

## Joseph Rustom: Conceiving Places of Worship in Postwar Beirut *The Cases of the al-Omari and the al-Amin Mosques*

“The nature of the Church and hence of ecclesiastical art demands the normative and remains adamantly opposed to the subjectivism of modern man.”

Alois Riegl<sup>1</sup>

In October 2010, I was reviewing press articles related to the inauguration of the Muhammad al-Amin mosque in Beirut when I was struck by a picture in *Al-Hayat* newspaper showing the Russian president Vladimir Putin in front of a mosque that looked very similar to the one being inaugurated in Beirut<sup>2</sup>. Next to him stood a man that had little resemblance with the main figure of the Beirut ceremony, Saad Hariri, the son of the late prime minister Rafic Hariri, who financed the construction of the al-Amin mosque and who was assassinated three years earlier. Looking closer, I discovered that two mosques were actually inaugurated on the 17<sup>th</sup> of October 2008, the first in Beirut and the second in Grozny, the capital of the Chechen Republic.

After further research, I discovered that the histories of the two mosques meet at different points: a country located in the heart of an international conflict zone, a demolished city reconstructed after a devastating war and seeking to forget the forces that destroyed it, an assassinated politician to which the mosque is dedicated, and a son that decided to carry out the political career of his father. The man standing next to Putin was Ramzan Kadyrov, the son of the former Chechen president Akhmad Kadyrov, who was assassinated in 2004.

As for the striking resemblance between the two monuments, it is due to a common architectural model. The architects of both mosques had stated that they were inspired in their design by the Sultan Ahmed mosque in Istanbul, also known as the Blue Mosque. Though the al-Amin mosque can host half of the believers that the Akhmad Kadyrov mosque can host, the two mosques have an exceptional size: the Muhammad al-Amin mosque is said to be the biggest in the Near-East, and the Akhmad Kadyrov mosque the biggest in Europe. Their minarets, like those of the Blue Mosque, peak at around 63 meters, 63 being the age of the Prophet when he died. Both mosques are also of an exceptional scale in their urban environment, a scale that has little to do with the necessities of their function. Indeed in both cities, there was no urgent need to build such monuments, the existing mosques being largely sufficient to accommodate the believers.

This strange coincidence led me to a series of questions about the ways in which places of worship are being conceived – and perceived – in Lebanon in the postwar period<sup>3</sup>. The most obvious ones were: What are the historical and geographical justifications for the use of an Ottoman mosque that

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<sup>1</sup> Riegl, A. (1903). *Der moderne Denkmalkultus, sein Wesen, seine Entstehung*. Tr. K. W. Forster and D. Ghirardo, “The modern cult of monuments: its character and origin”, *Oppositions* 25 (1982): 47.

<sup>2</sup> See *Al-Hayat*, 18<sup>th</sup> October, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Whilst the official date of the beginning of Lebanon’s war is 13<sup>th</sup> April, 1975, the war has no official end date. The dates used by researchers vary between the Taif Agreement of October 1989, the official reunification of East and West Beirut on 13<sup>th</sup> October, 1990 and the issuing of the Amnesty Law for militia leaders on 26<sup>th</sup> August, 1991. Taifiyya, the Arabic word for consociationalism, is the current system of government in Lebanon. It proportionally allocates political power among the country’s religious groups according to a system of representation based, since the Taif agreement in 1989, on a 50:50 Christian/Muslim ratio. It also allows communal autonomy whereby each community is free to determine its own affairs such as personal status laws.

was built four hundred years earlier as a reference to Sunni religious architecture in Lebanon? Is it the perpetuation of a tradition, a mere recognition of the artistic achievements of a past civilization considered as superior, a generic Sunni identity marker, or a sign of a general crisis of meaning in religious architecture? What is the role of the different urban actors – the religious authorities, the government, the political parties, the investors, and the architects – in defining the image that the religious architecture is conveying?

Though this paper does not pretend to give final answers to these questions, it seeks to shed light on the phenomenon of the architectural leitmotifs that are governing the design of places of worship in Lebanon by analyzing two projects: The rehabilitation of the al-Omari mosque and the construction of the Muhammad al-Amin mosque in Beirut Central District (BCD). While in the first case, the religious and political authorities were confronted to an existing image that they had to deal with, the al-Omari mosque being an ancient Crusader cathedral transformed into a mosque at the end of the thirteenth century, in the second case, they had the choice to shape the project to make it correspond to the image that they wanted.

### The “Chicken or the Egg” Causality Dilemma in the Case of the al-Omari Mosque

“The al-Omari mosque in Beirut has a special importance for us, because it is the mosque of the Arab conquest and around it rose the town of Beirut.”

*Rafic Hariri, inaugural speech for the al-Omari mosque, 4th June, 2004.*

“The plan, the elevation and the decoration [of the al-Omari mosque] are those of a Romanesque church and when looking closely at the apse, one is surprised to find that it has the style of the Auvergne”

*Liban. Les guides bleus. Hachette, 1975. p. 106.*

The al-Omari mosque is located in the heart of the Beirut Central District, an area that was part of the former no man’s land that separated East and West Beirut during the Lebanese war and that became, starting in 1994, the ground of a large-scale development and reconstruction project lead by Solidere, a private Lebanese joint-stock company founded by late prime minister Rafic Hariri.

Formerly the Saint John Crusader cathedral, the mosque is one of those religious buildings where the history of the Lebanese Christians and Muslims intertwine<sup>4</sup>. Though a recurrent debate had opposed Christian and Muslim historians on the first occupation of the site<sup>5</sup>, the question of “who came first” being essential to prove in a way to whom the site belonged, no archaeological excavations were made to search for proofs. Nevertheless, both Christians and Muslims agreed on the fact that the al-Omari mosque was a church built by the Crusaders in the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Inside the monument, a wooden structure is said to contain the hand of Saint John the Baptist, named al-Nabi Yahia by the Muslims. Although the connection between al-Nabi Yahia and Saint John is not often made, the two figures have peacefully cohabitated in the social memory of Beirut’s residents<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Two other examples in Beirut are the Emir Assaf mosque, said to be constructed on the ruins of the Saint Sauveur Byzantine church, and the Al-Khodr mosque, a medieval church transformed into a mosque. See Jabre-Mouawad, R. (2003-2004). "La mosquée du sérail de Beyrouth: Histoire d'un lieu de culte." *Tempora* 14-15: 153-173.

<sup>5</sup> See al-Wali, T. (1973). *Tārīkh al masājīd fi bayrūt* [The history of the mosques in Beirut] and Cheikho, L. (1993). *Bayrūt tārikhuha wa athāruha* [Beirut, its history and antiquities], Beirut, Dar al Machreq.

<sup>6</sup> The same could be said about Saint George, the patron saint of the city of Beirut, and al-Khodr, his double in the Islamic tradition.

Before the war, the mosque was hidden behind the shops of the souks. A great many of these shops were actually linked to the mosque through a particular kind of property called *waqf*. A *waqf* is usually a property that is donated by members of the religious community, whose revenues are allotted to the profit of the mosque and to various charitable causes. After the end of the war, the shops around the al-Omari mosque were torn down and their tenants compensated with Solidere shares. With these demolitions, a whole system based on charity, already weakened by the war, was erased. It also left the mosque standing alone, its Christian features more visible than ever. At the same time, a growing interest in cultural heritage and its role in shaping identity were making its way into every religious community. The places of worship were now here to represent the Lebanese communities in this highly symbolic place that was the central district. Though having four other mosques in the BCD, the main mosque for the Sunnis of Beirut was the al-Omari mosque.

The fact that the al-Omari mosque was stripped of its shops allowed Dar al-Fatwa, Lebanon's highest spiritual Sunni authority, to have more flexibility in planning its future. Dar al-Fatwa's first plan was to demolish the mosque and build a new one, but the plan had no financing. The project was looked upon unfavourably by Solidere anyway, and was sure to get the disapproval of the Directorate General of the Antiquities, the building having been placed on the List of Classified Monuments since 1936<sup>7</sup>. It is important to mention here that the mosque is also a *waqf* property, and is therefore managed by the internal laws of the community. Nevertheless, the projects of rehabilitation of places of worship should also follow the Lebanese Property, Construction and Antiquities<sup>8</sup> laws. In practice, and due to the limitless power of the religious communities, these projects are often executed with no respect to the Lebanese laws<sup>9</sup>.

The rehabilitation of the al-Omari mosque was finally instigated by a catholic businessman, Raymond Audi, who had invested in Solidere by building in the BCD the headquarters of the bank he was the director of and that bears his name, Audi Bank. He made a proposal to the main shareholder in his bank, the Kuwaiti businesswoman Sheikha Suad Hamad al-Humaizi<sup>10</sup>, to restore the mosque. As a child, al-Humaizi had spent many summers in Lebanon and had developed a particular relationship with the country. She had already intended to build a mosque in memory of her deceased parents in Lebanon<sup>11</sup>. Audi convinced her to restore the al-Omari mosque instead. He also suggested hiring Youssef Haidar for the project, an architect who studied in France, and had already rehabilitated Audi's family property in Saida and transformed it into a museum and a cultural foundation. The project was presented to the Mufti of the Lebanese Republic, Sheikh Muhammad Rashid Qabbani, who had no choice but to accept it. The operation was remarkable in the sense that in such projects, all participants are usually chosen from inside the Sunni community: The oldest Sunni mosque of Beirut was to be rehabilitated at the initiative of a catholic businessman by a Shia architect and with Kuwaiti funding.

Nine months after the beginning of the restoration works, *An-Nahar* newspaper<sup>12</sup> launched a first campaign against the project<sup>13</sup>: Dar al-Fatwa was accused of mutilating the monument by using

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Youssef Haidar, Beirut, 10<sup>th</sup> November, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> The Antiquities Law set by the High Commissariat of the French Republic in Syria and Lebanon in 1933 is still in force. The Ministry of Culture is currently drawing up a new law.

<sup>9</sup> According to George Nour, the Assistant General Manager for Business Operations & Relations with Public Authorities in Solidere, all places of worship in Beirut's Central District were renovated and extended without a construction permit. Interview with George Nour, Beirut, 18<sup>th</sup> October, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Koweiti Businesswoman Suad al-Humaizi is the only woman on the Rich-List of the Arabian Business Magazine. [www.arabianbusiness.com/rich-list-2009/list](http://www.arabianbusiness.com/rich-list-2009/list) (Accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> November, 2010). About her childhood years in Lebanon see: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOZPRO6Y0xc&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOZPRO6Y0xc&feature=player_embedded) (Accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> November, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Youssef Haidar, Beirut, 10<sup>th</sup> November, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> *An-Nahar* newspaper is owned by Ghassan Tueini, a famous Greek-Orthodox journalist who invested in Solidere by building the headquarters of his newspaper in Beirut's Central District.

inappropriate restoration techniques. Rumours were spreading that the medieval frescos, covered for centuries with white plaster, were being removed.

A second campaign was launched by *An-Nahar* when the excavations east of the building started, an area where previous archaeological excavations had proven that vestiges of the *Cardo Maximus* of the Roman city of Berytus are to be found<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless, Dar al-Fatwa continued the excavation and provoked what the journalist May Abboud Abi Akl qualified as an archaeological massacre<sup>15</sup>. Abboud Abi Akl has, however, raised no accusations based on religious motives against Dar al-Fatwa.

These accusations came a few months later from a famous Sunni opponent to Solidere, architect Assem Salam, member of a prominent Sunni Beirut family and former president of the Order of the Engineers and Architects.

With an indirect reference to the Buddhas of Bamiyan<sup>16</sup>, he accused Dar al-Fatwa of practicing what he called “architectural talibanism” by erasing the Christian features of the monument<sup>17</sup>. In answer to Assem Salam, the Sunni historian Hassan Hallaq, a fervent supporter of Hariri, presented in *An-Nahar* a barely credible version of the history of the monument, stating that the al-Omari is a mosque that was transformed into a church and then back into a mosque. He also accused Salam of attacking Hariri for electoral purposes<sup>18</sup>.

The design of the extension of the al-Omari mosque was not less polemical. Youssef Haidar worked in collaboration with a renowned Lebanese calligrapher to develop a design based on what he considers to be one of the fundamentals of Islamic architecture: the combination of geometry, structure and light. He spent difficult times trying to make his design convincing and to translate the antagonistic wishes and directives of the different actors involved in the project. The Mufti’s reaction to the design was negative, because of the absence of what he considered to be typical Islamic architectural features and because of the modest scale of the extension added to the project. Not satisfied with the small 16<sup>th</sup> century minaret, he also wanted to add three other minarets to the project<sup>19</sup>. Following long debates with Solidere and the architect, the number was reduced to one, but Sheikh Qabbani insisted on the fact that the minaret had to “look” higher than the bell tower of Saint Louis Capuchin Church located on a nearby hill<sup>20</sup>. As for Solidere representatives, they were concerned about promoting an image of peaceful cohabitation between the communities with a project that preserves to a certain extent the monument and avoids any use of the public space around it for religious purposes. They therefore decided to transform the parcel located east of the al-Omari mosque into a garden, blocking any possible overflowing of the mosque’s activities in that direction. They also encouraged the creation of a closed courtyard in front of the mosque. This courtyard was seen by the opponents of the project, especially inside the Christian community, as an attempt to hide the church. The result of the project ended up by being the materialization of a two-year negotiation over the monument and its urban environment. The physical marks of this

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<sup>13</sup> *An-Nahar*, 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2001, 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> July, 2001, and 23<sup>rd</sup> January, 2002. Journalist May Abboud Abi Akl, who covered the story, was asked by Ghassan Tueini after a while to stop her campaign.

<sup>14</sup> Saghieh-Beydoun, M., M. Allam, et al. (1998-1999). “Bey 004: The Monumental Street “Cardo Maximus” and the Replanning of Roman Berytus.” *Bulletin d’Archéologie et d’Architecture Libanaises*(3): 95-126.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with May Abboud Abi Akl, Beirut, 17<sup>th</sup> October, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> These monumental statues of standing Buddhas are located in the valley of Bamiyan in Afghanistan. They were dynamited by the Taliban in 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Salam, A. (2003). “mashrū’ tawsī’ al-jāmi al-‘umari al-kabīr: “tālibāniyya” mustatira tulghi thākīratāhu wa dawrahu [The project of extension of the Grand Omari Mosque: a hidden “talibanism” that cancels its memory and role]”, *An-Nahar*, 6<sup>th</sup> February, 2003. The term *architectural talibanism* was used in another context a few months later by Walid Jumblatt, a prominent political leader of the Druze community. See *An-Nahar*, 2<sup>nd</sup> June, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Hallaq, H. (2003). “raddan ‘ala maqāl ‘asim salām: bal tālibāniyya mi’ māriyya mustatira bil-turāth! [in response to the article of Assem Salam: Rather an architectural talibanism hidden behind cultural heritage!]”, *An-Nahar*, 25<sup>th</sup> February, 2003.

<sup>19</sup> See *An-Nahar*, 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 1993.

<sup>20</sup> With the al-Omari Mosque, the competition of the bell towers and minarets was launched. This battle is derisory though, when one compares the height of these religious symbols with those of the new offices and residential towers by Solidere.

negotiation can be seen in many architectural details such as the hybrid style of the external marble gallery or the design of the new minaret.

The al-Omari mosque was inaugurated on 4<sup>th</sup> June, 2004 in the presence of Sheikha Suad al-Humaizi and of the Kuwaiti minister of the Awqaf and Islamic affairs<sup>21</sup>. The project's costs were estimated at 3.5 million dollars. A detailed article on the inauguration was published in *An-Nahar* with no mention of the "archaeological massacres" presented in previous articles. The negotiation process between all parties was over now and the ceremony sealed its results. In his inaugural speech, Rafic Hariri described al-Omari as the mosque of the Arab conquest, around which rose the town of Beirut, making no mention of the Christian past of the building. In 2009, the text on the al-Omari mosque in the tourist brochure on Beirut published by the Ministry of Culture was corrected to adapt it to Hassan Hallaq's version. In the brochure of 1997, one could read: "Originally the crusader Cathedral of St. John (1113-1150 AD), the building was transformed into the city's Grand Mosque by the Mamluks in 1291". In the brochure of 2009 this sentence was replaced by: "The crusaders transformed the mosque in 1150 into a cathedral dedicated to St. John, before the Mamluks definitively turned it into a mosque in 1291"<sup>22</sup>. Threatened in their own identity, the religious and political authorities chose denial and reinvention of history. However, changing the architecture was not as easy as changing the touristic brochure: Due to the multiplicity of the actors and interests, nobody was able to win the battle over the al-Omari mosque, but nobody considered himself defeated.

### Muhammad al-Amin, a New Main Mosque for the City of Beirut

*"In our country, the mosques and churches embrace each other in all regions"*

*Bishop Roland Abou Jaoudé's speech for the inauguration of the al-Amin mosque, 17<sup>th</sup> October, 2008.*

The project of the al-Omari mosque, and its results on the architectural and urban levels, were not entirely satisfying for Dar al-Fatwa. The former church, with its controversial history, that served as the main Sunni mosque for Beirut for more than seven hundred years, could not play this role anymore and needed to be replaced. Dar al-Fatwa profited from a pre-war project for a new mosque on the nearby Martyrs' Square, transforming it into the biggest Sunni mosque of Lebanon.

The story of the Muhammad al-Amin mosque starts right after the end of the Second World War, when in 1945 an association for the construction of the mosque on the site of the ancient zawiya of Abi Nasr was created<sup>23</sup>. The project benefited from the donations of King Faysal bin Abd al-Aziz bin Saoud, the Egyptian president Gamal Abd al-Nasser<sup>24</sup>, and Sheikh Salim al-Sabah, prince of Kuwait. The land, whose property was shared by Dar al-Fatwa and the association, was enlarged by successive purchases and donations of land parcels. After the end of the Lebanese war, the association of Muhammad al-Amin was infiltrated by a religious sect and a political party, al-Ahbash, said to be supported by the Syrian regime. It set up a tent on the site of the future mosque to

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<sup>21</sup> *An-Nahar*, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> June, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> The text is also largely inspired by Hassan Hallaq's passage on the al-Omari Mosque in his book Hallaq, H. (1987). *Bayrūt al-mahrūsah fi al-'ahd al-'uthmāni*. Beirut, al-dār al-jāmi'iyya.

<sup>23</sup> See Mermier, F. (2009). "La mosquée Muhammad al-Amîn à Beyrouth : mausolée involontaire de Rafic Hariri". *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* (125): 177-196, and Vloeberghs, W. (2008). "The Genesis of a Mosque: Negotiating Sacred Space in Downtown Beirut". [http://uclouvain.be/cps/ucl/doc/epl-corta/documents/RSCAS\\_2008\\_17.pdf](http://uclouvain.be/cps/ucl/doc/epl-corta/documents/RSCAS_2008_17.pdf) (Accessed on 29<sup>th</sup> October, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> See *Al-Ahram*, 19<sup>th</sup> October, 2008.

promote the project. This operation was looked upon unfavourably by both Solidere and Dar al-Fatwa.

In 2001, the Mufti decided to take control of the project, first by buying land from Solidere to reduce the shares of the association in the ownership of the land, and later by taking a more radical approach, that of dissolving the association after accusing it of dividing the Sunnis. Rafic Hariri supported Dar al-Fatwa in dissolving the association, but was not for the construction of a big mosque in this particular location. He knew that such a project could only harm his relationship with his Christian partners and the foreign companies investing in Solidere.

Things left Hariri's hands when the Saudi prince Walid bin Talal, Hariri's opponent both in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, interfered in the project. Bin Talal is the grandchild of the Lebanese Prime Minister Riad al-Solh, and therefore has both Saudi and Lebanese nationalities. Like Hariri, he also had his Lebanese and Saudi connections and was planning for a possible political career in Lebanon by the typical means of large investment projects, charitable foundations and shareholding in the media and press. In 2002, he offered the Mufti two million dollars to buy a nearby land parcel to enlarge the construction site of the al-Amin mosque. By playing on the competition between Hariri and Bin Talal, Mufti Qabbani was sure to win. Hariri knew quickly that he had no choice but to cut into Bin Talal's influence by offering to buy the land and financing the whole project. The execution of the project was to be given to Oger Liban, Hariri's own contracting company.

Three designs for the new mosque were submitted by the architects Rasem Badran, Salih Lamai, and Azmi Fakhoury. No less importantly, the three architects belong to the Sunni community. The project of Rasem Badran focused on the urban and social integration of the building with its environment, and more especially with the neighboring Maronite cathedral and the "garden of forgiveness", a big archaeological park planned north of the parcel. The project was very quickly described as too modest and put aside by Mufti Qabbani. The design of Azmi Fakhoury interested the Mufti precisely because of its big scale and the fact that it was inspired by the Ottoman architecture of the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. The reference to the Ottoman architecture for the outer shell was complemented by a reference to the Mamlouk architecture for the inner design. On 6<sup>th</sup> November, 2002, the day the first stone of the al-Amin mosque was laid, Mufti Qabbani declared that the mosque would be built "*min al-rasif ila al-rasif*", from sidewalk to sidewalk, leaving not one inch of empty land around it.

The controversy caused by the absence of archaeological excavations in the al-Omari project was not to be repeated in the case of the al-Amin mosque. The excavations were done under the supervision of the Directorate General of Antiquities, and the structures found were removed in order to be exhibited later in a museum located in the basement of the new mosque. In a way, the al-Amin mosque needed no historical justification for its location. From one side the previous presence of *zawiyat* Abi Nasr was good enough, and from the other it was legitimate for a project of this importance to create a sort of *tabula rasa* that brushes aside all previous occupations. Apart from negotiations between Solidere and Dar al-Fatwa concerning the final height of the minarets and the cupola, the project was realised without any relevant opposition. Hariri, who was opposed to the project at the beginning, ended up seeing the al-Amin mosque as the crowning achievement for his reconstruction project of the capital.

Meanwhile the Maronite religious authorities responsible for the neighbouring Saint George Maronite cathedral were not satisfied with the whole project. First, they had to negotiate with the al-Amin association over the loud sounds of the call for prayer coming from their tent, then with Solidere and Dar al-Fatwa over the limit separating the two parcels, as the project seemed to completely overshadow their cathedral. But it took them little time to react, planning the construction of a campanile, the cross on top of which is the same height as the crescent of the minarets of the al-Amin mosque. The inspiration for this project came from the tower of San Marco

in Venice and was decided by the Maronite Archbishop Boulos Matar himself. At the same time, high fencing financed by Solidere was erected between the mosque and the cathedral, transforming them into highly protected areas and adding to their hostility toward the public space.

On 14<sup>th</sup> February, 2005, Rafic Hariri was assassinated by a huge charge of explosives a few hundred meters north of the Solidere project. He was buried next to the Muhammad al-Amin mosque, which became, as anthropologist Frank Mermier notes, his unwanted mausoleum<sup>25</sup>. The important demonstrations, which followed his assassination and led to the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon after a presence of nearly thirty years, took place on the Martyr's square in the direct surrounding of the al-Amin mosque, that became one of the symbols of what will be called the Cedar Revolution.

In his speech during the ceremony of inauguration of the al-Amin mosque on 17<sup>th</sup> October, 2008, Maronite Bishop Roland Abou Jaoudé stated that Lebanon is the country where mosques and churches “embrace” each other in all regions. What was in reality a fierce competition over the urban space was suddenly presented as an image of a peaceful cohabitation and equilibrium.<sup>26</sup> This image was transmitted later in Solidere's brochures, where certain photographic leitmotifs showing a multitude of bell towers and minarets having more or less the same height were used. At the same time, both political and religious leaders were starting to be aware of the important income that religious tourism can generate. The narrative of a country with eighteen different denominations living peacefully together was perfect to offer to the consumption of the global tourist. The planned bell of the campanile of the Maronite cathedral was therefore replaced by a platform offering a panoramic view on the city. Architectural codes like the Blue Mosque and the tower of San Marco allowed, at the same time, the tourists to find their way in the complex labyrinth of the Lebanese politics.

## Halal architectures

The examples of the al-Omari and the al-Amin mosques illustrate how the image of a community can be negotiated between different urban actors such as the governmental institutions, the political parties, the religious authorities, the private investors, the architects and the media. In the case of the al-Omari mosque, these negotiations left their physical marks on the architecture and the urban space around it. In the case of the al-Amin mosque, the consensus among the actors led to an undisputed project that scorned not only the construction and urban planning laws, but also the cohabitation between the Lebanese communities.

Though for different reasons, in both projects, the architect did not play the role he was supposed to in the creative process. The religious and political authorities promoted and certified the architectural models to be used, introducing in a way the notion of *licit* and *illicit* in the field of architecture.

In a place with a very high symbolic value like the BCD, the phenomenon reached its paroxysm with al-Amin mosque and the campanile of the Saint George Maronite cathedral, two buildings simplified to the state of symbolic objects, leaving aside any form of ambivalence or *incompleteness* that history and art can convey. Furthermore, these codes echoed strangely other general paradigms, myths, or categories, such as the Caliphate or Wilayat al-Faqih, that the Lebanese were used to

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<sup>25</sup> See Mermier (2009).

<sup>26</sup> Outside Beirut, the competition between the religious denominations over the Lebanese landscape is also taking irrational proportions. Bassem al-Thawwaq, responsible of the Sunni waqf at Dar al-Fatwa, complains that Sunnis from the Gulf States insist on investing in the construction of a mosque in Lebanon, while a mosque generates more expenses than revenues for Dar al-Fatwa (Interview with Bassem al-Thawwaq, Beirut, 2<sup>nd</sup> November, 2010). Raya Bitar, architect and daughter of Said Bitar, the architect of Saint George Maronite Cathedral, also says that they receive many offers from Christian immigrants from Southern Lebanon to design churches or enormous pedestals for religious statues on the top of hills or promontories (Interview with Raya Bitar, Beirut, 3<sup>rd</sup> November, 2010).

hearing in the political discourses and that are also employed outside any reference to a particular time or territory.

This suspicion harboured toward intellectualism and creativity in religious architecture, and this need for clear codes, is not characteristic of the Sunni or the Maronite denomination in Lebanon. Therefore, the project's next step will focus on other examples of the postwar religious architecture of the Orthodox, Chaldean, and Shia communities, where architectural models are also being drawn from the Greek, Mesopotamian, or Persian architecture. The sources of inspiration of these architectural codes and the ways in which they are created will be analyzed. The project will also question the ways in which these codes are being perceived by the believers. Are they for them totally transparent or totally opaque, or in other words, are they full or empty of sense?

Finally, the wide comparative spectrum offered by the Global Prayers project will allow seeing to what extent the fossilization of meaning in religious architecture can be considered as typical of the globalized spaces that are shaped, among others, by religion.

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