



complex projects



2021

COMPLEX PROJECTS

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Beirut Studio
Suburbs

RESEARCH PLAN

01

INDEX

01 INTRODUCTION	008
1.1. Cultural foundations	
1.2. The cultural situation in Beirut	
02 PROGRAM RESEARCH	012
2.1. Defining the program	
2.2. The Urban Winery Typology	
03 RESEARCH QUESTION	016
3.1. Research question	
3.2. Reflective methodology	
04 CONCLUSION	017
4.1. Reflection on relevance to grad.	

The urban winery: reintegrating fundamental cultural and agricultural practices into the urban fabric

1. Introduction

1.1. The land and its produce: cultural foundations and their development

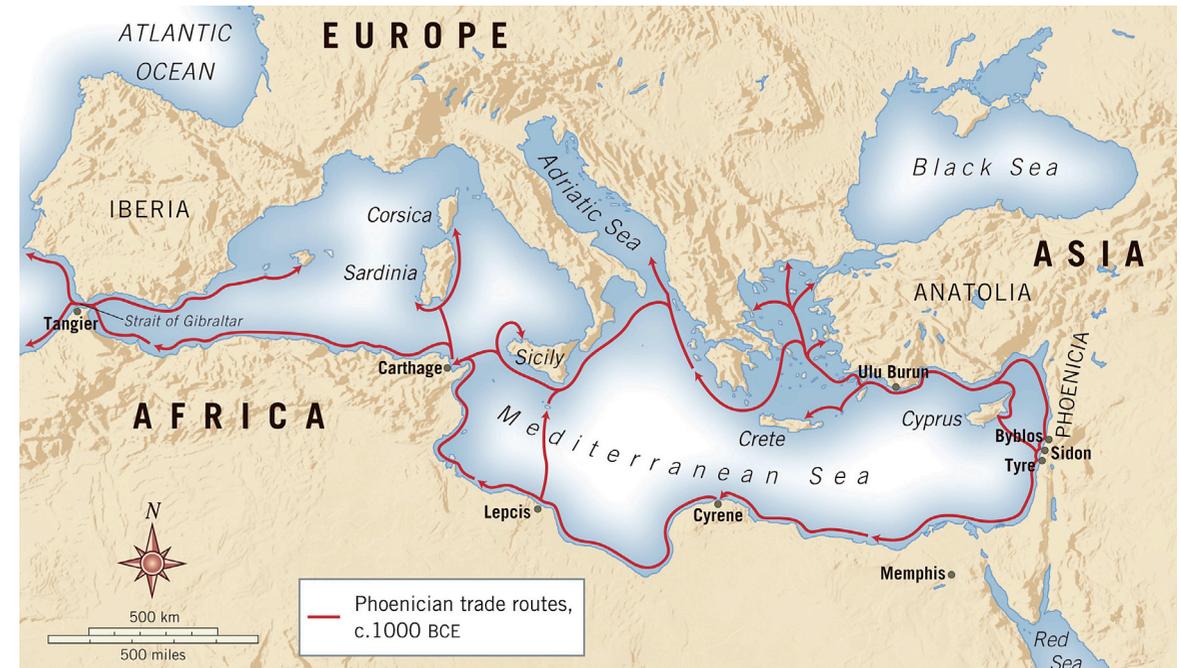
“Is the description of Paradise, which the righteous are promised, wherein are rivers of water unaltered, rivers of milk the taste of which never changes, rivers of wine delicious to those who drink, and rivers of purified honey, in which they will have from all fruits and forgiveness from their Lord...”
(Qur’an, 47:15)

Within sacred scripture, studies of the history of ancient civilisations, and in the comprehension of today’s societies; the natural land and its produce are often held with high esteem and depict an image of profundity and wealth. In the present situation cities have multiplied, densified and expanded further into the extents of natural land, and created rifts between urban and natural ecologies. This has led to a greater need for excursions to the countryside but also removed people from the processes unfolding upon their natural land. Consequently it amputates an important part of cultural practices and reduces our understanding and appreciation of the land and its specificities. These were once the foundations for ancestral cultural rituals and practices, and essentially the starting points from which present societies developed from.

In the context of Lebanon, with specific focus on Beirut, there is a strong deviation away from anything to do with the civilisation which dominated the Mediterranean shores around 5000 B.C. Still renown today as the “ancient middlemen of culture”, (Mark, 2021) the Phoenicians became masters of their territory through a refined understanding and utilisation of the land and the sea. Their skills in shipbuilding and navigation allowed them to travel but their rich lands and innovations in agriculture gave them many valuable exports which helped strengthen their civilisation.

This understanding, use, and ultimately capitalisation upon their geographic location and the resultant environment, established a society with an advanced governance, and in parallel also developed a rare cultural richness. Today the Phoenicians are seen as innovators for commerce and trade, and their influence has been detrimental to the development of a majority of the Mediterranean countries.

Yet Lebanon has been through an abundance of transformations and transfigurations since then, and the country has undermined the potential it once exploited. Even more recently, Lebanon was still seen as the crossroads between Europe and the Middle East, as vibrant centre for cultural goods. But instead, today, “the image people have of Lebanon is of an arid, war-torn region,” (Bilyeu & Beeman, 2017) and the country keeps having to deal with a series of crises which make the situation appear increasingly catastrophic. Politically, economically, and socially there is a large unrest and the double explosion of August 4th has only furthered the severity of the consequences. Many parts of the city still lay in a state of chaos at the present moment.



01. Phoenician trade routes and influence



02. Port area Beirut October 2021

1.2. The cultural situation in Beirut

The consequences this is having on Beirut and its inhabitants is manifold, and makes governance and rebuilding an even more difficult task. The city is tremendously low on funds, and with basic needs such as fuel and food being worryingly scarce, one questions what will happen to other, seemingly less essential parts of city life. In light of this I will be focusing on specifically this undermined part of the urban realm, more particularly the cultural sphere, which I personally view as an essential actor in the development of society.

The greatest problem in this regard has been present already long before the explosion, as it is a structural one which inherently hinders progress of the cultural department. The city was left in a vacuum state after the civil war, where the majority of cultural and other institutions had been destroyed, damaged, or closed as a result of the civil unrest. The since adopted fragmented government has been known to adopt a minimum standard culture, which still results from partisanship caused by, but also furthering, the divisions between the separate religious parties.

This has its effects down onto all of the ministries and seems to hinder significant progress. With regards to culture, the situation is worsened all the more as responsibilities are distributed further amongst other ministries; such as tourism, education, etc. and the Ministry of Finance even has final authority for the procurement of policies. Hence the national cultural policy is very weak in pushing the cultural sector, and even more disheartening is the detail that this slight push is in the direction of tourism, an economically more attractive department upon which 7% of Lebanon's GDP depends on (Agenda Culturel, 2016). Either way, the allocated cultural funds at 1.56% (2015) of the budget, indicate the lack of interest in the sector. Equally the surplus of funds from the gulf countries is also not allocated towards cultural projects. Any serious support is dependent on the civil society or the private sector, and this for a cultural sphere which had to restart from scratch in 1990.

INTRODUCTION

What this means for the present state is rather clear. Cultural production and events become less interesting on a national scale, and then in parallel also on an individual one. Recent extracts from the ministry of culture (Ministere de la Culture) show that only one tenth of the population is interested in cultural events. Less events and 'hype' curated by the country make it a difficult environment for interest to spread to those not inherently passionate. As a direct consequence the various forms of artists have no chance of surviving as there is no audience and no national or sufficient-private support. As they leave, so does the cultural production of the city, and ultimately the citizens lose their sphere of expression.

To make matter worse, due to the many crises there is a brain drain. Especially younger talent is very fast to leave, which brings about even greater concerns for the next generation. The prospect of Beirut is not looking very promising, and this is even affecting the more prioritised tourism sector. The current strategy does not work.

What is there which remains and offers hope for the once rich culture of Beirut? How is culture integrated into a social fabric devoid of artists and uninterested in current events? And what role can cultural buildings play in localities where there are barely any others around, let alone any active ones which have successfully integrated into urban life?

2. Program Research: the architecture of the vine

2.1. Defining the program through research

This complex cultural context has made it very difficult to select a building typology to brave the situation. Nevertheless it was decided that the focus shall be on something independent, linked to the lands and history, and accessible across social classes.

The site grounds are dry of cultural buildings, be it event spaces or buildings of archaeological or heritage value, and the varying isolated communities make it hard to assess rituals or common grounds. From a national level one can already understand that there is little going on that is furthering the cultural sector specifically, and the subject area confirms this lack of enthusiasm for the matter.

Yet a common success across Lebanon, benefitting from the warm Mediterranean climate, is agriculture. Irrespective of governance, the country is an agricultural gold mine. Diverse terroirs are found when going from the rocky or sandy coastlines up to the snow covered mountain tops, and all enjoy around three hundred days of sun a year. The sedimentary base makes the soil one of the most nutrient rich and rare ones found worldwide, and produces a highly flavourful harvest.



03. Selected Site

PROGRAM RESEARCH

One specific produce which takes on a very fine nuance being cultivated in this soil is the vine, and from this emerge the two most significant beverages tied in with the history and present state of the country; wine and arak. Made from Lebanese or French grapes, the two beverages are embedded with a long history, and play central figures in all Phoenician, Arabic, and ultimately Lebanese cultures. Today arak is Lebanon's national drink and wine one of the country's first (dating back to 5000 B.C.) and best agricultural exports together with "apples, honey and olive oil." (Anderson, 2014)

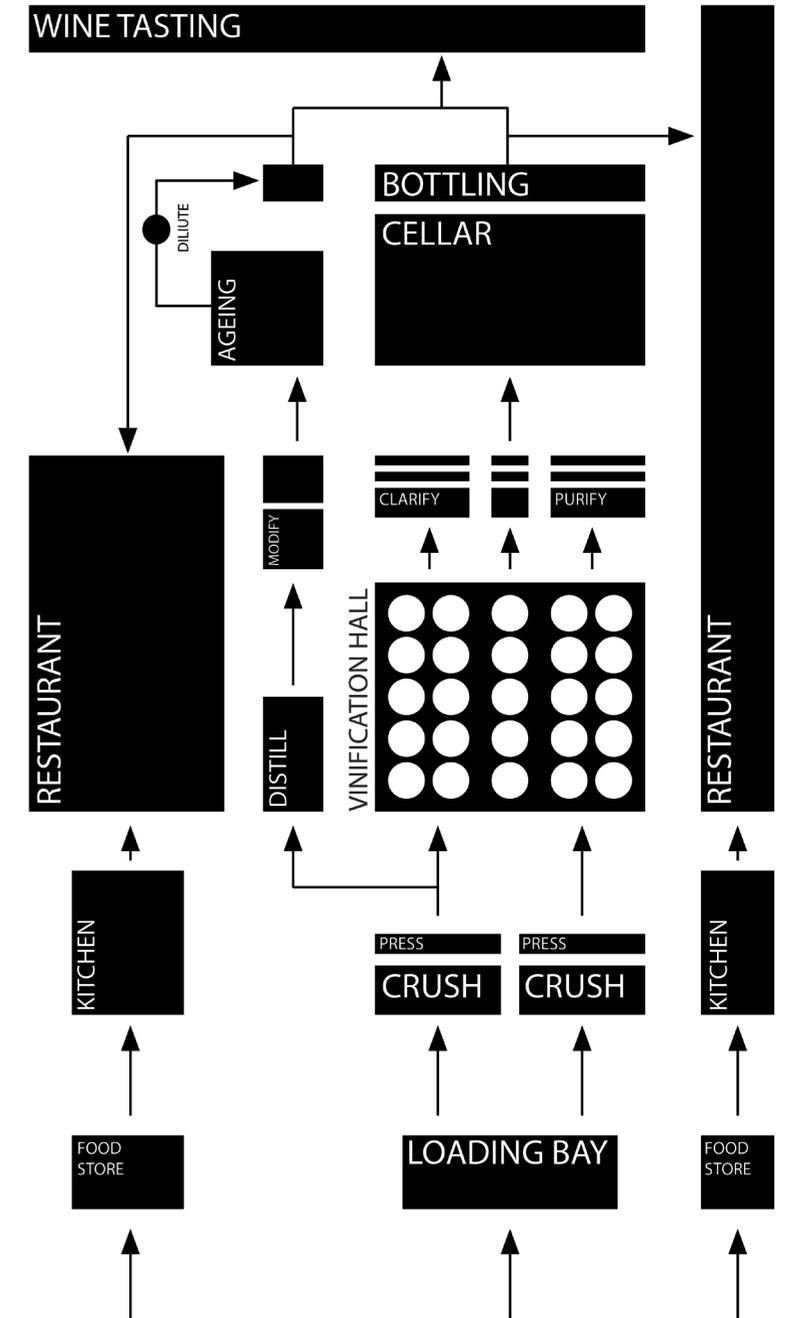
Despite the knowledge of the ancient trade of wine, there is little archaeological evidence found in Lebanon showcasing this reality as the coast was never thoroughly surveyed (Metcalf, 2021). Only a couple years ago the first Iron Age wine press discovered in Lebanon was found at the site of Tell el-Burak, along the coast nearby the city of Sidon (Eberhardt, 2020). Otherwise the closest reference, also only discovered very recently, was a square kilometre large Byzantine wine complex found to the south of Tel Aviv, in Israel (Israel Winery: 1,500-year-old Byzantine wine complex found 2021). Now there are a total of forty wineries, with the industry growing again since the end of the civil war, steadily expanding over the 30 years since.

The wineries in Lebanon are distributed across the five land regions, but Bekaa valley is the most prominent and Batroun the most exciting newcomer. Staple names are Chateau Ksara and Musar, situated in the land by their own vineyards as is commonplace to all wineries, with Musar even producing Arak within the same estate. The proposed project and bridge between the land and the city is to be formulated by an up and coming concept which sees the traditional winery migrate from the land to a more central urban environment.

2.2. The Urban Winery Typology

The main difference between a traditional and urban winery is that the grapes are imported from various farmers as opposed to being sourced from the vineyards on the nearby or same property. This brings the wine and arak-making process closer to the consumers because the grapes, as opposed to the wine, take on the longer journey. This also allows for a greater flexibility and diversity in terms of wine composition, and enables freedom of experimentation. In this respect the winery becomes both a point of production but all the more so a centre for consumption and celebration of the varying product extracted from the vine.

The winery will be informed by local and leading wineries, and the department focusing on arak will emphasise artisanal techniques all the more rigorously. Studies have indicated that it is commonplace for the logic of the building to follow a linear flow, assimilating the step by step development of the wine as it transposes from grape to bottle. This idea will be put to the test as the building is intertwined with the arak distillation process and restaurants and bars are to be integrated into pivotal locations. The main challenge will be to unfold the process of pressing, fermentation, clarification, ageing, and bottling whilst simultaneously establishing an urban ambassador for the agricultural produce. This is to manifest itself through references and events which establish a connection to the detached lands and the country's complicated history.



04. Winery and arak distillery program diagram

3. Research question and reflective methodology

3.1. Research question

How can a building complex, such as an urban winery, contribute to the narration and revival of cultural activity? And in what ways can produce from the land be utilised as driver for this?

3.2. Reflective methodology

The journey of grape based drinks, from the Phoenicians across the Mediterranean to the Arabs and then to the French and back to Lebanon, indirectly unfolds a substantial part of the history of the country and region. The task at hand is to tell this story through the architecture which processes the grape. The various stages in the process vary in telling ways from culture to culture and these differences need to be studied and utilised strategically in order to curate the experience. Starting from wineries in Lebanon, a comparison needs to be formulated between these varying examples themselves, as well as in comparison to French, ancient, and additional relevant references. Through this the typology will be thoroughly understood but also the varying nuances and their cultural implications.

The construct also requires qualities of a museum to be integrated within, whilst simultaneously needing to remain functional and eventful in order to establish an integral link with the community. For this reason the museum typology will be analysed once a clear and extensive understanding of the history has been devised. Successively I shall delve into the typologies and practices surrounding local bars and drinking culture, and restaurants and traditional dining practices which are so often coupled with wine or arak by those that do enjoy drink. Like this I would be able to understand trends and traditional practices which can help design meaningful but also simply more popular configurations.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Reflection on relevance to graduation project

The graduation studio revolves around the theme of catastrophe. The country is dealing with a political and economic collapse, and the selected suburban neighbourhood is short on history and a strong binding identity. In all cases there is little present to work with and build on. The task at hand appears to be the formation of new energy, new ties to the locality, and an improved building typology which adopts a multitude of facets in order to help sustain this complex urban life. Through the modification of the winery typology I can attempt to provide a combined architectural solution to these needs.

Without solving the problems the approach is to introduce new foundations which can gradually help people find their way back into a simpler way of living. Dealing with the critical topics of culture and place-making in a time where an increasing amount of cities globally are losing their personalities, holds value applicable throughout the architectural profession. Furthermore, the chosen topic and research to be expanded upon will allow me to improve my understanding of the correlations between varying cultures and architecture. It will help refine my execution of contextually driven designs and also emancipates a human-centric design approach. Concisely, the proposal takes a holistic approach I believe to be necessary when dealing with such delicate situations.

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