

'Cultural heritage is being massacred': The fight to save Lebanon's crumbling history

Lebanon's unique cultural and architectural history is another casualty of the country's countless crises. Without proper resources, infrastructure or the willing of the government to intervene, many of the nation's most treasured sites are at risk.

Roisin McCarthy
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It's early morning and a trio of elderly women are drinking coffee among the ruins of a crusader cathedral in Tyre.

They pour from a steaming rakwe, which has been left to cool on the remains of a stone wall built in the 12th century.

As they talk, a group of archaeologists carrying brushes, trowels and shovels appear and begin to clear the ground around them in preparation for excavation.

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The women are not disturbed by this arrival, moving only when the sun drifts towards mid-day heat.

"People are free to come and do whatever they want because the funding to preserve sites and protect them is almost non-existent. Many sites are vulnerable to vandalism," says one of the archaeologists, Francisco Núñez, who has spent years excavating in Lebanon.



Workers excavate a site in southern Lebanon

For preservation experts, archaeologists and activists in Lebanon, 2017 was a year for cautious optimism.

That autumn, the Ministry of Culture approved a heritage law after decades of planning and deliberation. It offered crucial protection to historical sites, notably including financial incentives for the owners of heritage buildings to protect them.

That law has not been ratified by parliament and remains an aspiration.

“To this day, there has never been a real policy for the protection of cultural heritage at the national level,” says Helene Sader, a professor of archaeology at American Beirut University.

Government efforts to protect heritage are critically insufficient, she explains.

“Today, anything to do with state administration is understaffed, underfunded, or not funded at all. Those in charge are not always enough to supervise everything that is happening in the country.

“Some of them are very well-intentioned but there is no overall policy or vision to structure the efforts of the Directorate General of Antiquities (DGA) towards preserving heritage.”



Pedestrians walk past damaged historic buildings on August 5, 2020, in Beirut's Gimmayzeh district which was heavily damaged by the powerful explosion that tore through Lebanon's capital [Getty Images]

Meanwhile, she warns, “cultural heritage in Lebanon is being massacred and no one speaks of it.”

Those hoping for progress in 2017 have instead experienced political and economic chaos. It has left Lebanon’s crumbling heritage firmly at the bottom of a growing pile of problems.

“We are not really in a good mood,” says Ali Badawi, archaeologist and regional head of Lebanon’s DGA.

He cannot speak for long. Power will soon cut off at his office, a small building situated next to the Al-Bass Tyre necropolis, an archaeological site of monumental proportions located on the southern coast of Lebanon.

“The challenges are significant. Today, we are working with less than 50 percent of our workforce. Most of our workers’ salaries are lower, less than 100 dollars per month,” he says.

“Considering the gasoline situation in Lebanon, this amount wouldn’t cover transportation costs. If they come, they have to pay money, so most people don't want to come to work. We are in the middle of a catastrophe and we have to manage with the tools that we have, and as you see, we have very minimal tools.”

Numerous archaeological and restoration projects remain unfinished, while many that were completed have crept back into disrepair.

A testament to the possibility of preservation, the Museum of Baalbek was painstakingly restored in 1997 by a team of experts from Lebanon and Germany.

The Blue House, a heritage building, was destroyed in the Beirut blast

“Now you go there and you cannot enter because the door is broken and there is no electricity,” says Helene, who was involved in the project.

“This was a magnificent museum that became a role model for future projects. It’s heartbreaking to see something that took so much dedication and effort disappear.”

“The [Beirut Port] explosion changed the situation in many ways. One of the outcomes was that it showed that civil society has the ability to grow, rebuild, and move on”

In the face of this, a growing number of social initiatives in Lebanon have emerged; all connected by a determination to ensure their country’s heritage remains alive.

“The idea of losing my heritage makes me feel uprooted, and knowing this gives me the strength to continue,” says Joanne Farchakh Bajjalay, the founder of Biladi, a Lebanese NGO working to safeguard heritage via education and training.

Over recent years, joining forces with like-minded organisations has become an increasing priority, she reflects. “The crisis has shown that you can’t continue on your own. So we are networking more and more.”

Nothing underscored the critical need for civil society initiatives more than the Beirut port explosion, an event that for Baijaly and her counterparts, marked a turning point.

“The explosion changed the situation in many ways. One of the outcomes was that it showed that civil society has the ability to grow, rebuild, and move on,” Joanne adds.

“We have become part of the scenery, so now it’s our job to push forward and to push more.”

Encompassing this idea is the Beirut Heritage Initiative (BHI), a collective of NGOs working in the heritage and restoration field.

“We informally gathered just after the port blast and from there decided to act all together to be more efficient on the ground,” says Yasmine Dagher, a Beirut-based architect and one of the first volunteers to join the initiative.

Over two years, BHI has carefully reconstructed heritage buildings across the city, a complex process made even harder to navigate without state support.

“All of the initiatives that have been working since the blast can tell you the same thing. The government and municipality of Beirut are non-existent. We’ve been working on our own,” says Yasmine.

“They are on their cloud and we are on the ground.”

Also helping to restore cultural heritage sites is MARCH, an initiative first set up in Tripoli that focuses on conflict resolution among young people.



BHI's renovation of the Blue House

The idea of reconciliation through rebuilding helped to unite together youth involved in the Bad al-Tabbaneh-Jabal Mohsen conflict, explains Rony Zgheib a program Manager at MARCH.

“It’s not just about what we are doing but how we are doing it. These projects allow people to connect through rebuilding pieces of history.”

As he speaks, we look at images of Muhjareen street in Tripoli, the site of a historic marketplace that also became a demarcation line. Former enemies now work together using paintbrushes and shovels to recover their shared heritage.

"In times of crisis, safeguarding heritage is a basic right"

For Charles al-Halek, it was this idea of reintroducing people to their heritage in a way that connects rather than divides that prompted him to establish Heritage and Roots.

The initiative provides a new approach to learning for people who aren't just academics says Charles, whose videos on Lebanese heritage, history and traditions have amassed thousands of views.

“Heritage can be one of the building blocks of your identity. But the danger in times of crisis is that this is damaged. It can be used to justify the division between Lebanese communities and sustain ideas of a divided nation,” he reflects.

“It’s why in times of crisis, safeguarding heritage is a basic right.”

But for heritage to be fully protected, the challenges are high without the right state infrastructure in place, warns Youmna Karam, from Lebanon’s National Heritage Foundation.

We need proper, efficient governmental and administrative bodies. As well as laws and regulations to be implemented,” she says.

“We are now reaching our limits.”

Roisin McCarthy is a multimedia journalist, primarily focusing on the sociopolitical developments of Turkey, Lebanon and Libya. She has previous experience working at the United Nations World Food Programme and reporting on political risks across MENA and Central Asia regions.