal and the Arab Image Foundation. Blending Traditions (left) is an example of Beirut's many publications that celebrate the city and its sites of memory, in this case Cafe Younes, established 1935.]

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