

H-Net Reviews

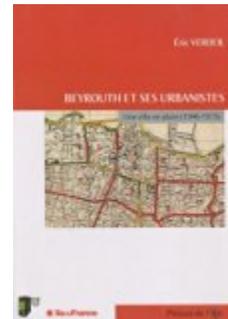
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Éric Verdeil. *Beyrouth et ses urbanistes: une ville en plans, 1946-1975*. Beirut: Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2010. 397 pp. EUR 30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-2-35159-162-8.

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In this book, Eric Verdeil provides urban studies scholars with a long-awaited and rigorous historical study of urbanism in Beirut, focusing on the 1945-75 period—which he qualifies as “foundational to study urbanism in Lebanon” (pp. 13-14). Verdeil investigates state-led planning in Lebanon through south Beirut’s social housing projects, downtown’s national construction projects, and Beirut’s urban codes and regulations. The book also examines the professionalization of urbanism in Lebanon during the 1960s and the field’s prevailing technological and ideological norms. Building on unexplored archives and interviews with key resource persons, Verdeil provides us with a rigorous analytical reading of the social history of urbanism in Beirut, which sheds new light on the postwar dysfunctions of the practice. The book is a significant addition to the body of scholarship on the history of urbanism in the Levant.[1] Verdeil is keen on understanding urbanism in Lebanon through a comparative sociohistorical methodology, in which urbanism is conceptualized both as representation and social space.

The book is organized in eleven chapters. The first three examine urban policies in Lebanon starting from the French mandate years until the presidency of Fouad Chehab—a key period for the institutionalization of urban planning in Lebanon. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on this period and detail the IRFED (Institut International de Formation Education et Développement) and Ecochard plans, as well as the interactions of Lebanese and French urbanists over their policy stakes. Chapters 6 and 7 further illustrate the urban planning practice during the 1950s-70s through two case studies in Beirut: the southern suburbs’ social housing project and the central district’s urban renewal projects. Chapters 8 and 9 profile

the professionalization of the field of urban planning and design in Lebanon, as more and more engineers and architects become practitioners. Here, Verdeil explores the technical, aesthetic, and ideological ideals underpinning the professional practice of urban development. The last two chapters underscore the main components of urban public policy in Lebanon at the eve of civil war: a practice dominated by private interests at the expense of the public realm. Verdeil shows how the negotiations of urban codes and regulations for Greater Beirut in 1964 privileged the business and political elite, undermining the prospects for an urban growth process respectful of different socioeconomic needs and basic environmental requirements. His conclusion further underlines how the impediments of the contemporary practice of urban planning in Lebanon are grounded in this history.

The book’s value lies also in its gathering of a wealth of new archives and documents illustrating the practice of urbanism in Beirut during its heydays. We mention here the ones recording the history of urban projects in the southern suburbs of Beirut, the current site of the postwar reconstruction Elyssar project (chapters 4, 6). These documents illustrate superbly the continuities and ruptures of urban visions, across time. They also demonstrate the interests of urbanists at the time in investigating a range of tools and procedures for implementing urban reform, ranging from regrouping and parcellization to real-estate agencies. We also note the substantive quantitative and qualitative data accumulated to profile the professionalization of the urban planning field (chapter 8).

Beyrouth et ses urbanistes makes several contributions to the understanding of urban planning processes

in Lebanon, across different historical periods. We will note here three key ideas. First, Verdeil underscores the significant input of French colonial urbanism in replenishing local urban practices in Beirut, while noting the strong continuities with previous Ottoman modernizing policies. He also underscores the debates and resistances that faced these colonial initiatives. One of his main findings is the progressive consolidation of a “local elite” in the architectural and public works sphere, which worked closely with mandate authorities. However, under the guise of modernity and progress, this network’s vision and approach to urbanism remains “elitist and profoundly unequal” and lacks social ambitions (p. 49).

Second, Verdeil asks if urbanism was an innovative practice during Beirut’s “golden age” (1950-75), the way architecture practice was. To answer, he explores the relationship between urbanism and colonization, focusing on the trajectory of Michel Ecochard across Morocco, Syria, and Lebanon, as well as other developing countries, and how these different sites operated as laboratories. He argues that there are complex interconnections between urbanism experiences in countries of the South, rather than a simple North-South colonial rapport. These interconnections also transcend French ideas to encompass influences from the Arab world, as well as the Western world, namely Britain and America. He particularly highlights the necessity of reconceptualizing planning practice and its history in this larger transnational context. Additionally, Verdeil pays special attention to the representations of urbanists, their professional training and social position, and how their production of norms and tools is closely tied to specific territories and related sociopolitical projects. He appeals to us to rethink their role with regard to their sociological trajectory and access to the professional market.

Third, Verdeil underlines how the construction of a national state determines techniques of urbanism and development. He reads urban policies through the prism of social and political strategies rather than through needs and resources. This leads him to two sets of questions. On one hand, he interrogates urbanism’s role in the historical and social construction of territorial and social identities. For Lebanon, he is interested in knowing to what extent urbanism plays a role in the dynamics of mobilization and sectarian territorialization. Verdeil argues that while urbanism was not a determining factor during the 1945-75 phase, it would become a major variable in sociospatial and sectarian dynamics during the civil war. On the other hand, investigating housing policies, he shows how urbanism operates as a tool of political exchange and highlights its role in producing material resources that can reinforce or constrain the interests of real-estate developers and capital-holders. He astutely observes how state-led urbanism was increasingly becoming a “tool of domination rather than a tool for improving livelihoods” (p. 333).

In sum, *Beyrouth et ses urbanistes* is an essential addition to urban studies libraries keen on a critical analysis and a rigorous documentation of urban processes in postcolonial cities and in the urban politics of cities in the Arab world. It brings to the reader a multilayered understanding of urbanism grounded in sociopolitics and institutional and policy analysis.

Note

[1]. See, for instance, the works of Jean-Luc Arnaud on Damascus, Marlène Ghorayeb on Lebanon, Galila El-Kadi on Egypt, and Taoufik Souami on Algeria, among others.

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