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Public Sounds, Private Spaces: Towards a Fairouz Museum in Zokak el-Blat



Figure 1: Young Nouhad Haddad (Fairouz) to the right, with one of the neighbours, on the staircase of her family's house in Zokak el Blat in the late 1940s. Source: Fairouz 1981 USA Tour catalogue.

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The idea of dedicating a museum to Fairouz, the famous singer and doyenne of musical theatre in Lebanon, at her childhood home in Beirut has circulated in the local media for several years.¹ The persistent media

¹ A variety of articles and television reports from Lebanese and Arab newspapers and TV stations from 2009 to 2015 have covered the issue of the "Fairouz Museum" in Beirut, in parallel to studies and research conducted by institutions and civil society associations such as MAJAL – see for instance MAJAL Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts, *Urban Conservation in Zokak el-Blat* (Université de Balamand, 2012) – and Save Beirut Heritage. Among these we mention the following media resources: Chirine Lahoud, "The House where a Star was Born", *Daily Star*, Beirut, 18 June 2013; Haifa

campaign, initiated by a number of associations and activists calling for the preservation of plots 565 and 567, the cadastral numbers of the two properties on which Fairouz's childhood home was located, came to fruition when the endangered nineteenth-century mansion in the Zokak el-Blat district was declared a building of public interest.²

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This paper discusses Fairouz's house as part of a contested urban space, and the multiple readings and interpretations of Beirut's architectural heritage that have arisen in this contentious context. First, we reflect on the dialectical concept of the "space of sound" in relation to the physical references of what was originally a private space; and second, on the space's legacy and memory, and the connection between the museum's function as a shrine dedicated to a Lebanese legend, and the transformation of a modest nineteenth-century building into a key cultural and public centre.

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Rather than retracing the topic over time, we will focus on the significance of the site's preservation, the obstacles this will face, and the history it can promote. Although the objective is not to detail the campaign for expropriation, we will, however, start with a declaration of public interest. The ministerial decree that officially forbids any alterations to the building, lists the facts reported in the General Directorate of Antiquities' assessment in 2010 of lots 565 and 567 in Zokak el-Blat.³ This evaluation highlighted "two existing buildings constituting one integrated architectural unit". According to the text, the site's value is due not only to its architectural features, but also to the record it offers of late nineteenth-century urban planning in Beirut. The decree also recognized a "historical and cultural meaning", and acknowledges the building's high value in society's collective memory because of its connection both with the Ottoman period and with Fairouz. This bold move by the Directorate of Antiquities revealed two clearly opposed visions for the city's future: on the one hand, the desperate reclamation and preservation of what little remains of Beirut's architectural heritage and an interest in its past; and on the other (in a best case scenario), a passive disregard for the city's constant disfiguration, or most commonly, promoting this under different names.

Shidiaq, "Tufulat Fayrouz: inna min ash-shaqa' la-sehra", *An-Nahar*, Beirut, 4 July 2009; May 'Abboud Abou 'Aql, "'Akhiran...athmarat hamlat *'an-nahar*' wa baladiyat Beirut wa-l-mu'assasa al-wataniyya li-t-turath istimlak bayt Fayrouz rasmiyyan li-tahwilihi mathafan li-a'maliha", *An-Nahar*, 9 February 2015; Khaldoun Zayn ad-Din, "Bayt 'as-sayyida Fayrouz", yuqawimu 'awasif az-zaman wa-l-'insan...wa lakin!!", *Deutsche Welle*, 15 July 2013 (<http://dw.com/p/196KI>); 'Ali Sa'd, "Fayrouz hal tarja'u yauman 'ila 'manziliha'?", *al-Jazira*, 24 January 2015 ; 'Abdou al-Helou, "Manzil as-sayyida Fayrouz sayatahawwal 'ila mathaf turathy, al-mu'assasa al-lubnaniyya li-l-'irsal", 5 July 2009 (www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1QKA7ERNhg); Jilan al-Fatayiry, "Manzil al-fannana al-lubnaniyya 'Fayrouz' yatahawwal li-mathaf fanny ba'd intiqal milkiyyatiha li-baladiyyat Beirut", 1 February 2015 (<http://ara.tv/rdqwq>).

² Ministry of Culture, Decision Number 74: Inclusion of the two plots numbered 565 and 567 in the area of Zokak el-Blat, Governorate of Beirut, in the list of the general inventory of historic buildings, *Official Gazette*, No. 38, Beirut, 12 August 2010. Only the house on plot 567 has survived; the one on plot 565 was entirely demolished despite the ministerial decree. Wizarat ath-thaqafa, qarar raqm 74: 'idkhal al-'iqarayn raqm 565 wa 567 min mintaqat zuqaq al-blat al-'iqariyya muhafazat Beirut fi la'ihat al-jard al-'am li-l-'abniya at-tarikhiyya, al-Jareeda al-rasmiyya, al-'adad 38, Beirut, 12 August 2012.

³ See FN 2.

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This paper is an initial attempt to rescue and preserve a physical, authentic space associated with Fairouz as a person, as distinct from the various performance venues she has graced, which have different connotations and resonances. Among these were permanent settings such as the Piccadilly Theatre in Beirut, where nine plays by the Rahbani brothers (Fairouz's husband Assi Rahbani and his brother Mansour) were performed, and locations for temporary events and festivals such as the Roman temples in Baalbek, the Cedars forest and the Beiteddine Palace.

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Our observation, in accordance with best practices of major architectural conservation projects, is that the appropriation of any building of public interest follows these steps:

Rescue: To halt the ongoing destruction of what little remains of the architectural heritage of a country. Government measures indicate an initial interest by decision makers. These measures do not necessarily include physical intervention, which might be postponed to a later phase.

Preservation: Establishing a long-term action plan, or implementing legal measures. This can take various forms. For example, it could simply be the addition of a commemorative plaque.

Upgrading: Physical intervention in the existing site, with the intention of redefining its function. This may lead to its museumification, but this is not inevitable.

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However, the preservation of the sites 565 and 567 in Zokak el-Blat and their conversion into a museum were announced at virtually the same time. The amalgamation of the first and third steps mentioned above is essentially because the attempt to preserve any private property in Lebanon has rarely been successful. This is why, in order to rescue what remained of the two lots, the upgrading phase was brought forward. Instead of imposing preservation guidelines (such as incorporating the existing fabric in any new development, or specifying its future use), the need for expropriation because of public interest became the only efficient way of rescuing the historical building from private pecuniary interests. Furthermore, this had the effect of protecting the fabric from obsolete building regulations that permitted major redevelopments in and around the historical city centre. Consequently, the idea of transforming the building into a museum became the primary means of confirming the expropriation, while at the same time guaranteeing public support.

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Yet, according to a different reading, the anticipation of the third phase – the upgrading of the site – is here generated by the collective need for a tangible expression of the national cultural heritage. It is a decisive response to the ongoing devastation of the city, when cultural references become the only surviving symbols of the collective memory.

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In our view, the museumification process can be better researched and promoted only when the necessity of rescue and preservation have been understood both by the public and the authorities. Once the public interest in this particular house is clarified, the conversion process can begin. Otherwise the debate about how to preserve the building's fabric, what image to promote and how, will remain fundamental questions without precise answers and may even obstruct the rescue and the preservation process. Let us now define further the importance of the site via three different readings.⁴

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The first reading assesses the value of the physical structure itself, before taking into consideration the additional value of the memory inherent in the place. The second reading is based on the memory of the place irrespective of any inherent value in the structure. The third reading combines these two and gives them equal importance by emphasizing both tangible and intangible aspects.

Reading 1: *The Site*

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Figure 2: From the left: The Chawaf house (plot 577, now demolished), the western side of the Ottoman Corps de Garde complex (Fairouz's parental home) and its eastern side (now demolished), 2004. Source: Gebhardt, Hans et al., *History, Space and Social Conflict in Beirut: The quarter of Zokak el-Blat* (Beirut, 2005), 371, Fig. 68.

⁴ The term "reading" is used as a methodological tool to convey layers of meaning and levels of interpretation.



Figure 3: Fairouz's house today, the former Corps de Garde, 2015. Source: Rawad Al Kuntar.

A visitor's discovery of the area of Zokak el-Blat begins with the history of urbanization outside the city's confines and the first road to be paved beyond the walls in 1831-1840, which gave the district its name of "the paved path".⁵ The name itself, therefore, bears witness to an infrastructural achievement and is a constant reminder of Beirut's modernization, that is, its expansion beyond the fortifications. Consequently, the developing fabric of Zokak el-Blat can be observed in what is left of its architectural heritage from the late Ottoman period. Despite losing some of the rich meaning of the urban context because of continuous deterioration, this district remains of unique historical significance for its considerable number of buildings dating back to this period. Among these, a survivor of the frenetic destruction, was the Ottoman police station, also known as the Corps de Garde (the living quarters of Ottoman officials), a complex of two connected late Ottoman buildings situated between Rue du Patriarcat and Rue Boutros Boustany.⁶ This complex, which denotes our site in question, was inhabited until recently and is structurally sound.⁷ Several images document the site as it stood in 2004, before it suffered the latest alterations. It was a rare example not only of late Ottoman architecture *per se*, but also of an Ottoman ensemble where the relationship between both exterior and interior space and with the surrounding lots was remarkably well preserved.

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What remains of this complex today, after the destruction of two dominant elements, does not have the same significance. Having lost both its western side and the adjacent Chawaf house to the east, the Corps de

⁵ Mollenhauer, Anne, "Continuity and Change in the Architectural Development of Zokak el-Blat", in Hans Gebhardt et al., *History, Space and Social Conflict in Beirut: The Quarter of Zokak el-Blat* (Beirut, 2005), 109-42.

⁶ Mollenhauer: (see FN 5).

⁷ Mollenhauer writes: "We do not know in exactly which year the different floors of the Corps de Garde complex became private apartments. In the 1930s, the father of Nouhad Haddad – who later became known as the world-renowned Lebanese singer Fairouz – came to live in Zoukak el-Blat because he had started work at the neighbouring publishing house Librairie du Liban. He found an apartment on the ground floor of the former Corps de Garde, just a few meters away from the Librairie." (see FN 5), 128.

Garde is now reduced to a dilapidated structure deprived of its original meaning.

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If we compare the site's condition in 2004, which was virtually unchanged from its original state, and its radically changed appearance ten years later, one might conclude that its value has diminished. Similarly, when faced with a decision about which conservation approach to adopt, one might opt for a thorough restoration of the whole complex. In this case, repairing and preserving the site would need to take into account the rebirth of the nineteenth-century complex in the contemporary city, representing perhaps, but not necessarily, the original interior organization of the space.

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If, however, in a quest for values, we would conclude that a significant homogenous architectural ensemble emerges from this particular urban complex, which creates a dialogue with, or relates to, the modern city. This complex represents a fine example of low-rise buildings in a district bordering the city centre and strongly recalls developments in rural landscapes. Rather than representing an isolated example detached from – and outside of – time, its role is to reconnect past and present and to raise the historical awareness of the new urban dwellers. The benefit of this scenario is the ability of the historical building to readapt and integrate the actual demands not in terms of mere refurbishment and modern utilities, but by a form of rebirth through a new function that combines public use and an intimate experience of history, without diminishing the building's original character.

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In this way, the value of a restored building is not limited to its physical preservation, but extends to the process of revealing the spirit of the place through its rehabilitation and interior refurbishment. The principle by which we aspire to identify the value of architecture is thus strongly linked to our understanding of the articulated and evolving meaning of the building. This meaning encompasses all of the significant functions that enriched the history of the building over time. The closer a conservation project reflects the fusion between the content (the interior space and its use), and the structure (the ensemble of physical components or the exterior), the more the equilibrium between the aesthetic and historical values is respected. This compels us to rethink the potential value that a space may acquire.

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Although the preservation of the site in its early condition, before the demolition of the Chawaf house and the western side of the Corps de Garde, could have profitably revealed the combined value of late Ottoman settlement, today's dilapidated house can narrate its entire history, both by recalling and deploring what is lost from the original neighbourhood, and by sheltering what little is left. With the fracturing of this dialogue in the contemporary urban context, the house, as a separate and isolated element, can develop a sense of rarity: the main value of the abandoned house now becomes its uniqueness in a chaotically urbanized city.

This rare example could thus change from being an anomaly, to becoming a key feature that would define the area as "a little oasis within a congested urban conglomeration".

Reading 2: *The Person*

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Figure 4: Young Nohad Haddad (Fairouz) with the school choir around 1947/48. Source: Fairuz 1981 USA Tour catalogue.



Figure 5: Fairouz at the Lebanese Radio Station located at the Grand Séreail (around 1951). Source: Fairuz 1981 USA Tour catalogue.

Fairouz's name is inextricably linked with numerous headlines depicting her role as a singer and prominent figure in musical theatre not only in Lebanon, but across the Arab world and beyond. Few people have been so closely associated with a nation or with its reconstructed modern identity.⁸ Fewer still have so accompanied the evolution of a society. Yet Fairouz has not been linked to one specific site, and her name cannot be identified with any physical location, because her songs were essentially poetic imageries of

⁸ Stone, Christopher, *Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon: The Fairouz and Rahbani Nation* (London, 2008).

vanishing places. She can however, be associated with a sequence of places where she has lived, rehearsed and performed.

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There is no doubt that a place closely associated with Fairouz, such as her childhood home in Zokak el-Blat, would attract public attention. Her name alone would legitimate not only the rescue of the house, but also its upgrading and promotion. Opposition to the rescue of this house could occur because it does not rank very high among the places associated with the singer, and is therefore not as significant as other locations. The documentation and reconstitution just of the single room once occupied by the Haddad family might represent this approach more accurately. However, even this would raise different questions, such as why spend so much effort rescuing the site in this urban context, knowing that the myth of Fairouz has been strongly linked to rural culture? Could the site in its current condition be worth saving in the name of Fairouz? This reading acknowledges the value of the different places related to Fairouz, but does not prioritize this one.

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In response to the questions above, "origin" seems to be a recurrent theme in the rediscovery of a public figure. First, the creation of a legend around any name begins by retracing its roots. Second, to retrace origins, and modest origins in particular, both humanize the legend and salute its grandeur. Finally, access to the intimate world of a star distinguished for her discretion and timidity is especially appealing.

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By examining Fairouz's past and her own narrative of her youth, it becomes evident that her formative years were inextricably associated with Zokak el-Blat. Fairouz (born 1935), whose original name was *Nouhad Haddad*, went to school and to church in this urban setting, and found her first job as member of a choir here. In this neighbourhood she also met the people who would radically change her life: Muhammad Fleifel at school, and later Assi Rahbani in Radio Liban, with whom she made her exit from this area to Antelias and then onto new milestones in her career.⁹

⁹ Introduced to Nouhad Haddad by Salma Kurban at school, Muhammad Fleifel's (1899-1985) formative role was twofold: to train young Nouhad in the basics of singing and Quranic chanting, in addition to providing her with a scholarship to study music at the Conservatoire, which was then managed by Wadih Sabra (1876-1952). He was also able to convince her conservative father, Wadih Haddad (d. 1994), to allow her to participate in choir performances both at the Hawd Al Wilayat School and at Radio Liban, located in the Grand Sérail where she met Halim Roumi (1915-1983) and more importantly Assi Rahbani (1923-1986). Radio Liban in 1950 (twelve years after its establishment by the French Mandate) had become the voice of an emerging country, a country that had gained independence seven years before and was striving to play a central cultural and economic role in the region. What is more, the radio as a medium of communication was the state-of-the-art technological tool to spread news and culture; it was a nation-building vehicle at a time when the nation was searching for its own evolving sound, which Fairouz from an early point of her career embodied to a large extent. Radio waves from Lebanon, Syria and Egypt synergized, and her weekly itinerary within Zokak el-Blat and other Beirut neighbourhoods expanded. Fairouz and the Rahbani brothers were soon to become weekly visitors to Radio Damascus (probably from 1952) where they recorded their works, which were warmly and passionately received by the Syrian audience. In parallel, the Beirut studios in Rue Jumblat of Near East Radio Station, which relocated from

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Raised in a lower-middle-class family, the daughter of a blue-collar father working in the printing trade and a housewife from the Boustany family in the Chouf's Dibbyeh village, Fairouz was the oldest child who helped her parents take care of her young brother and two sisters. She recalled her childhood in Zokak el-Blat and Dibbyeh, where she used to spend her summer vacation at her grandmother's house, in several interviews, most notably a biographical interview conducted by the Egyptian journalist Mohamad Assayid Choucha in 1956, a long biographical interview by journalist Nazek Basila in 1973 and a televised documentary by the French media personality Frédéric Mitterrand. In addition, two official programmes of Fairouz's 1981 and 2003 USA tours presented a biographical narrative and images of her childhood.

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In these interviews, Fairouz highlights her intuitive interest in music and singing, which started spontaneously at an early age:

I used to listen to the music coming from the house of our neighbour, who used to live in the upper floor while I was in the kitchen. In turn, our kitchen faced the window of another neighbour's house, who used to work in the evenings and sleep during the day. When the music played, I sang accompanying it and woke up this neighbour. He opened his window, shouted and cursed angrily, asking why don't they install a radio station here at the house? This incident used to recur daily until I left our home, after which he was totally relieved of me.¹⁰

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During this period, radio was the main medium for the dissemination of music, especially for those who could not afford to buy records or tickets to concerts or even musical films. Yet, for Fairouz, even owning her own radio was a dream:

Our house consisted only of one room, separated from the kitchen by less than one step ... a sweet dream that came to my mind many years before I started working – then the simplest and cheapest things were dreams to us – was to get a radio that will save me from standing long hours in the kitchen trying to listen to the sound of the radio coming from our neighbour's house. The first item that my father bought us immediately after my work was a used radio, though I am not sure

Palestine to Cyprus in 1948, became the third base for Fairouz and the Rahbani brothers. Furthermore, the visionary director Sabri Sherif (1920-1999) mentored their "new sound" and supported it with the needed infrastructure of trained orchestras, budgets and state-of-the-art recording instruments. For further readings about Fairouz's childhood and early career, see: Official catalogue of Fairouz's USA tour of 1981: Boullata, Kamal and Sargon, Boulus (eds.), *Fairouz: Legend and Legacy* (Forum for International Art and Culture, 1981); *Fairouz on Tour* (2003), Official catalogue of Fairouz's USA tour of 2003, author not mentioned; Stone: (see FN 8); Mitterrand, Frédéric, *Fairouz and Lebanon* (1998), arte video, 2007; el-Murr, Huda, Najmeh fi-l-khamsin, in *Majalleh Magazine* (9 issues), Beirut, 10-16 January 1981 to 7-13 March 1981; Badawi, Fuad, *Jaret al-Qamar: Fairouz wa Rahbani wa al-Aghani* (Cairo, 1966); Sayid Shousha, Muhammad, *Fairouz al-mutraba al-khujul: silsilat angham min al-sharq* (Cairo, 1956); Shidyaq: (see FN1).

¹⁰ Mitterrand: (see FN 9). Translated from Arabic by the authors.

how he got it. Since then, I started to wake up and sleep to the sound of music.¹¹

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In contrast with the one-room house in Zokak el-Blat, situated close to neighbouring houses, Fairouz's summer holidays at her grandmother's house in the mountain village of Dibbyeh provided an open and relaxed encounter with the sights and sounds of nature. This gave a freedom she could never experience in the city:

After the freedom and the scent of pine I enjoyed in Dibbyeh, I used to go back to prison within the fence that surrounded our and the neighbours' houses in Beirut ... my father used to be tender and strict, he did not allow us once to listen to the jokes our guests used to tell, instead and when he signalled, we used to get out of the house to the yard and give way to the elders to laugh and tell their stories ...¹²

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Both Fairouz's grandmother and Dibbyeh village projected a sense of safety and belonging for Fairouz. This continued to be symbolized by her grandmother even after the summer vacation ended and Fairouz had returned to the enclosed spaces of Zoukak el-Blat and its Beirut neighbourhood. The duality of rural and urban references are reflected from an early stage of her life through summertime vacations, the persona of her grandmother and the imagery of Beirut's evolving, fast-paced daily life:

As for my grandmother, I loved accompanying her wherever she went. Once we were waiting for the tramway in front of St George's Cathedral. When the vehicle approached us, I entered it and a man holding a large carpet followed me and blocked my grandmother's way to get on the tram in time. The tram resumed its trip suddenly and I went crazy and started jumping and shouting: I want my Grandma, I want my Grandma, while she was running trying to catch up with the train until we reached the Grand Theatre where it stopped while the passengers were laughing empathically.¹³

Despite the difficult living situation, Fairouz finds happiness in her childhood house, which she "loved more and more each day, and brought it bunches of flowers" from her walks in the meadows nearby.¹⁴

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By reconstituting the different elements of the story, the objective is not only to explore an intimate narrative with reality, but also to determine the potential of reintegrating the fragments by evoking memories in the present time. The process by which the history of a place is reconstructed is never orderly. The originality of

¹¹ Basila, Nazek, *Moudhakarāt Fairouz* [Fairouz's memoirs], episode 3, in *Al-Ousbou' Al-Arabi* [The Arab Weekly], No. 737, Beirut, 1973. Translated from Arabic by the authors.

¹² Basila, Nazek, *Moudhakarāt Fairouz* [Fairouz's memoirs], episode 1, in *Al-Ousbou' Al-Arabi* [The Arab Weekly], No. 735, Beirut, 1973. Translated from Arabic by the authors.

¹³ Basila: (see FN 12).

¹⁴ Basila: (see FN 12).

this reflective approach lies in its duality: on the one hand, emphasizing the value of historical knowledge in enhancing the rediscovery of the area, but also, and primarily, the engagement of this particular narrator with the modern history of the city of Beirut.

Reading 3: *The History*

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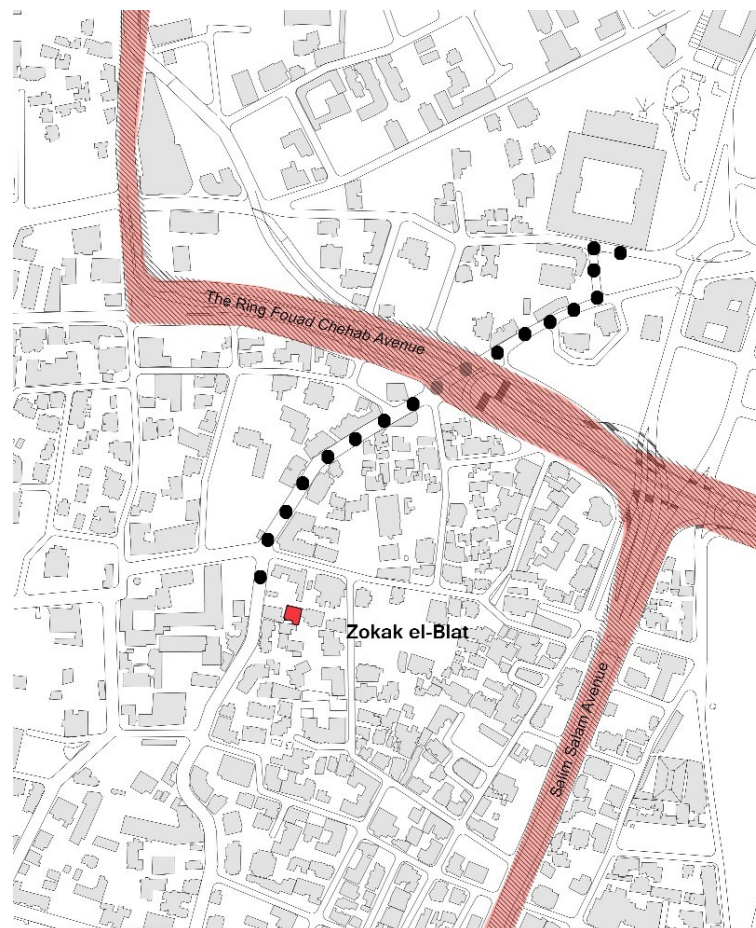


Figure 6: Actual map showing the truncated continuity between Zokak el-Blat and the City Centre with the new road network (Fouad Chehab and Salim Salam Avenues – accomplished before the civil war and restructured during the post war reconstruction). The dotted black line shows one part of Fairouz's itineraries (from her childhood house to Radio Liban at the Grand Séraïl). The complete itineraries are illustrated in Figure 7. Source: Mazen Haidar and Akram Rayess.

The memory of the place can be symbolized by celebrating the original function of the two buildings, and the Ottoman police station was mentioned in the Antiquities' Directorate decree as worthy of interest and preservation. Thus, this original function alone constitutes a solid argument for rescuing the site from oblivion, while the close association with Fairouz and the modern state of Lebanon further endorses and strengthens the preservation campaign.¹⁵ If we examine the decree more closely, we find that it

¹⁵ Several campaigns claiming the preservation of landmarks and houses of iconic figures have been launched through different organizations such as APSAD (Association pour la protection des sites et anciennes demeures) and Save Beirut's Heritage, and by private citizens since the mid-1990s. Among these are the successful movement to preserve the Barakat Building (Nasra district) currently being transformed into Beit Beirut (see www.beitbeirut.org), symbolizing the

acknowledged the importance of both the tangible and intangible aspects of the site. Therefore, the building's reappropriation and preservation must take both these into account.

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Another important aspect is the fact that the police station represents a model of conversion of Ottoman architecture from a public to a private space in the first half of the twentieth century, at a time of increasing urban density in the city. It would therefore be inappropriate to ignore this. Moreover, the adaptation of late nineteenth-century Ottoman architecture in modern Lebanon is of particular historical interest. It would be a missed opportunity to promote the space only as a former police station, without tackling the theme of building conversion during the migration of the working class into the burgeoning capital, thereby describing the changed function of the space during the journey of the Haddad family. Disassociating the existing structure from the memory of its original function would be tantamount to relegating it to a mere physical container and would mislead contemporary visitors

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The duality expressed in the decree clearly states that any intervention should not aim to purify the site, but to acknowledge its various strata and complexity. An urban memorial such as this can then act as a constant reminder of the evolution of the society in a particular phase of the modern era, and provide an insight into architectural and urban transformation. Here, the use and reuse of land during the urban expansion, a constant redefinition of public and private spaces in an Ottoman house and the transitional periods in domestic architecture can be illustrated. This history could be narrated through a protagonist who experienced the changes in the neighbourhood and its vicinities first-hand.

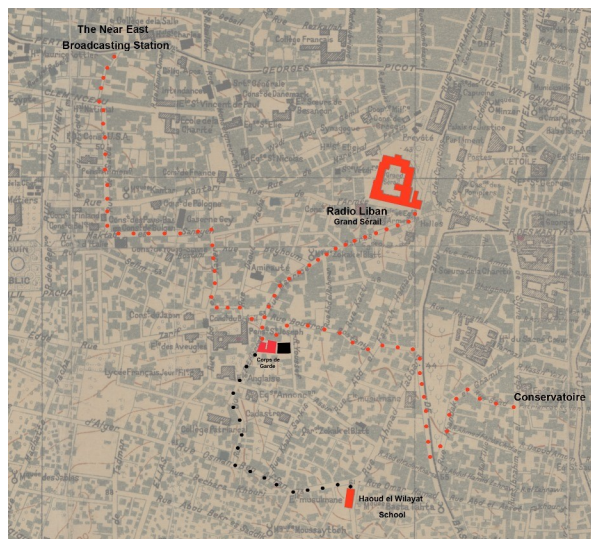


Figure 7: Fairouz's itineraries up to 1955. Source: Mazen Haidar and Akram Rayess.

history of the civil war, and many other efforts that failed reaching their objectives, such as the preservation of the childhood house of the author Amine Maalouf (Park district). Other iconic sites in the city such as the Piccadilly Theatre (Hamra) and Théâtre de Beyrouth (Ain el-Mreiseh) have today become the subject of ongoing protests against destruction or major alteration.

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When retracing the early history of Fairouz in her childhood home in Zokak el-Blat, it is surprising for non-connoisseurs of Beirut to learn how the enclosed neighbourhood of today, brutally detached from the city centre on its northern and eastern sides by a new urban network, was once fully integrated into the urban scene. Likewise, to learn, through this chapter of Fairouz's life, that this neighbourhood once encompassed a plurality of religious communities. The lost intimacy with several parts of Beirut caused by a series of factors is somehow re-embraced with this discovery of an oasis in a residential district. Long years of separation and political instability have reduced the overall familiarity with the city as it was to barely two districts, Hamra and Achrafieh. Even the official names of certain other districts often remain unknown or are conveniently included under the generalized names of these two districts, basically replacing the former terms of West and East Beirut. Undeservedly overlooked, several urban pockets are being deprived of their history, not only because of the constant loss and disfiguration of the urban fabric or changes in the population, but also for a lack of any sense of documentation.

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As anticipated in our second reading, the historical value of the site is to be sought in the connection between the tangible references to the past (in their actual condition, without any attempt to reinstate a particular chapter of history) and the multiple narratives concerning Zokak el-Blat, which are enhanced by the personal stories of a great singer. The intentional neglect of the Ottoman house becomes a document assembling and safeguarding the intersecting layers of modern history; the site becomes a reading of the colonial and early post-colonial neighbourhood, as narrated by Fairouz, and reflects in an Ottoman building savagely damaged by the city's rampant development.

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Yet an approach legitimizing and celebrating the coexistence of these divergent, and even conflicting, moments in a conservation project distorts the poetic history embodied by Fairouz's name. However, engaging only with the latest period of alteration and deterioration inflicted upon the architectural heritage in a historicizing process seems premature. The undeniable continuous disintegration of the architectural heritage – ironically saved from real estate development during the civil war – cannot yet be considered a closed part of history. By establishing the significant loss of the historical fabric of Zokak el-Blat as an ultimate chapter in the story of the site, the premises for a future conservation project could be considered as a renunciation of any claims to be preserving what is left of the aesthetically and historically valuable buildings still found in the area. Nevertheless, the acknowledgment of the urban metamorphosis does not necessarily imply acceptance, but proclaims, instead, an understanding of the nation's modern history, which is all-inclusive, and its reflection in the urban landscape. This is how the systematic recreation of any one original space – in this case Fairouz's house – which was not the earliest space, cannot embrace the composite cumulative meaning of the site.: Any approach, even if privileging an influential artist's biography,

should not, therefore, have precedence over either the authentic history of the place (even if seen from Fairouz's perspective), or the phases of alteration, even if some are less valuable than others. In other words, any intervention cannot but situate itself in this third reading, where the value of the place is identified in a sequence of factors, including the history of the urban fabric over time, the history of Fairouz in a specific period of her life and, inevitably, the junction between these two readings.

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There is a tempting, if dangerous correlation between these three different readings preparing the way for the site's conservation project, and the moments of a work of art as described in Cesare Brandi's theory of restoration.¹⁶ "The only legitimate moment for the act of restoration", to paraphrase Brandi, "is the actual moment of conscious awareness of the work of art". In other words, one can restore a valuable object or building if the decision recognizes a historical time separating the "creation moment" from the present. Transposing this idea to our case, an adequate conservation project would highlight only the intricate significance of the place: by delineating the plurality of meanings, beginning by acknowledging the disappearance of the Ottoman buildings as the first home of an acclaimed singer, the distance between present and past determines necessitates a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the fabric.

¹⁶ Brandi, Cesare, *Theory of Restoration* (Rome, 2005).

Conclusion

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Figure 8: Fairouz's house today, the former Corps de Garde, 2014. Source: Giorgio Tarraf.

This urban site not only reconstitutes Fairouz's life experience in Beirut, but also traces the history of Zokak el-Blat and Beirut through the personal experience of the young Nouhad Haddad. By accepting how the first two discourses interact to generate the third reading, the "insightful moment", reconciling tangible and intangible values, recalls the plurality of facades personified in the figure of Fairouz. The city, which progressively dropped out of the artist's spectrum in the Rahbani brothers' musical and theatrical works, was indirectly deprived of any emotional attachment and even discredited, becoming replaced by the village – an imaginary world that had been stabilized in an idealized rural context, as a paradigm of serenity. This hazardous process of constructing a national Lebanese identity, specifically in artistic representation, after the independence of the country in 1943, seemed to conceive of city life as a transient encounter.¹⁷ With a massive exodus to the capital, the demand on social scientists and historians to continually reinterpret and

¹⁷ Khalaf, Samir, "On Collective Memory, Central Space and National Identity", a paper given at the symposium "Beirut: Civil Pleasures, Civil Wars" at the Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona, 5-7 June 2005, <http://www.publicspace.org/en/text-library/eng/a023-on-collective-memory-central-space-and-national-identity> (29 September 2014).

glorify rural origins gained importance,¹⁸ putting Beirut in a secondary position.

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According to the sociologist Samir Khalaf, the urban survival of recent migrants was sustained by periodic visits to rural areas, or by developing rural networks within urban areas.¹⁹ The rural versus urban experience epitomized two contradicting poles, where the second was subordinate to the first and gloriously defeated by it. It was during the civil war that the cultural predominance of Mount Lebanon decreased and even disappeared, in an emerging perceptiveness of urban spaces that was expressed in Ziad Rahbani's musical works for Fairouz.²⁰ Through this collaboration between the singer and her son, a composer and playwright, the articulated and conflicted meanings of an enclosed city suffering a violent division emerged in several works.

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Similarly, the third reading offers a multi-layered representation of the past and present of Fairouz's childhood home, of the evolving city and of Fairouz herself, as an embodiment of a post-colonial and then war-torn nation. A timid, introverted girl becomes the aspiration of a country to modernity. As a mature woman, she becomes the soul of a nation broken by conflict into fractured territories, and her voice becomes not only a reflection of the surrogate national landscape, but is further empowered by its redemptive quality and a haunting collective consciousness, even if this was almost totally absent from local live performance venues between 1978 and 1994, the date of her grand Beirut comeback. In a parallel trajectory, Fairouz's childhood house was influenced by the transformations of Beirut, a city that before the civil war aspired to become a regional cosmopolitan hub. Also, and regrettably, the deterioration of the site and its post-war reuse are a clear expression of the turbulent events and incidents that have swept across the city and Lebanon until today. Among the contesting visions of the past and the future, the mere claim of rehabilitation of this particular abandoned house evokes a substantial change of outlook for the city and its identity.

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¹⁸ See for instance Salibi, Kamal, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (London, 1988); Traboulsi, Fawwaz, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London 2007); Kassir, Samir, *L'histoire de Beyrouth* (Paris, 2003); Baydoun, Ahmad, *as-sira' 'ala tarikh lubnan* (Beirut, 1989); Baydoun, Ahmad, *ma 'alamtum wa dhuqtum* (Beirut, 1990).

¹⁹ See FN 17 and FN 18.

²⁰ Haidar, Mazen, "Machhadiyyat al aghani wa miswaddat al afkar fi likaa Ziad wa Fairouz" [Scenography of Songs and Rough Draft of Ideas in Ziad and Fairouz's Collaboration], in *Al Adab*, vol. 57, no. 11-12, 2009.

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