

# Abandoned Lebanon

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## Tripoli - طرابلس

The city is organised around the central Tripoli Citadel ; I found myself lost amidst a tangle of streets and alleyways, flanked by a wonderful mix of architectural styles, from the high-rises built the 1970s to the many beautiful 19th-century buildings. I will never forget the honking and whirring of cars, mixed with the sound of coffee peddlers clinking their porcelain cups together to advertise the rich brews that they carried in large copper kettles at their sides.



## Hammam Al-Nouri

The Hammam al-Nouri was built in 1333 at the behest of the Mamluk governor Nur El-Din, and is located close to the Grand Mosque. It is still in good condition, but with its façade covered with modern shops it is extremely difficult to find the entrance. The dressing rooms, and the warm room known as a “tepidarium”, were built on a smaller scale to other baths in the city. However, the hot water steam hall is large and is surrounded by a series of private bathing alcoves.

The interior is decorated with multi-coloured marble paving, basins, and fountains, and from the exterior there is a view of its cluster of domes, perforated with light holes and protruding blue and green glass roundels.

I discovered this beautiful hammam in March 2019. After walking in the pouring rain through neighbouring souks, I was uncertain of the building’s exact location. However, as I stopped to speak to Jade and check the map, out of nowhere I heard an English voice asking if I needed help.

A young family approached, and its head came forward to speak to me – he lived in north London but had grown up in Tripoli, and was bringing his wife and young son to the city to show them around. He was shocked to see two Brits in Tripoli talking about a disused hammam. The family then proceeded to walk us straight to the entrance, which turned out to be directly in front of us, and was just very well hidden. The bath entrance is also guarded by locals, so our friendly newly-found translator certainly helped us gain access.

The unique Hammam al-Nouri has been closed since the 1970s. Whilst it is clearly in need of restoration, I also feel that time and neglect have added a strange charm and raw beauty. It is a cave of history which tells a story of eight centuries of bustling humanity.



## Rachid Karami International Fair

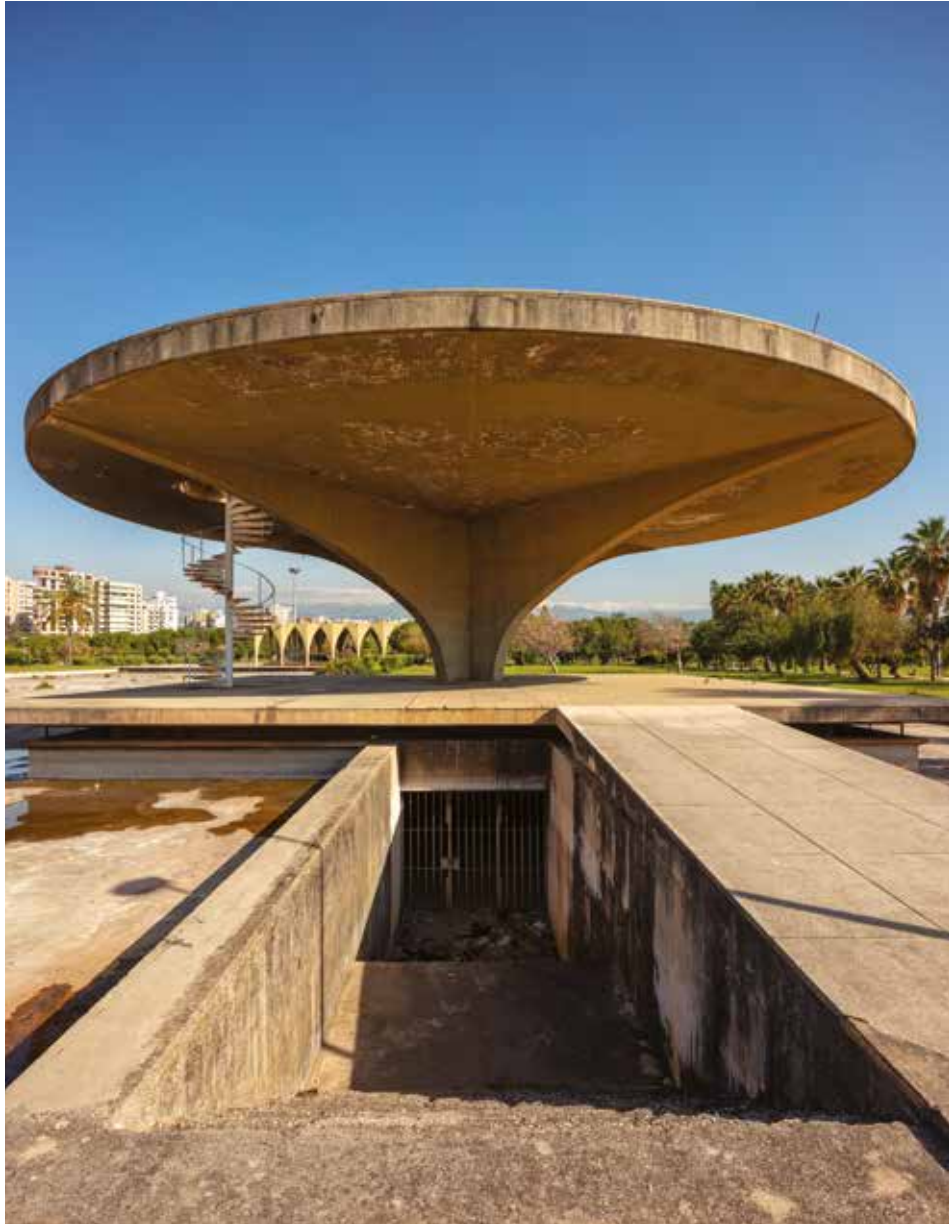
To the western side of Tripoli is the unusual Rachid Karami International Fair, a permanent fairground and exhibition centre, designed in 1962 by renowned Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer. It is considered one of the most iconic projects of the Modernist period of Lebanese architecture, but the outbreak of the civil war and its aftermath hindered the fairground's completion and later development, and it remains unfinished.

The site incorporates over 15 structures, including exhibition spaces, pavilions, a theatre, museums, and Modernist residences. The functional variation of the structures is matched by a distinction in their architectural forms: while they belong to a coherent whole, each structure has a unique architectural identity.

The Rachid Karami International Fair was added to UNESCO's World Heritage Tentative List in 2018. The Fairground's structures are vulnerable to decay, and repairs are currently needed to ensure the survival of this legacy.

It was difficult to negotiate access to the site when using a tripod. The other challenge was the harsh bright light, which I tried to harness to create shapes and lines where possible on a blistering hot day.





## Byblos District - قضاء جبيل

### Salim Beik Wehbe Palace

About a week after our day out with Nissrine, I met a guy called Tony whilst walking through the town of Amchit. At my request he guided us on foot to a mansion that I had noticed in an online article only the night before. The photograph in the article had been taken in 2017, so I had no idea of its current condition, or whether it had been renovated.

Tony explained to the current owner (Claude) the reason for our visit to the town, and Claude kindly agreed to let us photograph the upstairs section of the 120-year-old house. I am so glad we visited – it was a spectacular and beautiful home in the Italian style.

The house was built by Claude's grandfather, Salim Beik Wehbe, who was born in 1833 and died in 1925. It once contained a printing and publishing office for a local newspaper, and these days it serves as a family home, as it was when it was first built.

As I was leaving Claude and his beautiful mansion, I bumped into an admirer of my work just outside the front door, which was a wonderful surprise – it is always a pleasure to chat with people who support what I do.



## Piccadilly Theatre

In 2019, I was unsuccessful in my attempt to obtain permission to shoot this next location. However, two years later I finally succeeded, after several productive meetings about photographing heritage interiors. I feel that the fallout from the blast has led to many people being more receptive to requests to document such places.

Built by Lebanese architect William Sednaoui in 1965, the Piccadilly Theatre was the first of several theatres located on Hamra Street, although the others have now long since gone. The Piccadilly catered to a VIP clientele, which was reflected in the relatively modest number of 800 seats.

The crimson velvet seats, immense crystal chandelier, and large oil paintings made the Piccadilly the jewel of Hamra, and it became a major venue for concerts, musicals, and plays in Lebanon during the late 1960s and early 70s, embodying a time when Arab poetry and calligraphy were the pride of the region. The theatre eventually closed its doors in the mid-1980s, having postponed many shows once it became too dangerous to continue during the civil war.



## Takkedine El-Solh's Old Abandoned Mansion

This was once an opulent mansion in the Kantari district of Beirut, remarkably close to the downtown area where the street battles had ignited the civil war. The mansion was occupied by Prime Minister Takeddine el-Solh and his wife Fadwa al-Barazi between 1973 and 1974, and again briefly in 1980.

Takkedine el-Solh's mansion is an example of a shift from luxury to neglect – from the rich and famous tastemakers to the refugees and squatters who inhabited the house in its abandoned years.

The highlights here included the silver-toned triple arcade and the enclosed veranda that I discovered just as I was about to leave the property. The veranda was difficult to reach due to the stack of furniture piled high in the room next door, but once I climbed inside, I was delighted to use the last moments of available daylight to capture the beautiful space and the vegetation-covered floor.





## Grand Theatre

Beirut's Grand Theatre was designed by Youssef Aftimos and was built in the late 1920s by poet and theatre lover, Jaques Tabet. It was part of a commercial centre that housed a hotel, rental apartments, offices, and shops. The construction of the Grand Theatre on the corner of Emir Bashir and Syria streets blocked the original 1878 layout of a major thoroughfare that had connected the harbour to the pine forest at the city's southern fringe.

The horseshoe-shaped auditorium of the theatre accommodated 630 seats and was fitted with an orchestra pit, two balconies, and machinery for moving the stage sets. A small electrically-operated steel dome slid on rails, allowing the roof to open for ventilation. Another domed ceiling, this one decorated with stained glass, adorned the entrance lobby.

Opening in 1929 with a French musical, the Grand Theatre later hosted ballets and concerts, screened international film productions, and was home to major literary and charity events. However, from the 1960s, it operated solely as a cinema. According to my research, it had been known across France for having bad acoustics, with performers warning each other prior to visiting.

During the civil war, the building was used for various purposes, including showing pornographic films and as a field hospital. It was heavily damaged by the heavy fighting in the area and subsequently abandoned.



## “Gruyère”, the Koujak Jaber Building

The Koujak Jaber building in Ramlet el Beida is an apartment block that was designed by architect Victor Bisharat in 1964. Its main full-height façade consists of a flat surface punched with openings, from which the building gets the nickname of “Gruyère”. These large 3-metre diameter holes face windows and terraces, divided by smaller elliptical openings which reveal the slabs and sidewalls that separate the apartments. For a visitor arriving at the building and looking up, a perspective effect transforms the vertical ellipses into quasi-circles, and the circular openings into horizontal ellipses. The curtains were installed to give the owners or tenants privacy from the neighbouring high-rise buildings. These types of curtains can be now seen in other apartment blocks all over Beirut.



# مرفأ بيروت - The Port of Beirut

The Port of Beirut is located at the midpoint of three continents: Europe, Asia and Africa, facilitating the passage of ships between East and West. It was among the top ten seaports in the Mediterranean Sea and is considered the gateway to the Middle East. The history of the Beirut port dates as far back as the 15th century BC, and is mentioned in the letters of the Pharaohs and the Phoenicians. During the Roman era it was developed into a commercial and economic centre.

In the Omayyad era, it became the centre for the first Arabic Fleet. As for the Crusaders era, the Port of Beirut had an important role in the maritime trade between East and West. This strategic role continued to grow during the Mameluk era, when it was turned into a commercial centre visited by pilgrims to the Holy Land. By the end of the 19th century, the current Port of Beirut had been founded.

On 19 June 1887, the Ottoman authority gave the concession of the Port to an Ottoman company under the name of "Compagnie du Port, des Quais et des Entrepôts de Beyrouth". Later, in May 1925 it was passed to the French. But on 13 April 1960, after 30 years of the concession, control was handed over to a Lebanese company with the name "Compagnie de Gestion et d'Exploitation du Port de Beyrouth".

During the mid-1970s, the Port of Beirut was an important international trading station with the surrounding Arab countries. On 31 December 1990, the concession ended, and the government forced a temporary committee to manage the port.





## The Sursock Palace

Moïse Sursock built the Sursock Palace in 1860 as a symbol of the Sursock family's rich history. The palace is in the Achrafieh district of Beirut on the historic Sursock Street and is surrounded by beautiful gardens opposite the Sursock museum.

The 160-year-old palace withstood two World Wars, the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the French mandate and Lebanese independence. After the country's 1975-1990 civil war, it took 20 years of careful restoration for the family to bring the palace back to its former glory.

On a hill overlooking the now-devastated port, Sursock is home to some beautiful works of art, Ottoman-era furniture, marble, and paintings from Italy – all collected by three generations of the Sursock family.

Roderick Sursock, owner of Beirut's landmark Sursock Palace, and who had let me photograph the interior told me "In a split second, everything was destroyed again only months after we had completed a 20-year-long renovation".

Lady Yvonne Sursock Cochrane grew up in the palace that her forebears built and protected it all her life. On 4 August 2020, while sitting in her chair on her terrace, she was injured by falling debris caused by the explosion in the port, and sadly died on 31 August.

Today the palace has a partly caved in roof, damaged frescoed ceilings with more holes than plaster in them, shattered marble statues, splintered Ottoman-era furniture, torn antique tapestries, and blown-in latticed windows.

At the time it was built, it was recognised as one of Beirut's grandest town houses and it is today certainly the largest private palace of that period to survive as a family home.



## Serhal Palace

If you had dreams of building a beautiful palace by the Mediterranean Sea, then the Serhal building could well have been the palace of those dreams. Located on the south-east side of Jezzine, construction of the Serhal Palace began in 1967, and it reflects different civilisations and eras. The owner, Dr Farid Serhal, collected books on art history, ranging from the Byzantines to the Italian, French, and Spanish renaissances, and this reading inspired him to build this palace.

As I walked through the unfinished and colourful rooms, I felt as if I were travelling back in time. Each section of the palace has arches which reflect the different civilisations and eras. A series of quotes in Arabic calligraphy adorn the spaces above many of the windows.

The slow progress of construction was not helped by the start of the Lebanese civil war, but this took a turn for the worse in 1996 when Dr Serhal passed away, causing the project to grind to a complete halt.

The two main highlights for me were the palace's grand central room, built as half-church and half-mosque to symbolise co-existence, and an ornate courtyard with mesmerising arches.



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The abandoned mansion of a former prime minister, one of the most remarkable buildings in Zokak el-Blat, Beirut, a once glorious hotel now bearing its war wounds, a 17th-century palace in Deir El Qamar, and a stunning yet unfinished passion project, where each arch of the structure reflects a different civilisation, a sublime abandoned 14th-century hammam, the Tripoli International Fair complex, an ensemble built by Oscar Niemeyer that fell into disrepair before it was even finished, deserted buildings, grandiose dilapidated architecture ...

Civil wars, lack of consideration for a heritage in danger, the Beirut port explosion ... time has done its work on many of Lebanon's architectural gems.

An exceptional photographic report.

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