
Beyrouth et ses urbanistes is based upon extensive research in the archives of the French IRFED (Institut de recherche et de formation en vue du développement) in Fontainebleau, and on field work in Beirut, including numerous interviews with planners, architects, and politicians as well as articles in local journals and newspapers. The author Eric Verdeil proposes a convincing vision of planning in a city that has often been described either as having escaped planning or through the lens of the civil war, its consequences and the subsequent reconstruction efforts (including derivative effects like corruption and speculation). Verdeil argues that the period 1946–1975 (i.e. between the end of colonial occupation and the beginning of the civil war) has been a time of intense reflection on urban matters, and also a period of maturation of a whole social milieu of planners, whose influence on the country was crucial. The subtitle is a play on words on the fact that the city has been left alone, and also a reference to the Jean Pierre Gaudin’s seminal study L’Avenir en plans on the emerging milieu of planners in France; and indeed, Verdeil manages to apply the method to the city of Beirut with interesting results.1

The first chapter is about planning during the French colonial period. Eric Verdeil develops a very articulated vision of the treatment of the Ottoman heritage by colonial French planners during this Mandate period. For once, Late Ottoman planning is seen as the implementation of an original form of urban modernity, and not just under the lens of the dialectics between traditional backwardness and imported European modernity. The authors also shows how colonial planners continued to work on the base of Ottoman decisions during the first decade of French rule, and how the centre-ville is the result of a hybrid vision of the city, between Ottoman modernity and French colonial ideas. For the end of the colonial period, a specific attention is dedicated to the Ecochard master plan (1941–1944) and to the efforts of the French administration for the housing of Armenian refugees (p. 46). The next chapter, about the role of the State in planning during the early years of independence, provides detailed information on the constitution of a group of national planners, as well as on the role of the Swiss planner Ernst Egli, director of the Lebanese Town Planning administration at the beginning of the 1950s. Figures such as Gabriel Char, his successor, and Joseph Naggar are also given a specific attention, with the result of convincingly building the picture of the Lebanese technical and bureaucratic apparel of experts in urban and regional planning and its approach to the main stakes of the time, like congestion and the relationship between the capital city and other cities in the country.

The next chapters are about the crucial period of the presidency of general Fouad Chéhab, during which a cooperation contract was signed with the French IRFED. On this occasion, Michel Ecochard (the former colonial planner of Beirut, Damascus and many other cities of the region) was called back to Beirut. Detailed attention is given in the book on the administrative reforms of the time and on the city as planned in the Ecochard and IRFED plans. Information is also provided (p. 126sq.) on the first efforts to think the development of the peripheries of the city at the beginning of the 1960s and on the attitude of Lebanese planners such as Henry Naccache, Georges Corm, Farid Trad or Henri Eddé towards foreign expertise. In chapter 6, Eric Verdeil focuses on the South-West suburbs, seen as an urban labour for planning in Beirut, and also as the symbol of the limits of the very methods and practices of planning. As Palestinian refugees came progressively to the area following their expulsion from Palestine in 1948, the southern suburbs of the city, with also the evolution of the spatial distribution of the Shia community, came to represent a challenge to the very ideology of planning the reformed Lebanese administration was trying to implement. In a similar way, chapter 7 is a reading of the transformations of the town-centre under the light of the construction of a national narrative, of the affirmation of a State-led urbanism and of the processes of expropriation. In the following
part of the book, Eric Verdeil focuses on the structuring of the professions of engineer and architect, with a specific attention to the evolution of consulting firms such as ACE or Dar al-Handasah. With this perspective on careers and on the economic history of urban expertise, the author manages to introduce a very original discussion on the ideological and technical stakes of planning. He then uses the history of the architecture journal al-Mouhandess in order to unfold the various debates of the period 1964–1974. From this study emerge the figures of Gabriel Char and George Maroun. In a last series of chapters, Eric Verdeil gives details about the changing attitude of planners towards landowners, from a wish of strong control at the time of Ecochard to a more balanced vision at the turn of the 1970s, which also gave way to speculation. It is the end of a time, with shantytowns developing, planned speculation outside of the rules of the master plan and civil war approaching.

In his conclusion, Eric Verdeil underlines how the city – as described in the plans he has extensively presented – has, on the one hand, terribly suffered from the war, and on the other hand, largely developed outside of what was planned. But he also insists on the fact that planning, even when practically unsuccessful, can however be part of a broader urban culture. This is, of course, an important point. But instead of all the efforts of the author, by effect maybe of the archival resources chosen, which are mostly French, the book only provides partial information on what actually happened in the city. Little is said, indeed, about possible accommodation processes, at various scales, about the daily praxis of negotiation between planners, landowners, politicians, communal leaders and inhabitants, about the invention of alternative planning methods, outside of the legal system for example. But on the other hand, Eric Verdeil has a point when he argues that the culture of planning, and its evolution, is a reflection of broader ideologies and social phenomena. And under this aspect, his book will remain a fundamental contribution to the reading of the birth of a social milieu of urban experts in a newly independent Arab capital city.

Note

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