

The Urbanism of Good (and Bad) Intentions

MICHAEL STANTON

The American University of Beirut

“Moreover, since architecture enters directly into everyday life (for example, through its extra-artistic functionality), it creates a permanent bond that provides a firm critical base from which to pass judgment upon many ‘good intentions.’”

Giorgio Grassi¹

Today two cities sit across from each other, across the divide that separates the Near East from Europe, that separates the Social Darwinism of the former Third World from the Social Contract of the former First. These two cities sit as well across that topographic border dividing the cultures of the Mediterranean from those that edge the north seas that touch Europe. One city appears to be the product of social-democratic control and incessant planning. The other seems to be the unchecked product of capitalism in full rut. Both were radically damaged by war, but one began repair a half a century ago, a renewal that continues but that is now a history itself. Largely unreconstructed, the other has remained for ten years like a patient open on the operating table waiting for the biopsy news that never arrives.

So why bother to compare two cities reconstructed almost a half century apart and whose political/economic realities seem opposite? Even the wars and damage were different. Rotterdam was devastated in one night of bombs and fire. Beirut eroded over fifteen years of civil war augmented by intervention from across Lebanon's borders. Furthermore, comparison itself, and especially that which relies on the dialectic, is suspect now: definitely out-of-intellectual-fashion. Comparison relies on difference or similarity, both conditions of binary categories no longer acceptable if still omnipresent. Polarities, while historically the product of simplistic epistemologies – in clichés like man vs. nature, fashion vs. profundity, mind vs. body, rational vs. lyrical – serve productively only when they are understood as temporary and flawed, to be discarded when they have served their discursive purpose, to “throw away the ladder after we have climbed up it”². It would appear that we are stuck for now with these oppositions, if only as intellectual form-work for

more complex critical shapes. They pepper the language of those who reject them, for such rejection either leaves critics mute after destroying the formats that allow speech or forces the utterance of phrases in the very language that is attacked in those phrases. Rather than dismissing polarities and their dialectical implications while having to use them in a discursive system in which they are so entrenched that their complete eradication remains unattainable, perhaps it is better to understand them as tools, rigid means to a flexible end: like ideals in a post-teleological society. In any case, it is interesting to exercise such an antiquated practice because of the reciprocities that emerge when the two opposed cities are viewed with a slightly finer focus. Differences then merge into one blurred vision that approximates the intricacy and difference that actual cities project and that neither *good* nor I can singly describe.

Rotterdam and Beirut are the primary links to the sea for two little nations: new nations in the modern sense but of ancient and shrewd traders. They exist under the feet of more monolithic societies, Germany in one case and Syria in the other, in regions of even more powerful entities, the uncomfortable camaraderie of the EU giants and the discord of a sectarian Middle East. Each city is now part of an urban sprawl much larger than its original self. A nearly unbroken linear fabric connects Amsterdam to Rotterdam. Beirut now extends more than thirty miles along the precipitous coast uniting a string of municipalities. Erasure is a leitmotif in both places. As exhausted a theme as this may be, no other suffices. The center of Rotterdam was destroyed in 1940 and the void produced has been a laboratory for urban experiment presided over by a host of well-intentioned social planners and form makers. The amount of brilliance bought to bear – from Bakema to Koolhaas – was overwhelming but the product problematic. War chewed on Beirut. Small arms fire melted the buildings. Shells punched great holes in them. Sophisticated Israeli bombing caused them to collapse in concrete cascades. And many remain so damaged ten years after the cessation of hostility. But the destruction in Beirut, at the scale of the void left by one night of blitzkrieg in Rotterdam, mostly came from the real-estate

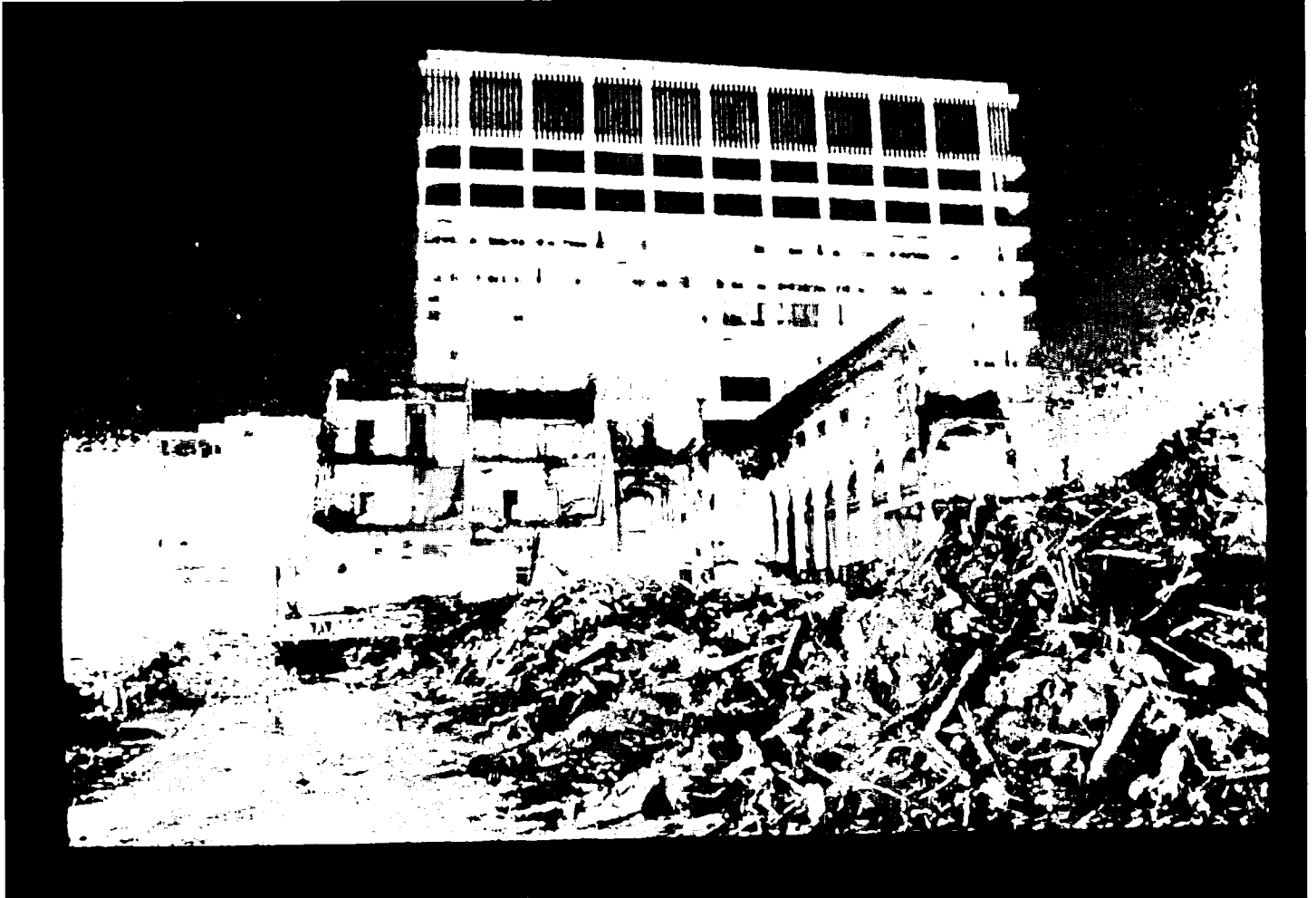


Fig. 1.

activities that followed the end of fighting. As in London in the '40s and '50s, war excused more radical demolition. In Beirut, the property of 250,000 owners was commandeered and replaced with devaluing shares in Solidere, a corporation run by the nation's new Prime Minister. This deal is nothing in its scale next to the demolition campaign that ensued before and after Mr. Hariri's ascension. The center was gutted. With the exception of the diverse religious institutions that could not be touched, remnants of historical building were eradicated in an area that had defined the limits of the small city before the remarkable expansion of the 20th century.

Beirut '90s was Rotterdam '40s, a *tabula rasa* produced by war and ambition. Despite the generational difference, the similar situation of deletion and reconstruction has, and is, defining these two places in an exceptional manner. Surely Berlin or other German cities – Dresden, Köln – were more mangled by war, or farther afield Stalin (Volga) grad or Hiroshima, or Sarajevo more recently. But there is a difference. In Beirut and Rotterdam, in very different political/economic environments, the decision has not been to rebuild but to reformulate. The

devastation has forced the hand of civic agencies and private interests. The wheels can be seen turning and the connection of their rotation to the proposals and built projects that refill the vast voids made by war and desire is evident. Little of the planet has escaped war – the deprived lowest-common-denominator of human interaction – especially the cities. They are always particular military targets for logistic, but also symbolic, reasons.³ But, more than most war-damaged places, these two cities have used war to redefine themselves and the motivations and methods are obvious . . . and the problems that continue to plague all intentions make themselves plain.

The eradication of the center of Rotterdam in 1940 was seen as an opportunity to effect Modernism of the sort the country had patented in the period after 1910. It hardly needs to be said that the Netherlands has a special place in the history of the Modern. Enthusiasm has yet to wane. It is largely free of the doubt and compromise that have crawled like a mold through the body of Modernist belief elsewhere, leaving a vulnerable and appropriated field where more persuasive formats for cultural development, and for resistance, have yet to emerge. The Netherlands still debates the value of Modernist formats

while recognizing their essential fallibility. Who more than Rem Koolhaas both embraces and debunks them simultaneously? While so much has been lost in the currently troubled discourse and commodified practice elsewhere, Holland hangs on. For example, it is still often accepted there that architecture can make a better society. Forms are seen as specific political devices. There is a datum, a degree zero of engagement, that allows Dutch work to respond metamorphically rather than desperately to the dictates of contemporary culture. It is a case of continuous redefinition, a much more credible critical position in fact than that of reinvention, given that the latter inevitably falls prey to the historical mistakes that it ignores in its quest for novelty.

In the period of recovery after World War II, Rotterdam was a laboratory for continuing formal and spatial experimentation, as well as revamped infrastructure and reworked city pattern. Inevitably, a simultaneous reassessment of social systems and class configurations accompanied the tacit assumption that architecture and urbanism could have a vital role in reforming these phenomena. Radical redevelopment was already being planned in 1941 to become the Inner City Reconstruction

Scheme in 1946 a year after the German occupation ended. "... the authorities did not flinch from demolishing any remaining buildings which stood in the way of new development."¹ Around new and restored monuments a network of pedestrian shopping streets and residential slabs was begun in 1951. To make slabs, individual lots have to be consolidated, even eradicated. The traditional economic structure implied by the marketing of urban parcels is challenged. Almost all slab construction is a sign of government intervention. Thus, in Beirut for instance, blocky buildings are the standard of private construction, maximum extrusions of individual real-estate allotments. The Rotterdam slabs by Maaskant rise, not on top of but next to or behind, low shops by Van der Broek and Bakema along the Lijnbaan. Each group of housing blocks forms a green square just off the busy shopping promenade, a revolutionary concept fifty years. The insertion of green spaces and housing in downtown was also innovative and, given that this is the Netherlands, social mixing in the housing was encouraged. It all sounds ideal, a brochure for happy modern life.



Fig. 2. Beirut.



Fig. 3. Rotterdam.

There is a valuable quotidian character to the shopping streets of Bakema and Van der Broek. They withstand, even support, tawdry excesses of advertising, neon and vulgar promotion. They are coarse and very popular in both the European and American senses.⁵ Such sordidness that also makes Berlin, Copenhagen, Barcelona, even Paris and Rome, something other than precious. And the housing remains extremely effective. So what is wrong here or is this the perfect world promised by our Modernist ancestors? Firstly the ensemble relies on extensive governmental maintenance to keep the fine line drawn between domestic and commercial. Public space becomes universal. Another problem is subsequent development after these initial delicate insertions. Mountains of commercial space hover over the downtown now with the grace, scale and density of Denver or Frankfurt. Throughout the fabric, weird experiments in various phases of Post-Modernism scatter like shabby harlequins. Behind these physical problems sit methodological ones: 1) the formula of developer/government collaboration 2) the competition system and lists compiled by the authorities of eligible architects for given jobs 3) the abrupt shifts in urban strategy brought on by the excesses of febrile genius that address the poor city half-dead from all the attention 4) the

failure to integrate intention and actual mess. Furthermore, despite the strong arguments made for their importance by Koolhaas, Rotterdam's most illustrious architectural citizen, visual chaos and entropic space are not always valuable.

Paradox confounds the clarity of urban discourse. This is possibly why so much of it is simplistic or dysfunctionally idealistic. Rotterdam embodies the contradiction inherent in the varied and often opposed attempts to counter the tendencies of capitalism as they present themselves physically. Its urbanism forms a layer of reaction complicit with that it is reacting against. Social mixing, very 19th-century in its character, is related to an egalitarian politics that relies on retail activity and commercial development for its energy while on some basic level rejecting those as primary social motivations. After all, developers finally implement all this benevolence. They work closely with the authorities, accept the lists of approved architects, etc. Their motive is profit. The very point of its leftist good intentions turns back on itself as the downtown becomes a shopping and entertainment emporium. This basic contradiction, that socialism appears to encourage materialism, may account for the vitality of a city that is neither

beautiful, ancient nor trendy in the way that Amsterdam is. There is a reciprocity between use and form that makes absolute value impossible when discussing cities. Rotterdam's vitality stems finally from the exuberance of its market culture – confounding, and enriching, the good intentions of its concept.

In Beirut, the buildings remain pockmarked or collapsed from the shooting and bombing. The spectacular landscape beyond the city is ravaged more by indiscriminate speculation since the beginning of hostilities in 1975 than by war as such. The infrastructure is in a state of crisis. It is not as if Lebanon has not initiated urban programs or attempted to define the maniacal growth of its capital since 1990. As in that other clever little nation Holland, talent is abundant in Lebanon. The discourse on the city is continuous and ambitious proposals appear habitually, and fade to be replaced by others: the fate of Planning everywhere. In Beirut there is a powerful history of such initiatives and a legacy of really superior Modern architecture from the era of independence: 1943 to 1975. Especially during the Shihabist⁶ period the nation brought to bear a Dutch degree of genius in an attempt to order the physical progress of culture. Strategizing was constant. The Directorate-General for Town Planning along with the Higher Council for Town and Country Design were prolific. The names of these agencies indicate the imposition of foreign concepts that they represented. Neither town nor country, in the Anglo-American sense, exist semantically in the Mediterranean.⁷ Although Arabic does have a word, *baldeh*, that may be interpreted as *town*, the term, implying not just scale but lawns and balloons, is something alien. *Country* too is exotic. That manicured foil of *town* does not pertain to a place where there is astounding landscape for sure but where the nurtured, Pastoral, implications of *country* are alien. The good intentions embedded in these notions could not be implemented at the municipal level as they were in Holland. In a culture that is not civil⁸ in the social-democratic sense, it is not surprising that the intense speculation on the application of the Modern as a public phenomenon – producing new infrastructure, new quarters, a new society – finally resulted in exceptionally high quality building financed largely from the private sector. But this was before the war and thus not part of the present discussion anymore than De Stijl has a direct repercussion on the post-war development of metropolitan Rotterdam.

The overriding difference between these two cities is obviously chronological. Fifty years after, Rotterdam is mostly done. Development continues along the city's edges, in implants in the center or in places where program is changing radically from industrial to more domestic or commercial functions: like the former docks of Kop Van Zuid. In Beirut, despite the extensive amount of repair, demolition and new construction throughout the extended city, reconstruction often seems not to have begun. After fifteen years of fighting and, more destructively, fifteen years of unregulated construction, any signs of

“good intentions” in Beirut are faint. It is hard to discern the repercussions of all the pre-war planning now. The city has expanded exponentially since 1975 given the influx of refugees from other zones of hostility but also given the natural demographic shifts brought on by the urbanization of a country so small that the entire nation can be seen as the region, if not the metropolitan area, of its capital. The war dismantled means of production and tribal loyalties that kept people rooted in villages and smaller cities, many of which are now consumed in Beirut's sprawl. As mentioned, more construction occurred than destruction but this was often on the periphery or beyond while the existing city suffered from the innumerable battles that erupted between every military and para-military entity. Most of what had been Beirut before the war is the site of maximum devastation and, of course, maximum economic potential. And in the center of this large, fractured yet vital, urban organism is the most radical condition, the absent downtown. As the Russian Ossip Zadkine called his 1946 sculpture executed for Rotterdam, Beirut is a “city without a heart.” Only the most extreme Stalinist urban programs, where state ownership allowed total erasure, produced comparable voids at the center of cities. But in Beirut extravagant speculation – developer and government one and the same – are responsible, an arrangement without precedent in the rest of the capitalist world. As happens with extremes, polar political/economic strategies come full circle to produce similar physical results.

Too much has already been written about this extraordinary void. Its particular interest is how private interests and what passes for government interact to produce the urban. It would be comforting to find Rotterdam to be an example of “good” relations – egalitarian, fair, socially responsible – between capital and the collective as represented by the social-democratic regime, and likewise to find Beirut as its opposite, a study in self-interest, exploitation, tyranny, weak government in complicity with wealth. But such easy readings do not hold beyond a superficial view of the places or a superficial understanding of the societies that these two cities represent. In Beirut, somehow, despite the apparent enigma of such a close complicity of capital and state, despite a profound Social-Darwinism determining most decisions, despite the shadow of Syria that falls over all events, things do get done. Plans for renewing the city spew out with an almost Dutch regularity. True, much of this revitalization has come from the same source. In a paradigm of power relations in socialist and high-capitalist cultures, all the anonymous public officials and private developers who collaborate to produce Rotterdam are congealed into one astoundingly rich and powerful figure in Beirut, but the effect is not so different.

Assuredly Rotterdam is in a lot better shape than Beirut. And this is not just because the Dutch have had a half-century to repair the damage. All the Dutch “good intentions” did produce results, many of them beneficial. But the gestures of Mr. Hariri have likewise reformed the city, not just by eviscerating it but



Fig. 4. Beirut.

also in the provision of new roads, monumental new facilities and myriad less evident public structures. In both cases nonetheless, the basic disorder of the place overpowers any organization. The disarray is very different than the nearby cities of Amsterdam on one hand or Damascus on the other: both ancient and picturesque, one suffering from an effervescent superfluity of open-mindedness, the other from a overbearing ballast of control. Rotterdam is a riot of conflicting ideologies embedded in disparate city fabric. Beirut is a turmoil of diverse urban material produced by pure speculation, a powerful form of ideology itself. The apparent self-interest of Hariri and his kind and the apparent interest-in-the-common-good of the Dutch planners have produced a similar pitch of urban pandemonium. The development of the Verdun corridor in West Beirut, of the Dunes and Concorde complexes in particular, rival, at least in their exuberance, the shopping zones of Rotterdam. But more vital even are the traffic circulation cores and attendant ad hoc working-class retail commotion of Cola Square or Dora in Borj Hammoud or the social mixing of Hamra, none of which was particularly planned and where shopping is only an aspect at best. The downtown hosts temporary events like a monster-truck rally next to the

most active of functioning mosques, reaching a peak during Ramadan of revving motors and electronically enhanced calls-to-prayer battling for audio-space.

The two cities are produced by a similar friction between capital and authority even if "intentions" are quite different. On the other hand, the teeming pedestrian streets of central Rotterdam have to be compared to the nearly empty streets of the meticulously renovated center of Beirut. In this homogenous wonderland far from the vital Third-World scruffiness of the rest of the metropolis, people are eerily absent during the day and move like tourists in a theme park at night. The New Urbanist rhetoric of pedestrianism and streetscape falls on the deaf ears of a bourgeoisie that prefers to drive, as it seems to in most places. The city of the flâneur is still vital in places like Rotterdam or, for that matter, Milan or Barcelona and not so in Beirut despite the global illusion that Mediterranean culture lingers in a twilight of social mixing: of piazzas and their kin. The different politics of the places has direct effect on the physical fabric. But there also may be a very simple, almost aesthetic, explanation as well. The Lijnbaan is common in its

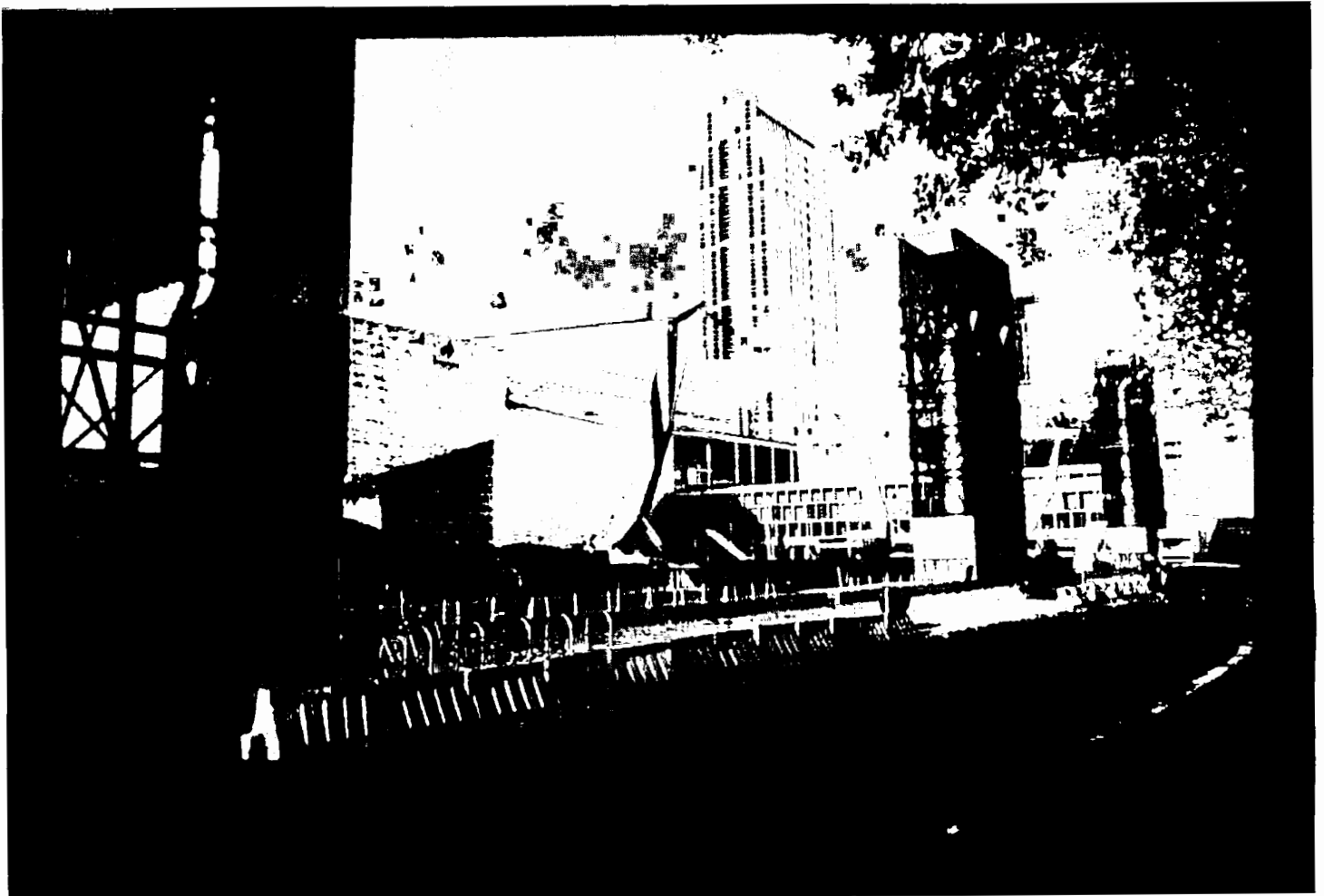


Fig. 5. Rotterdam.



Fig. 6.

mercantilism and not refined in its architecture. Beirut's downtown is, due to single ownership and a supremely bourgeois notion of urban quality, uniformly precious, over-restored – like a rhinestone encrusted beige poodle clipped too perfectly: no vulgar signage, no mess. Finally the flâneur is not welcome, let alone the underclass.

Beirut's subtext of monopoly and state control dilutes the city's apparent free-market anarchy, providing a crucial counterpoint to the inevitable urban entropy that is the endgame of speculation. Nevertheless, the frenetic expansion of the metropolis as new residential and mercantile fabric essentially without civic space or adequate infrastructure certainly maximizes revenue but obviously will arrive at intolerable conditions. The relief promised, the open space and facilities projected for the new city center, may be as illusory as have been other proposed amenities but they also tend to emerge in random and spontaneous locations.

To some extent both cities are victims of their respective eras, are indicative of shifting global urban enthusiasms coincident with their reconstruction. Rotterdam's grimmest moments come

from the Late-Modernism that guided the development process after 1960. The city's finest fabric (the housing squares and pedestrian streets) often evolved in unexpected and hybrid configurations far more successful than the stern planners could have imagined. Beirut was similarly affected at the same time, but without the realization possible in a social-democracy, and now has to attempt to rebuild in the pastel shadow of Post-Modernism and of the ersatz nostalgia of "contextualist" approaches that accompanied Post-Modern revivals of historicist pastiche and invented reference. "New Urbanist" rhetoric guides reconstruction. In fact, if the development of pre-war Beirut responded to many of the same planning enthusiasms as that of post-war Rotterdam, then post-war Beirut is not so much different in its desires and contradictions as is post-unification Berlin and many other cities world-wide.

Solidere is trying in the decade after the end of the Cold War to retroactively install a nineteenth-century urbanism that probably never existed and is certainly anachronistic in the twenty-first. Allusions to "tradition" pepper their language as they erase almost all structures more than one hundred years old. In his descriptions of the new codes for building in the center,

referents are Haussmann or Regency England. "Townscape" is again invoked. Even more incongruous than its use in pre-war Lebanese planning initiatives, this exotic term is now used in reference to the development of the downtown of a city of more than two million. Picturesque admiration of "views" and "a more Anglo-Saxon search for context and cultural continuity that seemed more appropriate"⁹ calls forth a Pastoral that fits the attitude of the entire project. Even "the Orientalist painters of the last century" offer inspiration. Seen in this Raj-tinted light, the restoration of mostly French colonial architecture is not accidental. "Tradition" here is nothing less than the Romantic invention of history to suit current politics. Any such call can only be assumed to be for speculative purposes. As always, real estate is well served by the production of identity. The erasure of history through the annihilation of the urban fabric in which it embedded offers a chance to rewrite that history: amnesia as urban strategy. In psychotherapy shock-treatment obliterates traumatic memory, allowing the recreation of personality in a more docile mode. Its urban counterpart subdues cultural flux permitting a redefinition of cultural values.

Regionalism and nationalism are different cuts of the same ideological suit of which identity is also a variation. The Dutch appear to have little concern for their sense of themselves. It is there for sure, open to new vectors: immigrant contributions and globalized imagery for instance. There are windmills and wooden shoes but they mostly appear as props in Jackie Chan movies or on tourist brochures. As likely it will be the new architecture of Rotterdam that will be featured even in these popular venues. Post-unification German planners, on the other hand, are adopting antiquated urban formats in a parallel attempt to produce a sense of history for a culture with a problematic recent past. The planners of modern Berlin or Beirut are generating an ersatz production of what is essentially a global romanticization of a 19th-century city probably only historically realized in the images of Caillebotte or the musings of de Maupassant: a city of arcades and boulevardian culture. This is now the universal image of identity, passing for cultural congruity, itself a difficult concept and one that may have no exact architectural or urban equivalent. In the cases mentioned above a New Urbanist generic is intent on exploiting a market that is almost exclusively bourgeois. New Urbanism, another closed meta-narrative like the Modernism it sets up as a foil, attempts to manifest the same utopian intentions if for antithetical purposes: a move politically from left to right. The

basic and flawed notion that good urban/architectural language makes good community persists. In wealthy countries of the European Union these policies are merely elitist. In Beirut, in a realm of pure business and racked with poverty, they constitute discrimination.

In Rotterdam and Beirut, the dissimilarities of the political motivations that underwrite the urbanism of good, and bad, intentions become less distinct when form is realized. Power sits, contained in and containing at the same time, all that apparent chaos and heterogeneity that is the city. It is this fact that allows Rotterdam and Beirut to be different and the same simultaneously. This incongruity embodies the exciting fact of the modern, as Karl Marx said "pregnant with its contrary."¹⁰

NOTES

¹ Grassi, Giorgio, "Avant-Garde and Continuity" from *Oppositions 21*, Summer 1980, p. 398

² Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1921, trans. D.F.Pears and B.F.McGuinness [London: Routledge, 1961] p. 74).

³ See Stanton, Michael, "On Realism, The Observer and Beirut: Design as Reporting" in *Architecture in Communication – Challenge and Opportunity in Building the Information Age: Proceedings of the 90th Annual Meeting of the ACSA*, New Orleans, 2002, or *Oriental/Occidental – Geography, Identity, Space: Proceedings of the ACSA International Conference*, Istanbul, 2001, or "On Realism and the Observer" in *ARCHIS 9 – Architecture, City, Visual Culture*, September 2000, Rotterdam.

⁴ Groenendijk, Paul and Piet Vollaard, *Guide to Modern Architecture in Rotterdam*, (Rotterdam: 010, 1996) p. 8

⁵ Both "of the people/proletariat" (*popolare, populaire*) and "liked by people."

⁶ Fuad Shihab was president from 1958 to '64, with vestiges of his influence surviving until 1970. His tenure marked the high point of government initiatives for social reform and planning.

⁷ In Italy for instance the movement from *paese* (a word that means village but significantly also nation) to *città* is abrupt. *Borgo* is now used sometimes to imply town but it too classically means village or even something smaller. In fact *città* also can mean just village.

⁸ I owe this concept to Robert Saliba who, in conversation, described Lebanese culture as "not civil." By that he meant having no sense of the public, of the dependency of culture on the collective and the manifestation of this relation in both public space and social programs.

⁹ All quotes in this paragraph come from Gavin, Angus, "Heart of Beirut: Making the Master Plan for the Renewal of the Central District" in *Projecting Beirut*, ed. Rowe and Sarkis (Munich, London, New York: Prestel, 1998). Gavin is described therein as "urban planning advisor to the chairman of Solidere."

¹⁰ "In our day everything is pregnant with its contrary. . . . All our invention and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and stultifying human life into material force." Marx, K., "Speech at the Anniversary of The People's Paper," 1856, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, (Norton, New York, 1978) p.578.