A French Urbanist Reflects on the City of Beirut (1945)

Source reference:
Michel Écochard, *La Ville de Beyrouth et son Avenir*, Société Libanaise d'Économie Politique 13. Banquet Mensuel, (1945). Booklet containing Écochard's talk and an opening speech by Gabriel Menassa, 05.04.1945, at the Société Libanaise d'Économie Politique; Box 9, Écochard 61IFA, Écochard Collection, Archive de la Cité de Patrimoine, Paris, France.

Source:
Lebanese Society of Political Economy (Société Libanaise d'Économie Politique, SLEP) 13. Monthly Banquet, Thursday April 5, 1945
Guests of honour: The Gentlemen, Deputies of the City of Beirut and Members of the Public Works Commission of the Chamber. The Gentlemen, Administrator of the City of Beirut and members of the Municipal Council.
Subject of the discussion: The City of Beirut and its Future (by Mr. Michel Écochard).
Excellencies, Gentlemen and Dear Colleagues,
In its cycle of study of the economic problems of the post-war period, the Lebanese Society of Political Economy [SLEP] has devoted a prominent place to the problem of the development of the City and the Port of Beirut.
This is a current issue that goes beyond the local framework to become a major national problem. This is why, Gentlemen, we wanted not only the Gentlemen Deputies of the City of Beirut and the President and Members of its Municipal Council, but also the Honourable President and Members of the Public Works Commission of the Chamber to be interested in and associate themselves with the study of this problem.
We thank you, Gentlemen, for having kindly responded to our invitation and thus providing us with a new attestation of encouragement.
Today's talk that the distinguished urban planner Mr. Michel Écochard is presenting to you deals with "the City of Beirut and its Future." His presentation will be brief, modest and moderate. But it is up to us to grasp the full scope of what this excellent French technician will tell us, who has been working for several years to make our city a modern capital, and our port one of the most important metropoles of trade in the Orient.
I would like to explain to you very briefly, myself, what Mr. Écochard, Foreign Advisor, could not or would not tell you:
Mr. Écochard confided to me a few days ago: "I have the impression of having failed in my mission here, although I succeeded in Syria, in Damascus and in Aleppo!"
We must recognize, Gentlemen, that this observation corresponds to reality; all the general or partial urban plans established for the development of the City of Beirut during the last thirty years have been sabotaged one after the other: the breakthroughs [i.e. wide streets] planned by Azmi Bey [the late Ottoman governor of Beirut] were stopped in the center of our city; the streets, designed on a tardigrade basis [i.e. too small], were drawn too narrow; clearances, access roads and junctions were reduced; building permits were often given without respecting the plans; the 'Danger plan' was discarded; the 'Écochard plan' – if it does not find defenders among you – risks being torpedoed too.
Thus, the narrow streets of our city already pose the delicate problem of the circulation of automobiles and pedestrians, a problem that will become insoluble in three years, when the number of automobiles will have increased from 4,000 to 5,000, the current figure, to 20,000 or 25,000 cars.

What regulations could we then impose? The transformation of all our streets and alleys into one-way passages would not solve the traffic crisis. Maintaining the circulation of cars (even and odd numbers) would not solve it either. Perhaps we should authorize cars to circulate only one or two days per week!
Gentlemen, the problem that arises is serious. Let us not wait until 1948 or 1950 to implement measures that are immediately necessary.
To govern is to foresee. I would like to urge you to collaborate with all interested Authorities to solve the urban problem of the city of Beirut.
That the Ecochard Plan or any other logical plan that fully saves the future be adopted before next summer and that this plan be financed and implemented immediately, without any harm being done to it by anyone.
The structure of the Lebanese National Economy requires us to be a country that is above all a "Service Producer": Trade, Tourism and Emigration constitute essential elements of our economic system.
Our economic policy must aim to make Beirut a pleasant modern capital with a view to developing Tourism and Vacationing, and to retain emigrants who would like to visit the country after the war.
Beirut is not only suffocating in its Urban Development Plan: Economically and Commercially, Beirut is in danger.
Haifa, Damascus and Aleppo are disputing our Place for its acquired (or reconquered) situation since the middle of the last century.
Syria, our partner in the Economic and Customs Union, is taking advantage of the wartime to realize its non-dependence on our Port: separate quotas; direct orders: various commercial facilities, compulsory customs clearance in Syrian territory; construction of a large port in Latakia, etc.
Shall we allow to seal the decadence and ruin of our port and our city without reacting? Will we consent to the certain devaluation of all the property wealth of Beirut?
The Lebanese Society of Political Economy will soon have completed its study of the economic projects that tend to restore Beirut to its former prosperity, and to make Lebanon the free entrepôt of the Orient.
Our Institution calls upon all the competitions and all the collaborations with a view to the defence of the economic and commercial heritage of Lebanon.
Excellencies, Gentlemen,
The City of Beirut and the Port of Beirut will find in you qualified defenders. It is the defence of Lebanese Economic Interests that we ask you to ensure, and we ask you to grasp the full importance of the problem posed to combine your efforts with the success of a cause that must take precedence over all others.
I reiterate the thanks of the SLEP Council for having kindly enhanced the splendor of this monthly banquet with your presence. »
Gabriel Menassa

The Talk by Mr. Michel Écochard
Excellencies, Gentlemen and dear colleagues,
There are cities whose location has been marked from time immemorial, and which will always exist so imperative are the geographical conditions which bind them to the ground, whether they defend the entrance to a valley, or whether they are at the crossroads of rivers, or whether they were the first habitable place after the desert spaces. Such are the cities of Damascus, Paris, Cairo.
There are others whose creation, due to momentary needs, is entirely artificial. They then disappear when these needs no longer exist: this was the case with Palmyra and Petra.

Still other cities, without presenting the ideal conditions of existence of those of the first category, are favourable to a midsize population and then owe only to human will or to exceptional circumstances to become great cities. Such is Beirut: a small Phoenician port, a medium-sized Hellenistic city, a large Roman city, an Arab town, and for the future, either one of the great Mediterranean outlets or a second-rate coastal city, depending on what its inhabitants want.
Because of its double barrier of mountains, Beirut was always outside the major communication routes with the interior. From Palmyra and Damascus, trade was conducted towards Antioch in the North or Tyre and Sidon in the South. Beirut owed its expansion in the Roman era to the installation of a hydraulic system that I have just discovered and which surpasses in boldness of implementation everything that the Services have attempted up to now: water conducted from the Sannin to Beirut along the ridges in cut stone pipes and through the mountain in tunnels, then brought to the inhabitants the security that the Nahr-Beirut could not give them. It also allowed the regular irrigation of the entire plain from Antelias to Khalde so that, despite the nature, the population and supply of the growing city were largely assured.
After the earthquake of 542, which destroyed its water supply, Beirut lost its rank as a great city. Nowadays, if these questions of supply are more easily resolved by metal pipes, the problem that arises for the life or death of Beirut is a problem of economic exchanges, translated on the ground by the organization of road, rail, air and sea traffic. The realization of such a technical program will ensure the full development of Beirut and will make the city an important link in interurban, interregional, international and even intercontinental connections. It is obvious that this program cannot be resolved on the municipal level; it must be carried out on the NATIONAL level.
We can say, without being paradoxical, that in the order of urgency of the developments of the city, tunnel constructions should be included in certain points of the chain of Lebanon allowing in all seasons an uninterrupted circulation between Damascus and Beirut. It would be regrettable if from an economic point of view, the interruption of such a road, even if only for a few days a year, made transport companies adopt the Haifa-Baghdad road instead of the Beirut-Baghdad road via Damascus.
In the more limited study of the Beirut region that was entrusted to me, I endeavoured to provide a concrete solution to the following questions
- to ensure that the port has all possibilities of development in order to meet the often unpredictable future needs, to free it largely by an independent road system allowing the rapid transport of heavy traffic to the outside, to improve its current rail clearance by its connection to the normal track.
- for the aerodrome, I tried to find a sufficiently large site so that, without hindering the development of the city, it could be used as an intercontinental aerodrome. The financial question was not neglected: it is enough that the current aerodrome be developed as building site, by a rational policy of constructions in the surroundings. Thus, its resale allows the purchase and development of a much larger plot of land that better meets the requirements of modern aviation.
Considering also that after the war, because of the great development that automobile traffic will take, a motorway will certainly connect Europe to Africa by the East of the Mediterranean, I have planned the direct connection of the Saida-Tripoli roads as the first step towards this motorway. I can only regret that a project of such real national importance has been abandoned and that the partly completed section, fixed at 40 meters wide by using lateral easements, has already been reduced to 20 meters by building permits given inconsiderately.
Furthermore, new roads with a minimum width of 30 meters have been studied in detail and could be built immediately to free up traffic from the city center to Damascus, Saida, Tripoli. These roads are not widenings of existing roads but entirely new roads taking the route best corresponding to their traffic. It is superfluous to prove, from a technical point of view, the

advantage of new roads whose route does not borrow its layout from existing roads. However, one could object that these new roads cost more. But a quick calculation has shown us that financially this solution is also more advantageous. Indeed; these new straight roads, passing inside the building lots, encounter many gardens and do not attack the shops located along the streets and representing the most expensive surface area of land.

It is quite obvious that the general study carried out for the city includes other chapters: legislation, social works, extension, etc., but if we have insisted more particularly on the question of traffic, it is because their resolution almost automatically leads to that of the other problems: thus, the urban extension will be organized and limited according to traffic, while the commercial or government centers will on the contrary provide the starting or ending points of these same arteries.

It is by urgently undertaking these major port, airfield and traffic works that Beirut could catch up with the delay it has fallen behind Damascus and Haifa in recent years. Already during these 4 years, the war effort would have made it possible to achieve vital clearances such as that of the port. On the other hand, whatever work is done in the city, sewers, sidewalks or public gardens, Beirut will then have to be content with a very inferior rank among the cities of the Near East. The race is tight; Haifa has largely developed its port and its accesses are vast and sumptuous. As for Damascus, the solicitude of the Syrian Government has made the city appear in a few years as a great capital. In the meantime, what has been done in Beirut? A plan exists. It was established by men, therefore debatable, but all plans whatever they are and whoever their author will be debatable: we must therefore admit it or admit another but act quickly without going back.

Here in my opinion is a program of action and work:

1°) Create a Lebanese urban planning department that is able to study the general organization of the country, the development of cities, the development of summer vacation spots which, it must be recognized, are totally neglected.

2°) Create a movement of opinion to draw the attention of the population to these vital problems. In this regard, the example of Great Britain has been striking for some time, a considerable effort has been made to interest the public in urban planning issues, through conferences, films, publications. I am thinking in particular of a remarkable pamphlet of clarity and common sense, very well illustrated, which is distributed by the hundreds of thousands of copies to the English troops to show them the necessity, even the obligation, of urban developments.

3) Create an intercommunal commission for the surroundings of Beirut to regulate all the questions concerning the city and its suburbs.

4) Study a program for the construction of major traffic routes clearing Beirut and its port on the basis - if they are approved - of the projects currently owned by the municipal administration. The government should help finance them.

5) Study the financial realization of a certain number of development projects in which private finance would be interested. In this order of studies, the Lebanese Society of Political Economy should be able to make the link between official services and private finance.

These proposals are not vague proposals because, thanks to the credits that the Municipality has provided, I have been able to establish a set of projects and lay the foundations of legislation that could, if desired, quickly take concrete form.

But wanting to move on to the approval of a plan, then to the achievements of urban planning requires for the elite of a city a strict discipline and a sincere dedication to public affairs. This discipline and this dedication carry their rewards: indeed, it must be understood that the real interest of society and even of capitalists and proprietors/landowners who want to make their property profitable is to help the development of the city. Why? Because all the current combinations, political pressures, bargaining etc. undertaken to avoid the loss of the smallest square

peak of land, may immediately make some money but contribute to undermining the overall plan and ultimately correspond to a general devaluation of the city's land.
Let us take as an example the land of the port; it represents a large surface area gained from the sea but little length of quays. At first sight, it may be, in the immediate future, an interesting operation, but let us realize that, on the one hand, the public interest has not been defended since the country needs above all a great length of quays to develop its imports and exports, and that, on the other hand, the private interest has also made a bad calculation because land gained from the sea but served by a minimal length of quays, will not take the added value that it would have received from a large traffic. It should also be noted that the land increases in value not because of its proximity to the center of the city by the extension of the latter, but as a direct result of the developments that have been made on this land; example: Achrafié whose value in gold of land has not varied for 40 years while other land much further away towards Saint-Elie increases considerably.
We see therefore by these two examples that the defence of the general interest of the citizens, that is to say of the higher interests of the nation, also corresponds to an intelligent defence, on a broader level, of their own interests.
Let us therefore be realistic: whether for the defence of a sum of personal interests or for the defence of the interest of the State by the alignment of the city at the level of its neighbours Haifa and Damascus, we must act before it is too late.
For me, the hospitality I received in Lebanon, the love I gained for the site of Beirut by walking the smallest paths in the surrounding area under the most diverse atmospheres and lighting, the knowledge I tried to acquire of its grandiose past could only increase the anxiety I have for its future if I did not have the comfort of the new forces that seem to be organizing in the country."
Michel Ecochard

Blurb:
This French-language source is a printed, 7-paged transcript of a talk French urbanist Michel Écochard delivered on April 5, 1945, at the 13th monthly banquet of the Lebanese Society of Political Economy (Société Libanaise d'Économie Politique, SLEP) in Beirut, in the presence of major functionaries and administrators of the City of Beirut, the state's Public Works Commission and the Municipal Council, and most likely, other members of Beirut's economic and political elite. The speech was preceded by an opening speech by the influential economist Gabriel Menassa, SLEP's president. The original source contains a full-page plan mapping the major existing and proposed streets of Greater Beirut's transportation network. Printed as an A4-sized brochure, the transcript was likely circulated during or after the banquet by SLEP.
Both speeches constitute passionate pleas to the influential audience that the realisation of encompassing urbanism-related projects in Beirut is urgent and desperately needed, not only to better manage the capital's urban space, but to secure a prosperous future for Beirut and Lebanon as a whole. They contrast previous failings – proposed urbanism plans were either too small in scope or never or only partially realized, due to short-sighted private interests trumping common and national interests and a lack of willingness – with the opportunities the endorsement of Écochard's urbanism plans would offer, not least to Lebanon's economic and political elites. To boost Beirut's "interurban, interregional, international and even intercontinental connections" and thus its economic capabilities, the French urbanist's plans focus on developing and expanding Beirut's infrastructure for road, rail, air and sea traffic.
Convinced that addressing the issue of circulation would solve most other urbanism-related problems, Écochard suggests actionable, detailed and well-planned projects: improving the port area's flow of circulation, enabling the airport's growth into a major intercontinental travel hub by relocating it to a larger area, developing a large north-south coastal highway, and

piercing large new roads through Beirut to ease traffic. These proposals reflect Écochard's foresight regarding major post-WWII developments to which he too would contribute. The urbanist further calls for creating institutions tasked with addressing arising urbanism issues, and for convincing the public, the private sector and the government to support and finance the proposals' swift implementation– for otherwise, Beirut's main competitor in the Eastern Mediterranean, the booming port city of Haifa would take over Beirut's role as the region's major trading node. Conceiving of this urbanism plan as a major national project for the newly independent nation, both Écochard and Menassa urge their (elite) audience to favour and support the common good and national interests over individual's private interests.

Michel Écochard's speech took place during a period of transition: Lebanon had gained its independence from France in 1943 (although French troops would depart only in 1946) and World War II would end only a month later in the Mediterranean and Western Europe. Lebanon's political and economic elites, Beirut's merchants and bankers in particular, were eagerly planning to expand their economic activities in peacetime. The ideas discussed in the semi-public, elite intellectual forum *Société Libanaise d'Économie Politique* and in its renowned counterpart the *Cénacle Libanais*, traced by Hicham Safiedddine's *Banking on the State* (2019) and Nadim Shehadi's "The Idea of Lebanon: Economy and State in the Cénacle Libanais 1946-54" (1987), respectively, would come to shape public opinion, debates and policies during the ensuing decades.

Since late Ottoman rule, urbanism plans and reforms had begun to rapidly transform the mushrooming port city of Beirut as Jens Hanssen traces in *Fin de Siècle Beirut* (2005). Marlène Ghorayeb's *Beyrouth sous mandat français. Construction d'une ville moderne* (2014), and a wealth of French-language research by May Davie, Carla Eddé and others demonstrate the extent to which French Mandate rule transformed Beirut's urban sphere, not least through numerous urban planning schemes.

Michel Écochard, after starting his career under the French mandate as an architect working on Syria's antiquities, had become by the early 1940s the director of the Mandate's urban planning department, and developed plans for Damascus, Aleppo, and Beirut before departing to Morocco. Committed to the international modernism of Le Corbusier and *CIAM*, Écochard returned in the late 1950s to Beirut and developed a second set of encompassing urbanism plans for the Greater Beirut Area. Although none of his plans were ever fully implemented, he remains the most influential of the many international urbanists from Switzerland, Greece, France and elsewhere who worked in Beirut, as Eric Verdeil shows in his monograph *Beyrouth et ses urbanistes: une ville en plans (1946-1975)* (2010) and his article 'Michel Ecochard in Lebanon and Syria (1956-1968). The Spread of Modernism, the Building of the Independent States and the Rise of Local Professionals of Planning' (2012). Much of Écochard's bequest can be found at the Paris-based *Centre d'archives d'architecture contemporaine*, and digitally here.

For researchers, urbanism plans and the debates surrounding them in early independence Lebanon provide a rich field of inquiry: into the diffusion, adoption, and appropriation of Western conceptions of modernity, scientific rationality, and supposedly apolitical planning; into the nature of Lebanon's classed society and the privileging of economic interests over social needs; into the fears and anxieties of the middle and upper classes; as well as into the processes of nation-building, the expansion of car-oriented lifestyles based on the use of fossil fuels, and much more.

Source selected, translated, and annotated by Jan Altaner.