

The Sacred as Brand: Corporatization, Spectacle, and the Vertical Redevelopment of Mecca

Karim Baba¹

¹ École d'architecture - Faculté de l'aménagement - Université de Montréal, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Abstract

In 2012, the Abraj Al-Bait complex, a cluster of towers anchored by a 601-meter clock tower and a five-star hotel, opened in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, it is positioned directly across from the Masjid al-Haram, the Grand Mosque, and within direct sightline of the Kaaba. The complex, a government-owned real estate asset, is simultaneously a luxury hotel and a shopping mall. It is also the most dominant visual object in one of the most sacred sites on earth.¹ This paper examines how the Abraj Al-Bait complex transformed the spatial and symbolic hierarchy of Mecca.

1 - Ziauddin Sardar, *Mecca: The Sacred City* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 320–340.

Introduction

Recent redevelopment projects in Mecca have fused religious infrastructure with luxury real estate and state branding, in which faith, state power, and capital are fused, where capital increasingly dominates the visual and economic organization of the city, it has displaced the Kaaba as the singular symbolic center of the city, replacing it with a skyline associated more with typical Gulf financial districts than with historic pilgrimage space. I am examining how Mecca's built environment has been restructured to function simultaneously as a site of devotion and a site of consumption, as a sacred geography and as a branded destination.

This paper moves through different layers at different scales of analysis. The physical structure, the image produced or intended and the broader urban model it represents and finally looking at what was demolished to make room for it.

Ahmed Kanna's study of Dubai introduces the city-as-corporation as a model in which urban development is governed by the logics of a private business rather than a public entity, where spatial decisions are driven by investment return, brand positioning, and competitive differentiation rather than civic needs or democratic deliberation.² For Kanna, this model produces a city in which citizenship is replaced by shareholding, and in which the built environment becomes a medium for the accumulation and display of capital.³ Kanna's primary case is the city of Dubai, but the model he describes has a structural affinity with the city I am looking into, in which the raw material is not oil wealth alone, but a more reliable source of demand: religious obligation.

Mecca receives around 2 to 3 million pilgrims annually during the Hajj, and several million more throughout the year for Umrah. This is not discretionary tourism. It is a

2 - Kanna, *City as Corporation*, 3.

3 - Kanna, *City as Corporation*, 77–104.

religious duty for devout Muslims, one of the five pillars of Islam, which makes the demand, in a way, guaranteed by faith. What the Saudi state and its development partners have recognized, and what distinguishes Mecca from Dubai as an urban formation, is that this captive demand can be converted into a real estate market. The vertical redevelopment of the area immediately surrounding the Grand Mosque materializes that transformation.

Saudi priorities have shifted for Mecca. Looking at what the skyline now looks like, the Kaaba, which represents the Islamic religious duties, is not the main focus anymore, it is overshadowed by the 600 meter "Islam-Branded" clock tower, with its own "golden arches", the giant crescent moon on top. This is somewhat contradictory to what Hajj is meant to be, where all pilgrims are equal, no jewelry, no markers of wealth or status, yet they perform their rituals at the base of a five star hotel and a golden clock tower.

The project reflects a deliberate shift in how the Saudi state spatially organizes pilgrimage. It represents a deliberate spatial strategy in which the Saudi state has leveraged its custodianship of the holy sites to produce a particular kind of urban environment — one that captures and monetizes the flows of pilgrimage while simultaneously producing their own image of what Islamic modernity should look like for global consumption.⁴ The religious significance of the Haram increases the economic value of the surrounding hotels, malls, and real estate.

In his analysis of post-revolutionary Cairo, Ali Alraouf coined the term 'phantasmagoric urbanism' to describe an urban condition in which image production and the culture of spectacle have come to substitute for substantive urban development. Drawing on Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle, in which lived social

life is replaced by its representation⁵ Alraouf identifies in Cairo a city that performs modernity through iconic gestures while deferring the structural conditions of genuine urban transformation.⁶ The phantasmagoric city replaces reality with image.

The concept applies closely to Mecca, though with a crucial modification. Where Cairo's phantasmagoric urbanism is largely a symptom of political dysfunction — a state performing development it cannot deliver, Mecca's image production is a deliberate instrument of a highly functional sovereign actor. The Saudi state, through the Saudi Binladin Group and associated development entities, has constructed an environment in which the image of the sacred has been amplified, aestheticized, and branded at the very moment that its historical urban fabric has been demolished.⁷

The Abraj Al-Bait's clock tower, is visible from virtually every point in the Grand Mosque's outdoor precincts. Its face, four times the diameter of the clock at Big Ben (Fig. 1), is illuminated at night. The complex contains a 10,000-seat prayer hall, a museum of Islamic art, and a shopping mall. It is, in the most literal sense, a machine for the production of religious spectacle at the scale of global capital.

4 - Amale Andraos, "Problematizing a Regional Context: Representation in Arab and Gulf Cities," in *The New Arab Urban: Gulf Cities of Wealth, Ambition and Distress*, ed. Harvey Molotch and Davide Ponzini (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 60.

5 - Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 12.

6 - Alraouf, "Phantasmagoric Urbanism," 75.

7 - Sardar, *Mecca: The Sacred City*, 290.

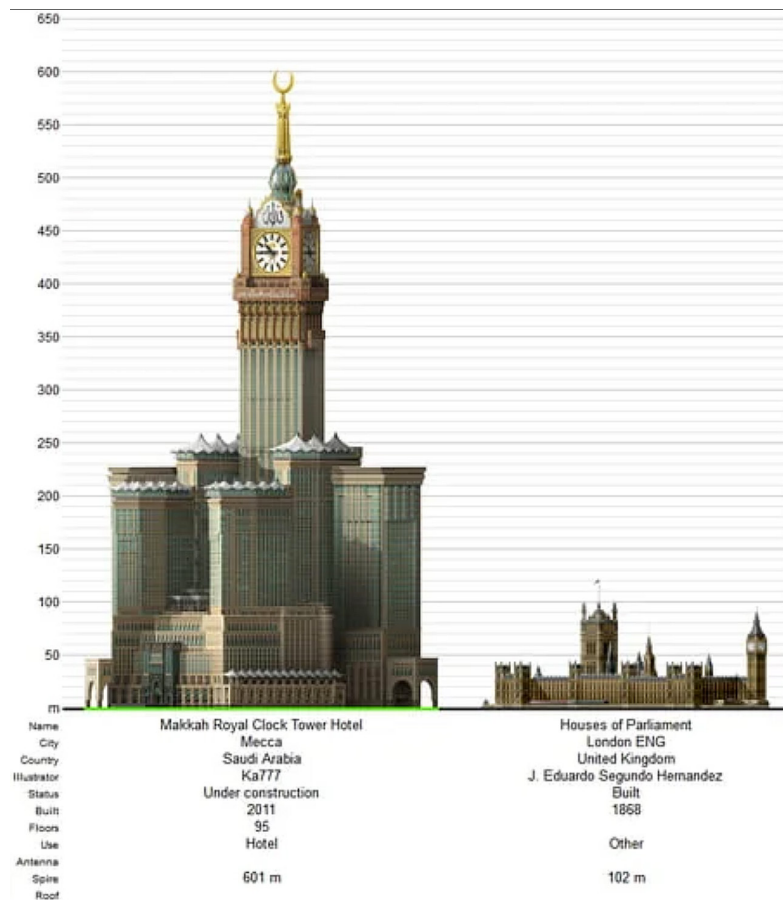


Fig 1. Comparative elevation of the Makkah Royal Clock Tower (601 m) and the Houses of Parliament, London (102 m). Illustration by Ka777, 2011.

What makes the Abraj Al-Bait legible as phantasmagoric urbanism is not simply its scale or its program, but its relationship to the image economy of contemporary Hajj. The pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the most photographed events in the world. The aerial images that circulate globally — millions of worshippers in white ihram garments circumambulating the Kaaba — have become icons of Islamic collective practice. The Abraj Al-Bait now appears in the background of almost every such image. It has inserted itself into the iconography of the sacred without being itself sacred, and in doing so, has produced a visual conflation of devotion and development that is nearly impossible to disaggregate.⁸

This is a particularly charged contradiction with Islamic

tradition, which has historically prohibited figurative imagery, rooted in the idea that representation displaces authentic devotion, and in asense the Kaaba is Islam's only sanctioned iconic exception, yet the Abraj Al- Bait inserted itself within this image, not through real religious importance but through scale and visual ornament.

Edward Said's Orientalism describes a representational structure in which the 'Orient' is produced as an image for an imagined Western gaze, a projection that tells us more about the anxieties and desires of the observer than about the observed.⁹ Said's analysis is primarily literary and discursive, but its implications for architecture and the built environment have been extensively elaborated: the staging of 'Islamic' visual

8 - Alraouf, "Phantasmagoric Urbanism," 80.

9 - Said, Orientalism, 3.

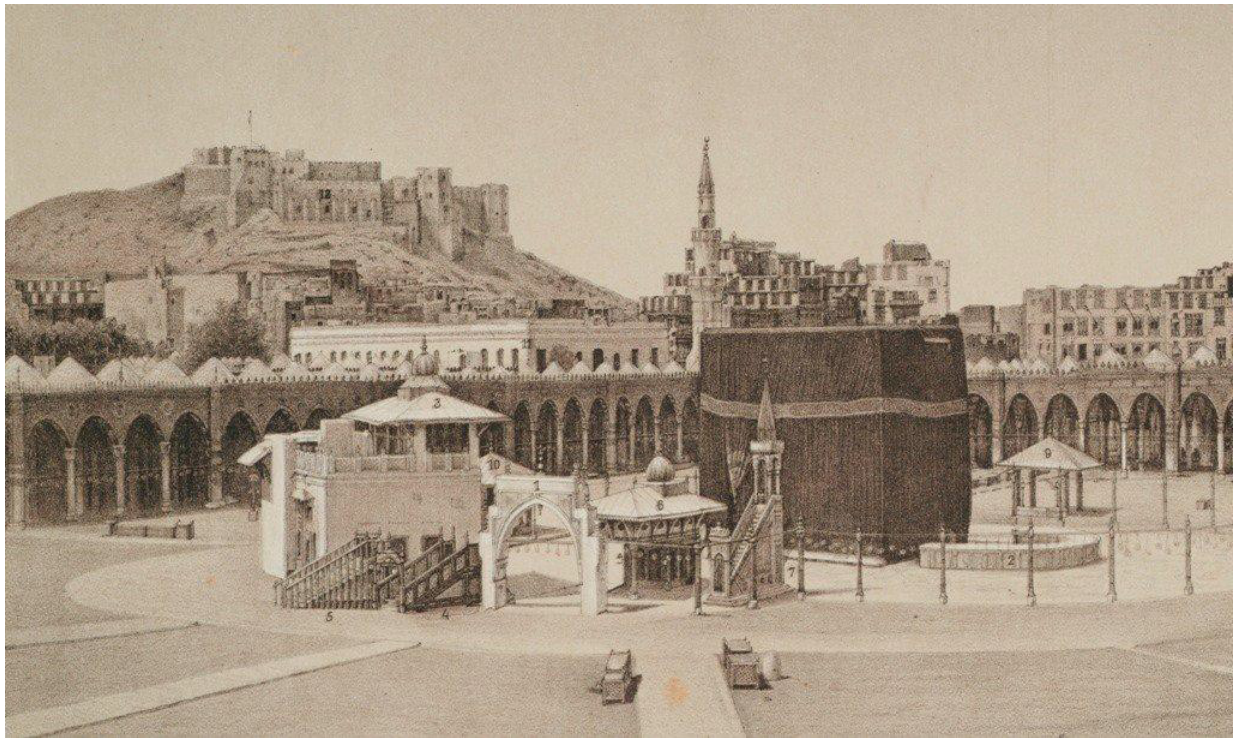


Fig. 2: View of the Masjid al-Haram with the Kaaba in the foreground and the Ajjad Fortress visible on the hill above, Mecca, ca. late 19th century. Historical photograph.

vocabulary for external consumption, the production of cultural identity as aesthetic performance, the instrumentalization of heritage as brand.¹⁰10 What Said describes is exactly what we see happening in Mecca, yet it is not only meant for a Western audience, but for a global one which includes the muslim world, it is the rewriting of the visual narrative of Islam.

The primary audience for Mecca's built environment is not a Western observer but the global Muslim

community, the Ummah, alongside the international development and investment community that finances Gulf real estate. The image being produced is not 'the Orient' for the West, but 'Islamic modernity' for multiple simultaneous audiences: the devout pilgrim, the Gulf investor, the international media, and the Saudi state's own domestic legitimization project.

This project is transforming Mecca, the city is not about the pilgrim anymore. The tower is a signal to global capital, but it also speaks inward, reinforcing the Saudi state's legitimacy at home. Islam is open for business, Mecca is a stable open market with a long term sustainable and renewable source of revenue: the pilgrims, they are now only part of a larger system and the city has been built around extracting value out of their faith.

10 - Sandy Isenstadt and Kishwar Rizvi, "Modern Architecture and the Middle East: The Burden of Representation," in *Modernism and the Middle East: Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Sandy Isenstadt and Kishwar Rizvi (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 10.

The outcome of such an interconnection of the audiences becomes that of what can be termed a “recursive image,” that is, nothing more than a simple representation of what is sacred but needs the sacred to survive, which depends upon the significance of the Kaaba and the pilgrimages of Hajj. The Abraj Al-Bait does not replace the sacred; it feeds on it. This is, perhaps, the most precise diagnosis of what has occurred in Mecca: not the corruption of the holy, but its instrumentalization; a process in which the sacred remains the sacred, precisely because it must, and in which everything built around it captures the surplus value of that necessity.¹¹

Any analysis of what has been built in Mecca must contend with what was destroyed to build it. The redevelopment of the area around the Grand Mosque has involved the systematic demolition of the historic urban fabric of Mecca — Ottoman-era structures, early Islamic sites, the built record of more than a millennium of the city’s history. The Ajyad Fortress (Fig. 2), an Ottoman castle built in the late eighteenth century on a hill directly overlooking the mosque, was demolished in 2002 to make way for the Abraj Al-Bait complex. The demolition prompted a formal protest from the Turkish government and condemnation from UNESCO. The Saudi authorities proceeded regardless.

This is not incidental to the analysis — it is constitutive of it. The production of a new sacred urbanism in Mecca has required the erasure of the physical memory of prior sacred urbanisms. The Wahhabi theological tradition that informs Saudi state policy has been hostile to the veneration of historical sites on the grounds that such veneration constitutes a form of idolatry, a position that has provided doctrinal cover for a program of demolition that also happens to serve the interests of real estate development. Theology and capital have found, in Mecca, a rare and convenient alignment.¹² Ironically, the Abraj Al-Bait has achieved what the Saudi state used as

an excuse to justify the demolition of historical sites. The clock tower is now the most circulated image of Mecca, a symbol so dominant it has effectively replaced the Kaaba in the global visual imagination of the city.

The need for space is understandable — Hajj operates at a scale few cities in the world have ever had to absorb. But the demolition of Mecca’s historical fabric was not an inevitability, it was a choice. Other cities have expanded capacity while preserving historical layers. What was erased here was not just old buildings — it was the physical record of how Muslims across fourteen centuries understood and built their faith. That cannot be reconstructed.

The destruction of the Ottoman heritage brings forth another issue of whose Mecca is being created. For centuries, the Ottoman Empire had been the custodian of the holy places, a custodianship which the modern state of Saudi Arabia has taken upon itself since 1924. The erasure of Ottoman architectural presence is, in this reading, not merely a matter of urban renewal but of political historiography: the built environment is being edited and curated to tell a particular story about who has always belonged at the center of Islam.

This paper discussed a few overlapping logics at work in the redevelopment of Mecca: the logic of corporatization, the logic of spectacle, and the logic of representation. The set of circumstances derived from these logics reinforce each other, and they are what makes Mecca one of the most interesting and clear cases of this phenomenon in the Arab world; the transformation of sacred or historical space into an instrument of capital and state power, like in the case of Beirut, where a state-backed private developer, Solidere, was granted power to demolish and redevelop a historically significant urban center, with modernization and public benefit as the justification, and capital accumulation as the outcome.

Beyond the question of how it was done, there is the question of whether what has been produced constitutes a ‘new model of sacred urbanism’. The term ‘model’ implies replicability, and Mecca’s conditions are, in certain respects, unique: no other city commands an

11 - Sardar, *Mecca: The Sacred City*, 305.

12 - Stefan Maneval, “Navigating Urban Space: Jeddah, Early Twenty-First Century,” in *New Islamic Urbanism: The Architecture of Public and Private Space in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia* (London: UCL Press, 2019), 86.

obligatory pilgrimage from approximately 1.8 billion potential visitors. But the structural logic, using religious or cultural gravity as the anchor for large-scale capital investment and luxury development, and using image production to naturalize that investment, is already visible in other contexts: in the redevelopment of Medina, in the mega-projects of Riyadh's Vision 2030, and, in a different register, in the heritage-branding of cities like Dubai and Doha.¹³

What makes Mecca distinct, and what gives this case its peculiar critical charge, is the nature of the raw material being developed. In Beirut, Solidere built on the ruins of war.¹⁴ In Dubai, the desert was a blank slate. In Mecca, the raw material is faith itself, the accumulated spiritual significance of a site that has been the center of Islamic devotion for fourteen centuries. The Abraj Al-Bait monetizes it. And in doing so, it poses a question of morality: at what point does the development of a sacred site cause the sacred to become a commodity?

Mecca is not an exception in the Arab urban landscape, it is probably its most extreme expression. The logic of sacred or cultural gravity converted into capital investment, and image production used to naturalize that conversion, is already spreading across the region. And if the Arab city is a lens through which to examine broader questions of modernity, capital, and representation, then Mecca's redevelopment offers an unusually sharp focal point: a place where the political and cultural consequences of redevelopment are clearly visible.

13 - Yasser Elsheshtawy, "Real Estate Speculation and Transnational Development in Dubai," in *The New Arab Urban: Gulf Cities of Wealth, Ambition and Distress*, ed. Harvey Molotch and Davide Ponzini (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 237.

14 - Saree Makdisi, "Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidere," *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1997): 661.

Bibliography

Alraouf, Ali. "Phantasmagoric Urbanism: Exploiting the Culture of Image in Post-Revolutionary Cairo." *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 31, no. 1 (Fall 2019): 71–86.

Andraos, Amale. "Problematizing a Regional Context: Representation in Arab and Gulf Cities." In *The New Arab Urban: Gulf Cities of Wealth, Ambition and Distress*, edited by Harvey Molotch and Davide Ponzini. New York: New York University Press, 2017.

Elshehtawy, Yasser. "Real Estate Speculation and Transnational Development in Dubai." In *The New Arab Urban: Gulf Cities of Wealth, Ambition and Distress*, edited by Harvey Molotch and Davide Ponzini. New York: New York University Press, 2017.

Isenstadt, Sandy, and Kishwar Rizvi. "Modern Architecture and the Middle East: The Burden of Representation." In *Modernism and the Middle East: Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Sandy Isenstadt and Kishwar Rizvi. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008.

Kanna, Ahmed. *The City as Corporation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

Makdisi, Saree. "Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidere." *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1997): 660–705.

Maneval, Stefan. "Navigating Urban Space: Jeddah, Early Twenty-First Century." In *New Islamic Urbanism: The Architecture of Public and Private Space in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia*. London: UCL Press, 2019.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, 1979.

Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995. Originally published 1967.

Sardar, Ziauddin. *Mecca: The Sacred City*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.



The Nahda as a Spatial Project: Architectures of Modernization and the Unfulfilled Destiny of Arab Cities, 1805–1918

Gonzalo Caceres Valcarcel ¹

¹ GSAPP, Columbia University, NY, United States, gc3139@columbia.edu

Abstract

The Nahda, most often narrated as an Arab literary and intellectual awakening of the long nineteenth century, was simultaneously a spatial project that reshaped the urban form of cities such as Cairo, Alexandria, and Beirut. Under the umbrella of Ottoman Tanzimat reforms and the autonomous ambitions of Muhammad Ali Pasha (1805–1848), new architectural typologies, military barracks and academies, polytechnic and medical schools, saraya (administrative palaces), public sabils, and printing houses were erected as instruments of state-building and modernization.

This essay argues that this spatial Nahda was, on its own narrow terms, a failed program: many of its institutions were built atop what Hasneli, Meirison, and Muhammadi (2024) call an “inverted pyramid” that collapsed once the geopolitical conditions sustaining it dissolved, first after the 1841 Treaty of London and definitively after the dismantling of the Ottoman order at the end of the First World War. Nevertheless, as Samir Kassir (2006) and Georges Corm (2020) urge, the Nahda succeeded as cultural infrastructure: typologies, ideas, and habits of progress that outlived the dismantling of their original programs and were reabsorbed, often in westernized form, by the cities that inherited them.

Introduction

For most of the twentieth century, the Nahda, literally “awakening”, was discussed as a phenomenon of pen and press: of dictionaries, novels, journals, and translation. Tarek El-Ariss (2018) describes the conventional narrative as a story of “novellas, plays, poems, letters, newspaper and journal ads, and linguistic and philosophical essays,” all framed by a “desire for modernity” that pulled Arab thought toward Europe. Yet that narrative, however accurate for the world of letters, shadows the fact that Nahda was also a *project of infrastructure*: it built things. The same nineteenth-century elites who funded printing presses and dispatched scholarship students to Paris also commissioned new architectural typologies, military schools, faculties of medicine, polytechnics, saraya, sabils, public hospitals, agricultural stations, and translation bureaus, that were unprecedented

in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. These buildings reshaped the urban form of Cairo, Alexandria, and Beirut, creating a modern spatial fabric whose persistence and decay form the subject of this essay.

Two interpretive frames compete for the meaning of this fabric. The dominant nationalist reading, summarized by Kassir (2006), holds that the Nahda “failed” because the Arab nation it gestured toward never fully became an independent political movement after the First World War. By that measure the Nahda’s buildings, many of them designed for an Arab empire that did not survive, are monuments to an unfulfilled plan. A second reading, advanced by Kassir himself and elaborated by Corm (2020), insists that the Nahda was less a program than an attitude, a “spirit of regeneration” that diffused through Arab modernity and outlived the political order of its origin. By that measure, the Nahda’s buildings were

not failed promises but seedbeds, blueprints onto which later, often influenced by the west, programs were designed and built.

This essay tries to study that tension. It argues that the Nahda was perhaps a inconclusive program, its institutions, like its army, were built on the temporary foundations, and many lost their original footing once Muhammad Ali's expansionist plan was suppressed by the European powers, but that it was, simultaneously, a successful infrastructure: it inscribed new typologies into Arab cities that survived the collapse of the regimes that built them and were reactivated, frequently with a Western face, in the colonial and post-colonial decades. The verdict on the Nahda, in other words, depends on whether one judges programs or sediments.

The essay proceeds in four chronological movements. The first reconstructs Muhammad Ali's "state at the service of military force" as a *spatial* logic, tracing the typologies erected between 1805 and 1841. The second traces the Nahda's diffusion to Beirut, where it acquired a pluricentric, missionary, and bourgeois character distinct from Cairo's centralized program. The third examines the collapse: how the Treaty of London in 1841 initiated, and the post-WWI settlement consummated the abandonment of these typologies. The fourth asks what happened to the buildings themselves and proposes that their westernization is precisely what allows us to read the Nahda as both failed program and persistent cultural form.

The State at the Service of Military Force: Cairo as Spatial Laboratory

Hasneli, Meirison, and Muhammadi (2024) capture the structural logic of Muhammad Ali's modernization in a single phrase that doubles as a building program: "the state at the service of the military force." For them, this is the only motto that even Muhammad Ali's defenders cannot deny. Every architectural and educational decision the Pasha made was downstream of his expansionist ambition, to detach Egypt from Istanbul's orbit and

turn Cairo into the seat of a new Arab empire that could rival Britain, France, and Russia. The buildings he commissioned were not, on his own terms, civic infrastructure; they were instruments of war.

Kassir (2006) corroborates this reading from a wider angle: Muhammad Ali, "nominally the Ottoman governor but in practice an autonomous head of state," set about modernizing the administration, sending scholars to be educated in France, rationalizing agriculture, and instigating a preliminary phase of industrialization. The instruments of this modernization were typological. Between 1827 and 1840, an entire vocabulary of new buildings appeared in Cairo and its hinterland: the Faculty of Medicine at Abi Zaabal, the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine at Rashid, the agricultural schools at Shubra al-Khaima and Nabaruh, the School of Metals, the Bulaq Polytechnic, modeled on the École Polytechnique in Paris, the School of Engineers at al-Qanatir al-Khairiya, the Translation School, the Arts and Crafts School, and the School of Administrative Law, alongside dedicated military academies for staff officers, infantry, cavalry, and artillery (Hasneli, Meirison, & Muhammadi, 2024). About ten thousand students moved through these institutions. Roughly sixty-six new primary schools, forty in Lower Egypt, twenty-six in Upper Egypt, fed them.

This program was carried out in a recognizable *Tanzimat* way. Quoting Kassir (2006), "*all the advantages of technological civilization, railway, telegraph, electrification, steam navigation, were adopted east of the Mediterranean pretty much at the same time as they were in the north*". The new schools and barracks were not Mamluk in plan or section. They were quasi-French, designed by missions of European experts (largely French) recruited as teaching staff, with attached language wings, a French school annexed to the medical college, for instance, that announced their pedagogical descent. AlSayyad's (2011) history of Cairo, cited by Hasneli et al., catalogues the way these typologies began to colonize the area between Bulaq and Azbakiyya, displacing the older, mosque and madrasa area that Al-Azhar had anchored.

This was, however, an "inverted pyramid." Hasneli, Meirison, and Muhammadi (2024) borrow the term to de-

scribe Muhammad Ali's pedagogical strategy, beginning at the top of the educational structure (military academies, faculties of medicine) and only later attempting to build the primary schools that should have fed them. The same description fits the spatial program. Cairo acquired the *visible* apex of a modern state's architectural typology, polytechnic, medical school, palace, printing house, without the broad civic substrate of literate urban life that, in European cities, had grown those typologies organically over decades. The buildings were ahead of the society they were meant to serve. This is the structural fragility that doomed them once the political weather changed.

A small but telling case is the Bulaq Press, founded in the early 1820s. Bustani treats it as the most distinguished of the Arabic presses then, praising the volume of its original Arabic works and translations and the discipline of its translators in resisting foreign terms when rendering European languages (Bustani, in El-Ariss, 2018). The press did not exist for letters as such; it existed because

Muhammad Ali needed manuals, military regulations, treatises on artillery, and French-Arabic dictionaries. Even its civic byproduct, modern Arabic prose, was the unintended outcome of a barracks-supply program.

The Beirut Mirror: A Pluricentric Spatial Nahda

If Cairo's Nahda was concentrated in a single dynastic hand, Beirut's was diffuse. The Nahda reached Beirut in the second third of the nineteenth century and acquired a markedly different architecture, one that Kassir (2006) attributes to the city's networked relationship with the broader Mediterranean, Bustani's effort to modernize the Arabic language through dictionaries and encyclopedias; the Bible translation undertaken by Bustani and al-Shidyaq; the coexistence of Maronite, Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Protestant, and Jesuit institutions, none of which would tolerate exclusion from urban space.



Figure 1 The Amiri Press building in Bulaq, 1820

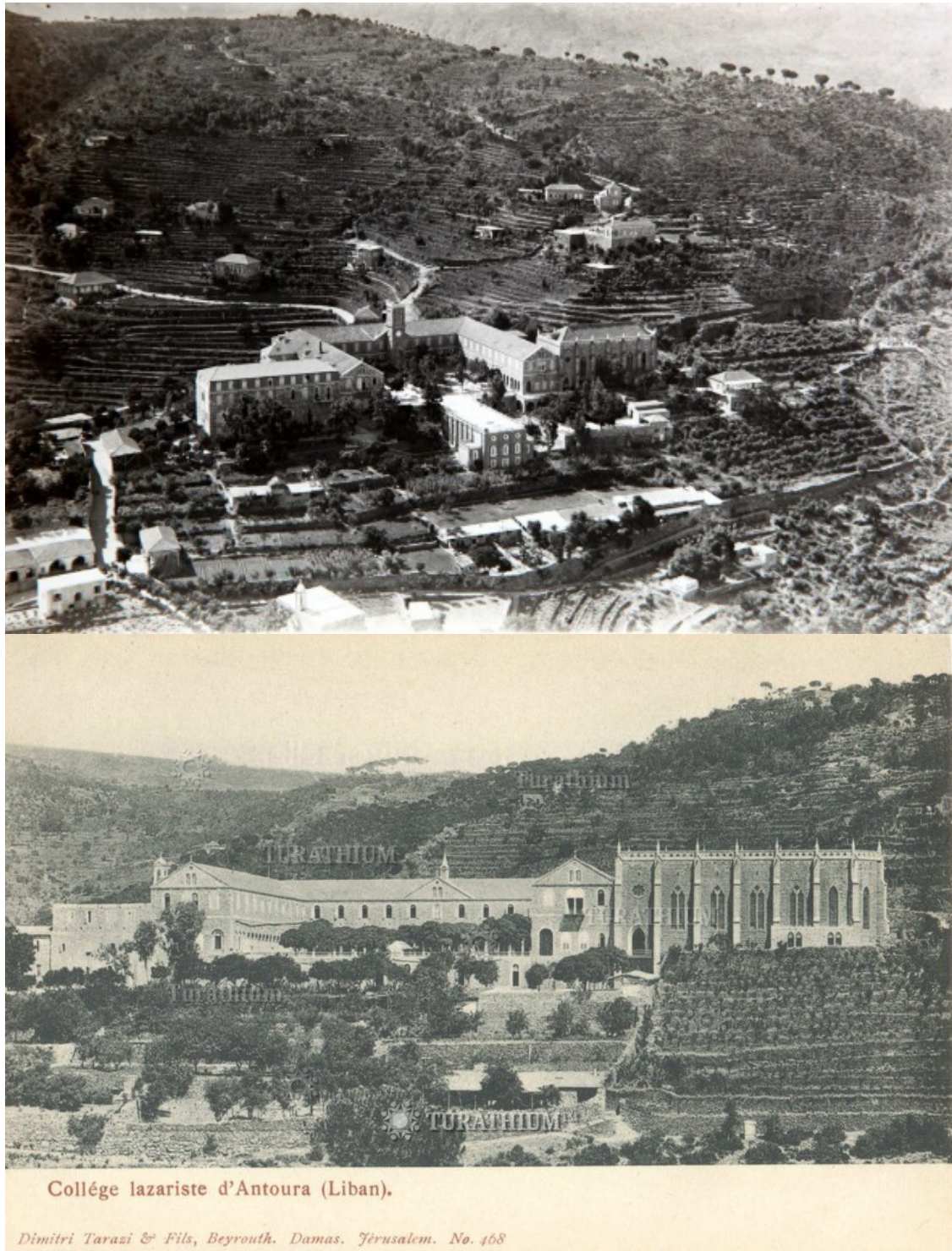


Figure 2 Lazarit School, Beirut, 1930

In Bustani's own catalogue (El-Ariss, 2018), he enumerates the schools that re-shaped Beirut and its surroundings: the school for boys at 'Ayn Waraqa, founded by Bishop Yusuf Istifan; the schools founded by the Sfair and Assaf families in converted convent buildings; the secondary schools of the Greek Catholic community at al-Moukhalles and 'Ain Traz; the Syriac Catholic school in al-Sharfah; the Armenian school; the school of the Lazarite monks in Antoura (Figure 2); the American school in 'Abey; the Jesuit school in Ghazir. Bustani positions these against Muhammad Ali's Bulaq school as "the most renowned" Muslim institution. Architecturally, all of these typologies, convents converted to schools, new pedagogical wings added to old monasteries, libraries with iron doors, were shaped by the ideas of the Nahda, even if the original structures existed before Muhammad Ali's reforms. They were the visible spatial form of what Kassir (2006) calls the new socialization, "encouraged by a range of associations and the emergence of a highly diversified press."

Beirut's Nahda, in other words, was missionary and bourgeois rather than military and dynastic. Its building infrastructure was comprised by sectarian schools, journal offices (al-Khuri's *Hadiqat al-Akhbar* office, by Bustani's account), printing houses, scholarly societies, and the residential serail typology that Tahtawi had described after Paris. Tahtawi's *An Imam in Paris* (1834) had given Arabic readers their first systematic typology of European urban form: ordinary houses, residences for "elite families" and château for royalty, organized by whether or not they had a gatekeeper, courtyard, or carriage gate (al-Tahtawi, in Newman, 2011). It is hard to read the late-nineteenth-century Beiruti merchant villa, with its central hall, gated forecourt, and reception floor, without hearing Tahtawi in the background.

The Nahda's spatial achievement, then, is plural. Cairo's was the centralized program of an aspiring empire. Beirut's was the distributed program of a missionary and merchant city. Both reorganized urban form around new typologies, the school, the press, the dispensary,



Figure 3 The Grand Serail, Beirut, 1840

the journal office, the bourgeois townhouse, and both belonged to what Kassir (2006) names the underlying revolution “in transport and the urban landscape” that the Tanzimat brought to “the large urban centers of the Arab provinces.”

The Beginning of the Collapse: From the Treaty of London to the End of the Empire

The fragility of the inverted pyramid showed first in Cairo. Hasneli, Meirison, and Muhammadi (2024) date the beginning of the collapse to the 1830s, when Muhammad Ali’s campaigns in the Levant exhausted the country’s economic and human resources. Students were withdrawn from medical and engineering schools to fill the ranks of a Levantine war that ended badly. The 1841 Treaty of London, imposed by an alliance of Russia, Austria, Prussia, England, and the Ottoman Empire, forced the Pasha to reduce his army from somewhere between 250,000 and 300,000 soldiers to no more than 18,000.

The architectural consequence was immediate. The doors of the naval factories were closed and the armories were shut; many military officers were laid off; “all forms of Education and their branches” stagnated and disappeared. The buildings remained, but their programs evaporated. A polytechnic exists *in order to* train engineers for the army. A military academy exists *in order to*

graduate staff officers. When the army that was their *core purpose* was reduced by an order of magnitude, these typologies became *vestigial*, still present but functionless.

The collapse was thus not a destruction but an emptying. The buildings, in Kassir’s (2006) formulation, were “*thwarted*”. This is a critical distinction for any architectural history of the Nahda. The fabric of Cairo’s modernization was not erased after 184, it was abandoned in place, often re-occupied for purposes its original architects had not imagined. Some of these structures were re-programmed under the Khedives, particularly Ismail (r. 1863–1879), but as Kassir notes, the dynastic continuation tended to direct itself toward Westernization rather than the imperial-Islamic project Muhammad Ali had envisioned. Al-Tahtawi himself, returning from Paris, championed an education for women that “began to bear fruit in the Ismail era” (Hasneli, Meirison, & Muhammadi, 2024), a domestic-modernist program that was Western in form even when its rhetoric was patriotic.

One legible example of all these changes was the Qasr al-Aini, located on the Nile shore in central Cairo. Originally a Mamluk palace built in 1466 by Ahmad Ibn al-Aini, the structure was reused as a French military hospital during Bonaparte’s occupation, repurposed by Muhammad Ali in 1825 as a preparatory school and converted in 1837 into the new home of the Medical School and military hospital (AlSayyad, 2011).



Figure 4 Mamluk palace, Qasr al-Aini, 1466

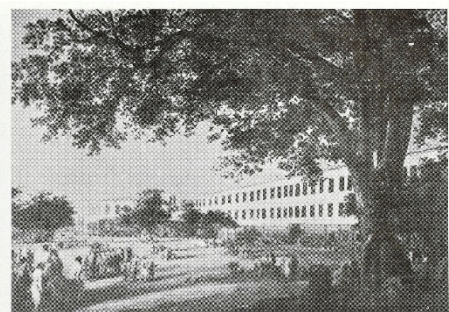


Fig. 10
Military Hospital of Qasr al-Aini, organized in 1837 after the
evacuation of the Hospital of Abou-Zabel.

Figure 5 Military Hospital, Qasr al-Aini, 1837

The deeper collapse came later, with the dissolution of the Ottoman political order at the end of the First World War. Kassir (2006) draws the line precisely: the Nahda “as a historical moment and expression of nationalism” was “undoubtedly over by the end of the First World War” even if it lived on as an attitude. The post-war settlement, the British protectorate over Egypt, the French Mandate over Lebanon and Syria, the British Mandate over Iraq and Palestine, converted the Tanzimat city into a colonial city. Cairo’s polytechnics and medical schools, where they survived, were absorbed into a British colonial educational architecture; Beirut’s missionary schools were absorbed into a French Mandate cultural strategy. As Kassir puts it, “between the wars, modernization meant westernization more than ever”.

The buildings, in other words, lost their second destiny as well. They had been built for an Arab empire that the Treaty of London suppressed, and then re-inhabited within an Tanzimat order that the post-WWI dismantled. The double abandonment is what gives the Nahda its melancholic quality in retrospective architectural history.

Buildings without Destiny: Westernization, Reprogramming, and the Survival of the Type

This is also where the narrative of failure becomes insufficient, as many of these buildings continued to exist and were *re-programmed*. The medical school at Qasr

al-Aini, the polytechnic at Bulaq, the Al-Alsun translation bureau, and the engineering school at al-Qanatir all entered the twentieth century as Egyptian institutions even as their imperial parent vanished. They tended, however, to do so under a markedly Western architectural and curricular face. Where Muhammad Ali had recruited French and Italian instructors to staff Egyptian institutions, the post 1882 British administration recruited British administrators (Lord Cromer, most famously) to oversee an “*education limited*”, to borrow Maman and Falah’s (2018) phrase, which Hasneli, Meirison, and Muhammadi (2024) cite, that explicitly sought to make Egyptian higher education non-threatening to colonial interests.

The shift was visible in the urban fabric. The Cairo of Khedive Ismail, boulevards, opera house, hotel typologies, French-style apartment blocks, was decisively Haussmannian. Its grammar was European. Underneath this westernized urban language remained the earlier Tanzimat framework introduced by Muhammad Ali: the typological commitment to school, hospital, press, polytechnic, and military academy as legitimate and necessary urban categories. What the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did was *re-style* these typologies in a Western architectural idiom while preserving their programmatic identities. The original “Arab” face of the Nahda, what Behrens-Abouseif (2006), in a passage Hasneli et al. cite, calls the visual transformation under Muhammad Ali, was overwritten, but it was not erased.



Figure 6 Faculty of Medicine, Qasr al-Aini, 1925



Figure 7, New Teaching Hospital, Qasr al-Aini 1984

This pattern is the strongest argument for treating the Nahda as a successful infrastructure even as its programs failed. Corm (2020) makes the point at the level of ideas: he argues that the Arab renaissance “*has been completely erased from memory*” but he also insists that we are still *living within its consequences*, its transformed political language, its religious reform, its feminist movement. The same is true at the level of stones. Cairo and Beirut are still organized around typologies the Nahda introduced. The concept of the public school, the polytechnic, the printing house, the dispensary, the boulevard, the modern administrative palace, none of these typologies existed before Muhammad Ali. All of them are now constitutive of the Arab urban fabric and part of the Nahda’s architectural legacy.

What was *lost* was the political program that animated these typologies. The school as instrument of dynastic empire, the polytechnic as supplier of military engineers, the printing house as servant of an imperial bureaucracy, these specific destinies were not realized. The buildings persisted, but as orphans. And here Kassir’s (2006) verdict is the precise one: the Nahda’s nationalist dreams were undermined, but to dismiss the renaissance on those grounds is “*a pretext for present failings*”.

Conclusion

The question this essay began with: was the Nahda a failed or successful program? cannot have a single answer because the question operates on two scales. As a *program*, the spatial Nahda failed. The military academies, polytechnics, and translation bureaus that Muhammad Ali commissioned in Cairo, and the missionary schools and printing houses that Bustani catalogued in Beirut, were built for an imperial Arab future that the Treaty of London (1841) suppressed and the post-WWI settlement abolished. Their original destinies were not fulfilled, many were reduced to husks, others were reinhabited under colonial and Western curricular regimes that bore little resemblance to Muhammad Ali’s Islamic-imperial vision or to Bustani’s Beirut civic patriotism. As Hasneli, Meirison, and Muhammadi (2024) put it, the

educational system “*with which he concluded his reign collapsed*” and so, by extension, did the spatial system.

As an *infrastructure*, however, the spatial Nahda succeeded. It introduced typologies, school, polytechnic, press, sabils, sarayas, dispensary, journal office, boulevard, serails, that colonized the urban imagination of the Arab city and survived the dismantling of the regimes that built them. It produced a public culture that outlived the militarism it was originally meant to feed. The buildings westernized, but the typologies remained Arab. This is what allows Kassir (2006) to insist that the Nahda was “*an attitude*” and Corm (2020) to lament its erasure from memory while documenting its continuing effects.

The architectural Nahda, then, is best understood as a project that was *thwarted but not erased*. Its monuments stand in Cairo and Beirut as layered urban fabrics, sometimes Western on the outside, Tanzimat in plan, Ottoman in bones, and the difficulty of reading them today is itself a clue to the double layered modernity the Nahda inaugurated. To call the Nahda a failure is to mistake the absence of an Arab empire for the absence of an Arab modernity. To call it an unqualified success is to overlook the buildings whose original programs were drained of meaning by the geopolitics of 1841 and 1918. The honest verdict is that the Nahda built more than its political moment could sustain, and that what survived is the architectural type, not the program: an infrastructure waiting, as it were, for a politics adequate to it.

References

AlSayyad, N. (2011). *Cairo: Histories of a city*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Behrens-Abouseif, D. (2006). The visual transformation of Egypt during the reign of Muhammad 'Ali. In *Islamic art in the 19th century* (pp. 109–129). Brill.

Corm, G. (2020). *Arab political thought: Past and present* (P. Phillips-Batoma & A. T. Batoma, Trans.). London: Hurst.

El-Ariss, T. (Ed.). (2018). *The Arab renaissance: A bilingual anthology of the Nahda*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America.

Hasneli, Meirison, & Muhammadi, Q. (2024). Educational renewal during Muhammad Ali period and its impact on the Al-Azhar educational institution. *Tafkir: Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Education*, 5(1), 27–40.

Kassir, S. (2006). *Being Arab*. London: Verso.

Maman, Y., & Falah, J. F. (2018). "Education Ltd."—The influence of British Earl of Cromer on the education system in Egypt (1883–1907). *Advances in Historical Studies*, 7(2), 79–96.

al-Tahtawi, R. R. (2011). *An imam in Paris: Account of a stay in France by an Egyptian cleric (1826–1831)* (D. L. Newman, Trans. & Ed.). London: Saqi.

AlSayyad, N. (2011). *Cairo: Histories of a city*. Belknap Press

