

# **Beirut's Afterlife/Afterlives Afterlife/Afterlives Heritage, Remembrance and Amnesia**

## **BY NELLY P. ABOUD**

### **WELCOME (SLIDE 1)**

I am delighted to join you today at this in-person conference centered on the world of historic house museums. The opportunity to engage and exchange ideas with experts, is indeed a privilege I've missed. I extend my sincere thanks to the organizers for their invitation and for putting together this event. Thank you Milja and DEMHIST.

### **AFTERLIVES (SLIDE 2)**

My presentation today will take us on a journey through my personal life and Beirut, the city I call home. In Lebanon, we have a saying, "May God protect us from the 'I word'." **However, our memories are an integral part of who we are.**

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The term "afterlife" in the title of my presentation, I must credit to Professor Priyamvada Gopal, an esteemed academic from the University of Cambridge, whose research delves into history, memory, and colonialism. **Professor Priyam argues that events in history do not exist in isolated past, present, or future states. Instead, they persist as "afterlives," extending beyond temporal boundaries. This ongoing process defies finite classification.** I find this statement quite relevant to our discussion today.

### **ROAD MAP (SLIDE 3)**

To navigate this effectively, I have divided my talk into three distinct timeframes: the past, the present, and the future.

We will begin by the first afterlife called the past, where we will explore the themes of amnesia and remembrance. Additionally, we will gain insights into the life of Beirut, Lebanon's capital, through the lens of a unique building known as Beit Beirut. Our journey will then transition to the second afterlife called the present, where we will navigate the complex terrain of memory loss and retrieval

and also examine the evolving definition of museums, as defined by the museum's community and its implications on the Lebanese scene. Finally, we will be looking into the third afterlife called the future, a dimension marked by uprisings, revolutions and destruction, with a glimpse of hope in the horizon.

#### **SLIDE 4 BLACK PAUSE**

#### **THROUGH AMNESIA AND REMEMBRANCE (SLIDE 5--6)**

Just recently, I was having a conversation with my husband regarding the increasingly trendy term 'resilience.' This term has gained prominence, particularly in the not-for-profit sector, in response to the numerous crises our world faces.

This led me to embark on a deeply personal endeavor—an exploration of my own life's timeline, highlighting moments when resilience was required from either myself or my parents in the face of uncertainty.

This exercise of self-reflection uncovered the selective nature of memory, which was adept at erasing and obscuring numerous significant events. The challenge of recalling everything and the frequent omission of crucial details raised compelling questions: Is there value in remembering, or can we simply move forward?

The outcome of this contemplative exercise, expressed in numerical terms, proved to be as shocking as the introspective journey itself. It's worth noting that, I am 40 years old, firmly positioned in the middle of my lifetime expectancy.

This prompted me to delve into profound questions: **Does history, in fact, persist within the present moment? Is the act of remembering truly crucial? Or can we, perhaps, find comfort in the idea of forgetting and moving forward?**

#### **(SLIDE 7) BLACK PAUSE**

#### **(SLIDE 8) THE BARAKAT BUILDING**

My pursuit of answers led me to a case study that has stirred considerable controversy within the Lebanese community. Known locally as the "Barakat Building" or "The Yellow House" due to its ochre sandstone construction, this architectural gem is situated in the heart of Beirut. Constructed between 1924 and

1932 by prominent architects of the thirties, Youssef Aftimos and Fouad Kozah, it stands as an early example of modern architecture in Beirut.

At the time of its creation, the Barakat Building was groundbreaking, incorporating concrete and introducing the concept of void and aesthetics within its structure rather than mere functionality. This architectural masterpiece marked a transition from traditional to modern building techniques. The building was designed for residential use and also featured various ground-floor shops.

### **(SLIDE 9) FROM THE BARAKAT BUILDING TO THE BUILDING OF DEATH OR SNIPER'S NEST**

In April 1975, the eruption of the Lebanese war transformed the Barakat Building into a sniper's nest, strategically positioned along the green line that divided Beirut into East and West. The structure was abandoned by its residents and occupied by snipers. Throughout the fifteen-year Lebanese war, the building served as an important military strategic point, and became known as "the building of death." Snipers utilized the architecture to conceal themselves behind blind walls, installing bunkers within the building. The conflict left the Barakat Building severely damaged by bombs, bullets, and the installations that had taken root inside.

### **(SLIDE 10) FROM THE SNIPER'S NEST INTO A MUSEUM AND AN URBAN CULTURAL CENTER**

In 1994, four years after the end of the war, the Barakat Building was threatened by demolition. However, Lebanese heritage advocates campaigned for its preservation as an iconic architectural gem. Their efforts led to a halt in the demolition activities in 1998 and the building's eventual expropriation by the Beirut Municipality in 2006. Subsequently, the municipality, in collaboration with the French Embassy in Beirut and the Paris Municipality, initiated a restoration project led by Architect Youssef Haidar.

The restoration project, initiated in October 2012, and was led by Haidar. The original structure was fortified, and a modern extension was added to the old Ottoman-style building to incorporate new facilities like an auditorium, library, and a cafe. The works were carried out with an architectural unique and forward-thinking vision. **The goal was to transform the building into a museum and urban cultural center accessible to the public, overseen by an independent**

**board. The building itself was treated as 92 years old human-being, that had survived the war, bearing numerous wounds and missing limbs. The restoration process was similar to a surgical procedure, employing stitching and sutures to mend wounds and gray prosthetic implants to replace missing elements. Notably, only technically and structurally necessary missing parts were replaced; otherwise, they were left vacant. These prosthetics highlighted absence and emptiness. Traces of the war, such as the snipers' graffiti on the walls, were preserved and even exhibited.**

**(SLIDES 11) FROM A STATE OF GENERAL AMNESIA/AMNESTY TO A CULTURE OF REMEMBRANCE AND A SITE OF CONSCIENCE, THE BUILDING EMBARKED ON A TRANSITION FROM THE BARAKAT BUILDING TO A 'MUSEUM FOR THE MEMORY OF THE CITY OF BEIRUT.'**

**However, this approach faced criticism from architects and heritage professionals in Lebanon who deemed it an unsightly reminder of the war's horrors that should be erased rather than displayed. Haidar's concept defined the building as a living cultural center dedicated to preserving the memory and history of Beirut, a profound memorial endeavor.**

Beit Beirut, as it came to be known, was envisioned as an inclusive cultural center encompassing a museum, a research and documentation facility. While the restoration was completed in 2013, it took an additional three years for the building to open its doors, inaugurated as an urban cultural center, rather than a museum.

However, after all this being said, Beit Beirut is still not open to the public except on rare occasions and for special events. The excuse presented by the Municipality of Beirut is the lack of resources.

The argument used around the Barakat Building's reopening primarily revolved around **the absence of traditional museum collections** that would categorize it as a **"real museum."**

But it is clear by now that this isn't the real reason. What Beit Beirut aims to achieve through the vision of Haidar is unity and social cohesion. Opening the building and allowing it to fulfill its role as a museum at the service of society is quite intimidating for the decision makers. Telling our stories, as Lebanese human beings, so we remember and reflect is still not accepted by the majority of stakeholders. **This debate sheds light on the social power a museum can hold. It**

**is as a revealing reflection of what defines a museum and what it ought to be in the eyes of the community.**

**(SLIDE 12) BLACK PAUSE**

**(SLIDE 13) BUT WHAT IS A REAL MUSEUM AFTER ALL? IS IT A STORAGE SPACE FOR OBJECTS AND ARTEFACTS? OR IS THERE SOMETHING MORE TO IT?**

**A museum is above all an experience, an authentic human emotional experience.** It is all about the stories of the people. It is the people who makes the museum and not the objects and the collections. Museums work with narratives and not only with objects and artifacts. Intrinsically, what makes any narrative relevant is its personal and emotional aspect.

I remember the first time I visited the Barakat building during the restoration period in 2014 with a group of museum and heritage experts. I remember that many couldn't continue the visit, and the impact of the building itself with all the scars and traces of the war, was so emotionally powerful that many had to pause and stop their visit.

**(SLIDE 14 ORHAN PAMUK)** When you enter a museum, you step out of the present physical afterlife into a different dimension. This out of space and time state creates room for different reflections. It is a safe space where dialogue, empathy, listening and learning is made possible.

Museums can help people make sense of our complex and nuanced world that doesn't come with any simple answers. It is the perfect space to tackle sensitive issues providing answers to difficult questions.

What differentiate a museum from many other cultural spaces, is the positioning of the people's stories in the center of the museum's experience. That human aspect makes museums relevant to society.

This is the case of Beit Beirut. The traces of the war and the stories around this building are what constitutes the museum main collection. **The people and their stories are the collection.**

**(SLIDE 15) ICOM MUSEUM DEFINITION** On Wednesday August 24th, 2022, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) approved a new definition of a museum that focused on inclusivity, community participation and reflection. This new definition is aligned with some of the major changes in the role of museums today.

The new definition marks a shy transition from ‘Museums of/for objects’ to ‘Museums of/for the People’ insisting on the participation of communities and on reflection making it more relevant to the society it serves.

The new definition encompasses the social role of the museum as a powerful space that can inspire and influence social change.

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**So, one might ask what does all this have to do with Lebanon? And why is it important to have Beit Beirut become a historic house museum for the memory of Beirut?**

**(SLIDE 16) BLACK PAUSE**

**(SLIDE 17) Lebanon has been diagnosed by many as suffering from social amnesia (lost memory), hypomnesia (poor memory) and hypermnesia (enhanced memory).** {War, Memory, Amnesia: Postwar Lebanon, Contemporary French and Francophone Studies 18(5):457-461.}

**Following the end of the war, we, as Lebanese, just went from general amnesty to general amnesia as a self-defense mechanism in the face of a long history of trauma and political unrest.**

**During the war, imagined myths of origins were contested, and differences in historical narratives were politically exploited to segregate the country and divide Beirut into East and West.**

This imagined past and contradictory narratives are still being used to cause so many tensions between different components of the Lebanese society.

To this day, we do not have a homogenous history textbook and the books used in our schools stops their timelines in 1943 date of the independence of Lebanon from the French Mandate. We do not talk about the war in our schools. A big chunk of our

modern history is simply wiped out. Efforts towards remembrance and a real memory exercise are not prevalent.

**This amnesia, hypomnesia and hypermnesia is keeping the Lebanese in an unstable state, victim of politically misused narratives.**

(SLIDE 18) But how can we proceed and move forward?

**Rola, a 22 years old Lebanese student said when asked about the memory of the war that it is not easy to remember and it is such a blessing to forget.**

(Slide 19) Ashraf Osman

**But how can one forget something he/she can't remember?**

History is ever present, passed down from one generation to another. It is ever present in the collective memory of the nations. The emotions caused and triggered by a traumatic or happy event are deeply engraved in our nervous system and passed down to us through the genes of our parents same as genetic diseases and physical traits.

So, the act of remembering is inevitable. So instead of focusing on forgetting, better focus on the process of remembering first asking the important questions: WHY AND HOW to remember. **But most importantly WHO. Who** gets to tell the story?

**History taught us that who owns the past has knowledge and knowledge is power: power to tell, show, or hide stories, power to rewrite narratives and history and use them to justify violent unhuman acts.**

This is how historical narratives are being used by powerful politicians and decision makers to change discourses and rule the world using a **twisted version of our stories and our narratives.**

## **SLIDE 20**

And here comes the role of museums as **an Ideal Place for Memory but also for Forgetting**. Adherent to the act of forgetting is an act of remembrance. An exercise of remembrance essential to reach inner peace and a sense of social cohesion. So, why not do it in the most subtle, beautiful, 'safe' way through a museum experience, through the use of art, beauty, aesthetics, architecture, empathy and dialogue?

## **SLIDE 21 BLACK PAUSE**

**(SLIDE 22) HISTORY IS NOW!** On the 17<sup>th</sup> of October 2019, people took it to the streets demanding basic human rights. During the protests, people were asking questions related to their identity, to the history of the country and their real stories as Lebanese. Very strong debates were taking place in the middle of the streets but unfortunately most of these major questions were left unanswered. Most of the Lebanese museums alienated themselves from the debate and did not stand with the people with little or no engagement in the social uprising.

Yes. Museums in Lebanon are neutral because they are ruled by the same elitist well established class, connected to the political class ruling the country. The sector in Lebanon is deeply intertwined with the political elite and carries a very loaded colonial baggage perpetuating the colonizer's discourse. Museums in Lebanon are cut off from their public, not inclusive and not accessible to the majority of the population. They manage the museums as sanctuaries, reserved to the well-educated people and not for everyone.

This is quite the opposite of what the new ICOM definition and world order in the museum world is about. Aren't all museums supposed to be public institutions that serves the society? Aren't they supposed to be at the heart of any social/cultural life?

**(Slide 23) To conclude, I would like to mention the last traumatic event that shook Beirut.** On the 4<sup>th</sup> of August, 2020 a massive explosion shook the heart of Beirut where a warehouse located at the port of Beirut was blown up destroying the wheat silos and half of the city of Beirut, taking more than 200 lives, injuring more than 6000 and displacing more than 300000.

**(SLIDE 24)** Today following the 4th of August explosion, Lebanese are demanding the preservation of the silos as a memorial, as a site of conscience, as a museum, where we can go remember, reflect and maybe forgive but most importantly to bring justice to the victims of this explosion ...

The proposal of the museum probably do not include any collection or artifacts but it will be the house of many untold stories of loss, remembrance, justice and hope

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To this day, 3 years after the explosion, the debate over the preservation of the silos still continues and justice is still not served.

**(SLIDE 25) The Cedar Within.** What is a museum if it does not aspire to bring social change, social justice and foster a better future where all the stories are being heard and acknowledged, especially the stories of the less privileged. What is our



role as heritage practitioners and museum experts if it does not include a social responsibility to make all the voices heard and all the stories relevant?

It is greatly ambitious. I know. But in the face of all the atrocities and uncertainties our world is facing today, I dare to dream.

**(Slide 26) HOPE Graffiti. Thank you!**

**Museums can make our world better. Museums give us hope. Hope that our stories will not be erased, that our memory will live on after we perish. Hope that one day our voices will be heard and justice will be served.**

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For pictures:

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**To add Nassim Assaad Interview: <https://youtu.be/j3wKEvVvV2c>**

**To add Ziad Saab last part about forgetting and reconciliation and the memory of the war <https://youtu.be/JyqXKScI6JM>**

Add : Beirut 1968: <https://youtu.be/wBPYiMY-NYU>

ReCon Heritage: [https://youtu.be/3krjec3p\\_eE](https://youtu.be/3krjec3p_eE)

LOLJ 4 Episodes: <https://youtu.be/rShNEWjgxMQ>