

# Beirut After the Explosion: The Effects on the Cultural Heritage and the Museums

Written by Sarah Mady, Nelly P. Abboud and Alexander A. Bauer

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SARAH MADY, NELLY P. ABBOUD AND ALEXANDER A. BAUER, SEP 30 2020

Beirut, the Mediterranean port city whose history includes multiple destructions and reconstructions since antiquity, was yet again destroyed on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August, 2020 (BBC, 2020). The double explosion that originated in its seaport and rocked its capital traveled a 10 km radius east of Beirut, killing more than 200 people, injuring 7000, and damaging more than 8000 buildings. According to the Jordan Seismological Observatory, it was equivalent to a 4.5-magnitude earthquake on the Richter scale, and is considered one of the most powerful non-nuclear explosions in history (Verma, 2020). The echo of the enormous blast was felt as far away as Cyprus, about 200 km from Beirut (BBC, 2020). Local and international media outlets rushed to cover the various aspects of the blast and its aftermath. The arts and culture scene were particularly highlighted because the neighbourhoods suffering the greatest damage, Gemmayzeh and Mar Mikhael, are famous for their old historical buildings, and vibrant artistic and cultural scene. Indeed, preliminary damage assessments issued by UNESCO and the Ministry of Culture recorded 640 historical buildings damaged, 60 of which are at risk of collapse (UNESCO 2020).

While there has been a great deal of attention focused on the fate of private art galleries and museums like the Sursock museum, a semi-private modern and contemporary art museum (Sursock, no date), coverage of the effects of the blast on the archaeology museums in Beirut, which too have been damaged, were almost entirely absent. The goal of this piece is thus to focus attention on the effects of the explosion on the cultural heritage of Beirut, and in particular its archaeological museums, and to consider more broadly what the current lack of attention on this sector reveals about the systemic issues facing the archaeology of Beirut that implicate local, national, and international policy alike.

### Heritage in Beirut, Before and After the Explosion

Lebanese cultural heritage has endured waves of looting, vandalism, negligence and destruction over the past several decades, and in all cases the city's social fabric, heritage, and memory have suffered (Naccache, 1998; Fricke, 2005; Sandes, 2017). Ironically, it was not the Lebanese War that caused the most destruction but rather the 1994 "rebuilding" in its aftermath, as the whole center of the city was literally and intentionally razed with the collaboration with archaeologists and experts under UNESCO supervision, in what Naccache (1998, p. 140) has termed a "memorycide." For a brief moment in time, Beirut was dubbed the largest urban archaeological site in the world (Haddad, 1998). A quasi-governmental company which was founded for the development and reconstruction of Beirut known by its French acronym SOLIDERE came to the "rescue" to build a new and unrecognizable Beirut, in which traces of the conflict were removed and replaced by new buildings to hide its scars and make Beirut "beautiful" again (Fricke, 2005). The systemic destruction of heritage at the hands of SOLIDERE and its collaborators was monumental; it affected its inhabitants who lost their homes and businesses, it affected its history as its archaeological sites and historical buildings were erased and built over, and affected the shared memory of the Lebanese people who no longer share a common identity. Today the remains of virtually any pre-war era are gone from the Beirut Central District (BCD), and now the historic neighborhoods of Ashrafieh, Gemmayzeh and Mar Mkhayel, which escaped the bulldozers of 1994, have been severely damaged by the seaport explosion. In light of this destruction, the importance of preserving its archaeology and history museums, also damaged in the blast, is even more crucial, as they play a vital role in preserving and celebrating the city's heritage.

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In the crypt of the Saint George Orthodox Cathedral, located in the city center, is the only in-situ archaeology museum of Beirut (Badre, 2016). The cathedral, which was heavily destroyed during the war, was again severely damaged in the 2020 explosion; however the state of the museum itself is unknown. Other archaeology museums in the city are the National Museum of Beirut (NMB) and two university museums; The American University of Beirut Museum (AUBM) and the Prehistory Museum (PM) at the University of Saint-Joseph. With their considerable collections of archaeological remains, their cultural events, and lectures, they have been playing a major role in the museum sector.

Throughout the tumultuous modern history of the country, these museums have each seen their share of misfortune. This is perhaps no truer than in the case of the NMB. Inaugurated on the 27<sup>th</sup> of May 1942, it was enriched by archaeological artifacts discovered on the various excavations carried out in Lebanon as well as by donations (Chehab, 1937; Asmar, 1997). On the 13<sup>th</sup> of April 1975, the Lebanese War broke out forcing the museum to close its doors to the public. Between that year and 1990 the museum square became a demarcation line named “the museum passage” dividing Beirut into East and West. The head of the Antiquities Service and curator of the NMB at the time, Maurice Chéhab, his wife Olga, and museum team members rescued and protected the artifacts from the dangers of looting and destruction (Asmar, 1997; Speetjens, 1997). The impromptu risk management plan and rescue operation were a success, and by the end of the war in the 1990 most of the artifacts were found intact (El Dahdah, 1995; Pharès, 2003). The damage was mainly confined to the building itself and its warehouses, and restoration works were subsequently carried out by the Ministry of Culture and the National Heritage Foundation (a non-profit organization created in 1996 by a group of Lebanese intellectuals aiming at preserving the Lebanese cultural heritage). In 1999 the museum reopened with a completely renovated ground and first floor to welcome back its visitors (Pharès and Farchakh, 2003).

The August explosion did not severely affect the NMB as the damage was mainly structural, while the collection and the museum staff remained safe. The AUBM also had some structural damages but has lost a showcase containing over 70 ancient glass artifacts ranging from the Roman to the Islamic periods. This was communicated a few weeks later on the museum’s website, which followed by a series of Facebook live videos showing the lifting of the fallen showcase and the salvage of the remaining pieces (*American University of Beirut (AUB) on Facebook Watch*, 2020). The PM disclosed a few details on their Facebook page (without any visuals) about the cleaning process performed by a team of Blue Shield volunteers (*Musée de Préhistoire Libanaise*, 2020). Other than the university museums, private museums with archaeological collections such as the Villa Audi Mosaic Museum and the Robert Mouawad Private Museum are now permanently closed, however there was no information in the news regarding their structural condition nor their collections’ following the explosion. The relative lack of information communicated by the archaeology museums can be contrasted with that of the Sursock Museum, which was quickly a focus of international media attention. The museum’s page on Facebook (Sursock, 2020) and Instagram (Sursock, 2020) posted pictures a few hours after the blast showing the damaged building and collection, as well as surveillance camera footage at the moment of the explosion. The museum remains active on all its social media platforms, posting visuals on a daily basis regarding the works performed to clean, restore, and rehabilitate.

The cultural community in Beirut was already at breaking point when the blast hit. Cultural institutions were already strained by recent events, including a popular uprising, an economic collapse, and the global pandemic. For the past two years Lebanon has been facing its worst economic crisis in its history, as the Lebanese Lira plummeted to half its official value this year and the country is teetering on the brink of financial collapse (Hubbard, 2020). Relying mainly on private initiatives, the cultural sector was already suffering from a major lack of financial resources. The budget of the Ministry of Culture represents less than 1% of the total government budget (Agenda Culturel, 2020)

This results in a total incapacity to pay simple monthly bills as well as the inability to organize any cultural events. The private sector is not spared; almost two years ago the Sursock Museum announced that it would reduce its opening days to save funds and even considered closing for good, launching a fundraising campaign in an effort to prevent the permanent closure (Khoury, 2019). Adding to the preexisting weak economic situation, the 17<sup>th</sup> of October 2019 uprising paralyzed the country’s economy for two weeks in a row. The movement which is demanding basic civil rights and a political reform, is still ongoing after 11 months (Sullivan, 2019). It is noteworthy to mention that the protesters were showing a deep appreciation of their heritage. Staying on the streets in Beirut and camping in the

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public squares, people were promoting the preservation of the archaeological sites scattered in and around these squares reclaiming the public space as theirs. In the early days of the uprising, the cultural scene in Lebanon in general, and in Beirut in particular closed down its museums, galleries, and art spaces in solidarity with the millions of protestors. Even as some of them reopened, the situation remained unstable as daily anti-government demonstrations took to the streets of Beirut causing a complete paralysis in the country (Dafoe, 2019). Around March 2020 they had to close again due to the Covid-19 lockdown, and on the 4th of August the entire city was destroyed (Sewell, 2020).

The 4th of August explosion has thus revealed issues that need to be confronted. The lack of a coherent cultural policy for the country that can regulate, protect, encourage, and ultimately financially support cultural activities through actions, laws, and programs, has left cultural institutions to fend for themselves, finding creative ways to rise to these challenges and continue to provide for their communities.

Outdated Lebanese laws on culture need structural reform to bring clarity and direction to managing the cultural field, decision-making, and the distribution of responsibilities. In the case of museums, the lack of clear laws and regulations have led to major problems related to the ownership and custody of private collections. Independent entities such as the High Commission of Museums would contribute to fill the gap left by the governmental parties. This commission regulated in the Official Gazette decree (Nb. 3050 | 12/03/2016) published in 2016 is composed of a president and seven board members (Official Gazette, 2016). Its role is to supervise and strengthen the establishment and the management of Lebanese public and private museums, to preserve the Lebanese cultural heritage, and to enhance the skills of museum professionals. To this date this commission remains inoperative for unclear reasons. However, with the budget cuts the economy is facing, it is highly probable that this commission's activities will be put on hold for an uncertain period of time.

Another organization that can play a role in shaping the museum sector in Lebanon is the National Committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). All the museums that were affected by the explosion in Beirut have been ICOM members for years. As a forum of experts, ICOM makes recommendations on issues related to cultural heritage, promotes capacity building, advances knowledge, and sets professional and ethical standards for museum activities. It also has a code of ethics and a set of rules and regulations that define what a museum is or what it should be. And the role of a museum as an inclusive institution that has as a primary responsibility to protect and promote cultural heritage is at the top of the mission; a museum plays a major social role and engages regularly with its community (International Council of Museums, 2017).

## **Moving Forward**

The blast on the 4th of August came at a point where the Lebanese cultural sector was facing a slow death. In the aftermath, various local and international organizations rushed to offer their help and to restore what was destroyed. This however, did not only expose the damage caused by the blast, but it also exposed the frailty of the sector that was already suffering. Nevertheless, it might also open a small window of opportunity to hit the reset button, allowing for a new start with a different approach and a different set of objectives. The cultural sector now has a substantial role to play in reshaping the future after the explosion. After all, the loss of heritage is an act of symbolic violence on the past and future inhabitants of Beirut, as the erasure of cultural memory severs links with the past, which 'are integral to forging and maintaining modern identities' (Meskell, 2002, p. 564). The failure to preserve Beirut's pre-war social fabric and architecture should motivate us today to save what is left, and resist calls to rebuild these areas in the way SOLIDERE did in the BCD. Museums in Beirut should embrace their social role as a place to express, contest, and mediate community identity and memory. This cannot be reached without the inclusion of the entire community, with which the museum should maintain means of communication open.

Public outreach and communications especially in times of crisis place the museums in the heart of their communities, making them more accessible and visible, and should be part of a museum's communications plan (French and Runyard, 2011, p. 242). Social media is indispensable in this process and a lot can be learned from the strategy applied by the Sursock Museum to attract immediate attention and disseminate news; this can go a long way in the process of raising awareness, collecting funds, and rapidly rehabilitating the museum.

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Cultural institutions and museums in post-colonial Lebanon (as elsewhere in the world) have a long history of elitism and exclusivity. However, museums worldwide have been getting more involved with their communities and the notion of the museum for the elites has been gradually changing towards being more accessible and inclusive (Moffitt, 2017), and emphasizing social involvement (Brown and Mairesse, 2018). Even the word 'museum' has been scrutinized, as they are now seen as key players in social issues such as environment and climate change, migration and integration, digital democracy, cities and urban development, food and health (Black, 2018; ICOM, 2019). This was especially seen as the majority of museums supported the global community's well-being by diversifying their offers online during the COVID-19 lockdown. This does not come without its problems as museums around the world are facing major challenges especially during the crisis caused by the pandemic; many of them had to cut their budgets for the upcoming year and had to downsize, while others are facing permanent closure.

To try and compensate for the lack of resources, cultural institutions in general and museums in particular can create volunteering programs and community councils. Volunteering programs can help recruit young enthusiasts, train them and use their expertise during times of crisis and to fill in where it is needed. After the Beirut explosion and due to the absence of such programs within museums, a group of trained students in Museum Studies and Cultural Heritage Management from the University of Balamand advanced to help the most affected museums starting with the Sursock Museum, then moving to the AUBM (Asser, 2020). Community councils are another way museums are involving and engaging their communities and making them an equal partner in its decision making and in creating and shaping its mission. Including representatives of major businesses, institutions of higher education, government, and local agencies, these programs can aid the museum in locating and releasing funds and serve as ambassadors for these institutions spreading awareness by conveying their messages, especially in times of need.

Having plans and partners to deal with crises such as this can help mitigate the worst outcomes. Several local and international organizations have organized training programs on the preservation of a threatened heritage and how museums can best prepare for emergencies. One was organized in 2013 by a Lebanese NGO, Biladi History and Nature, in collaboration with the Red Cross and the Lebanese Army (Biladi, no date; Aql Khalil, 2013), and another training was jointly organized in 2015 by UNESCO Beirut Office in collaboration with the Lebanese National Committee of ICOM, on "Museum Emergency Preparedness" (Unesco, 2015). Having such plans in place can help museums mobilize staff and volunteers to act during catastrophes, and spread information about the heritage under threat.

The way forward would be to open up to the young generation by giving them a role in the decision making while also including new expertise and set of skills, offering new training opportunities and implementing new alternative partnerships. This new generation of museum professionals can pave the way towards a more inclusive and socially active museum, capable of facing new challenges. Once the paths between the community and its museum are open and accessible, the museum can then reaffirm its social role, certainly by mediating the community's identity and its memory.

For museums are not simply repositories for objects and valuable art pieces but can play a key role in helping communities remember their past and envision their future. Keeping the scars left by the explosion and to document the event that has now become part of the collective memory is an essential step in the healing process. Children's programs such as those offered by both the AUBM and PM can be utilized now more than ever to promote the importance of the preservation of cultural heritage, and offer a safe space for children and adults alike to express their feelings and process the negative experience they had to endure as a way of reconciling with the traumatic past.

Exhibiting relics from revolutions and political movements should be part of their permanent installations. Something like this is already done at the NMB, where visitors are invited to watch a documentary entitled 'Revival' that tells the story of the museum and its collection as they were being 'rediscovered' and restored after the Lebanese War. Moreover, exhibited in one of the display cases on the first floor is a conglomerate of metal, ivory, stone, and terracotta—objects that were in storage during the war and all melted together due to a fire thus fusing into one object; instead of tossing it away or keeping it in storage, the NMB displayed it so visitors can see the damage of the war on the collections. Museums can use objects such as this as a reminder of both the conflict itself and of the

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vulnerability of cultural heritage.

This article focused on how the August explosion affected the cultural heritage in Beirut through its museums, a sector that has been largely absent from conversations in the aftermath of the blast. This absence is in large part due to the erosion of a common Lebanese identity and shared heritage over the past decades, made worse by a museum community that has preferred to isolate itself intellectually and socially from the general population. While these are systemic issues whose roots can be traced back to 19th and 20th century orientalism (Said 1978), our focus here has been on modern times. In the 1990s, through the work of SOLIDERE, politicians and development planners brought about the destruction of Beirut's heritage and archaeological sites under the guise of "rebuilding" the city, all the while working with local and international archaeologists, and under the supervision of UNESCO (Naccache, 1998). Whatever escaped this destruction was not fully protected by Lebanese laws, which remain outdated and incomplete.

The economic collapse that has been plaguing the country for almost a year resulted in further budget cuts, leaving the cultural sector stranded and with little to no help when the latest disaster struck. Now the international community (UNESCO, ICOM, ALIPH, Blue Shield, etc.) is once again planning to assist in rescuing and rebuilding Beirut. But although all efforts are essential after this disaster, we urge caution not to repeat the mistakes of the past. Rather, it is necessary to put aside a colonial narrative that seems to have no exit, for one that will allow for a sustainable and locally-owned management of future projects.

Finally, we should avoid taking away the wrong lessons from this event. Threats to museums and sites can happen anywhere, as the result of everything from fire (Brazil's Museo Nacional, France's Notre Dame) to natural disasters (Port-au Prince in Haiti, Japan's historical and archaeological sites), to social uprisings (Egypt's Tahrir Square) and even terrorism (the World Trade Center in New York City housed a large collection of fine art), and not all contingencies can be anticipated. At minimum, museums should do their best to maintain up to date inventories of their possessions so that if items do disappear only to show up later on the antiquities market, their return is straightforward under the provisions of the UNESCO 1970 Convention, of which Lebanon is a signatory. But these events should in no way serve as support of a colonialist (and orientalist) view that Lebanon cannot preserve and manage its 'antiquities'. Rather the international, national, and local communities must continue to work together to support efforts to safeguard collections and expand the human relationships that make museums meaningful to the communities in which they reside.

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