

# Beyond the Spectacle: Al-Saha Village, Beirut

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This article discusses al-Saha Village, a revenue-generating restaurant/hotel in Beirut, as a journey in hyper-reality. In the spirit of the commodity, al-Saha celebrates the thrill of the spectacle over the real; it is a model of the model of the Lebanese village of memory and collective imagination. Owned by a Muslim Shiite charity organization, al-Saha is simultaneously also a means of unification and a symbol of separation. Its stance is Lebanese, Islamic, anti-Western, and anti-global. The three main sections of the article shed light on the village concept, the nostalgic fantasies that inspired its architects, and its social and cultural invocations.

With the growth of the tourist and entertainment industries, the demand for scenes and experiences that are simulations or representations of reality rather than reality itself has grown exponentially. Increasingly, historic-themed developments, theatrical events, and other hyper-traditions (i.e., traditions delinked from the times and places in which they originated) are being created and re-created as stage sets and sold to consumers seeking new experiences.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, advances in technology have altered notions of time and space and challenged doctrines of realism and authenticity in historical representation. More than ever before, simulation is being associated less with a “referential being,” a real original, than with the hyper-real — “a real without origin or reality.”<sup>2</sup>

Simulated heritage villages and living-history museums are perfect examples of the above trends. A perceived loss of traditional customs and ways of life, accelerated by contemporary patterns of global communication, has fueled interest in heritage-related development. Likewise, rapid urbanization has amplified the power of “the old village” as a theme, so that the idea of the heritage village has emerged as a prime strategy around which to present a staged re-creation of lifestyles long gone. Usually sold to city residents, such thematizations conjure the illusory image of intimate communities that were once models of social unity, harmony and security.

This article examines the manufactured thematic experience and symbolic connotations of one such development. Al-Saha Village in Beirut is a heritage-themed restaurant

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and hotel owned by the al-Mabarrat charities of one of Lebanon's leading Muslim Shiite clerics, Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah. Inspired by similar tourist developments elsewhere, popular concepts of Islamic architecture and the Lebanese village, and the work of the Lebanese writer Anis Freiha, al-Saha is an architectural work of collage and a simulacrum without a real original. However, its stage-set architecture and reinvented rural charm celebrate the thrill of the spectacle over the real, and problematize the distinction between one and the other.

In a recent newspaper article, the project's chief architect, Jamal Makke, described the idea behind al-Saha: "As cities are distorting our villages, which are becoming increasingly urbanized with small buildings springing up here and there, we thought of this project . . . of bringing the village into the city."<sup>3</sup> For al-Mabarrat, the choice of the village as a theme, albeit commercially attractive, also aligned with its character and values as an Islamic association, since it would commemorate social unity, local identity, traditions and customs.

Despite this apparent clarity of purpose, the architecture of Al-Saha Village evokes complex questions related to collective memory, cultural identity, and historical authenticity. The three main sections of this article address some of them. The first section describes al-Saha within the broader context of invented traditions and introduces its political and economic rationale. In doing so, it examines the birth of the concept of "heritage village," its defining characteristics, and its evolution in relation to emerging technologies and new, global patterns of communication and economy. The second section investigates how the makers of al-Saha absorbed and simulated cultural myths and nostalgic fantasies. It also critically examines the literary work of Anis Freiha, the image he constructed of the Lebanese village and its folklore, and the architectural techniques and language al-Saha employs in attempting to bring this image to life. The third section discusses al-Saha as a religious/political creation that addresses both a growing desire for a distinct Lebanese architectural identity and an Islamic kind of tourism. In conclusion, the article reflects on the debates that a cultural production like al-Saha arouses and the ways it shapes and is shaped by present socio-cultural conditions.

## THE VILLAGE

The concept of the heritage village can be seen as an outcome of the nineteenth-century "ideological labor" of inventing traditions, as epitomized by the rise of historical preservation movements and the museum culture, and as commodified in international expositions.<sup>4</sup> At the time, rapid urbanization had raised awareness of the value of heritage, and influential European architects, artists, planners and intellectuals had started calling for national preservation laws. Seeing industry as a threat to art, they considered the

past a source of pride and identity. According to Victor Hugo, it was "[a] nation's most sacred possession, after the future."<sup>5</sup>

Different circumstances brought different responses in different European countries. In Scandinavia, concern for peasant life and folklore — simple and unromantic as it seemed — gave birth to a new type of showplace that combined a folk art center with an open-air architectural museum.<sup>6</sup> The first such institution was inaugurated in 1873 in Stockholm. It was followed by a series of others: the open-air branch at Skansen outside Stockholm (1891), the museum at Lund in southern Sweden (1893), and the Norwegian Folkemuseum in Oslo (1894). Aside from these large, privately funded institutions, several hundred folk museums of varying sizes were also founded, maintained by committees of farmers. Some have seen these living museums as artificial and destructive.<sup>7</sup> But their intent was to foster traditional arts and crafts and display typical rural structures and traditional customs and ways of life. Beyond being spectacles, they encouraged people to regenerate threatened folk culture and adapt old customs to changed living circumstances.

Nevertheless, the birth of living folk museums in Europe, and the coincident attempt to revive arts and crafts traditions, took place during a period Walter Benjamin has described as "glorif[y]ing] the phantasmagoria of the commodity."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, entertainment industries had begun to market nostalgic fantasies rooted in the past. The popularization of culture eventually made the previously elite practice of escaping into exotically themed environments widely available to a rising middle class. Historically or exotically branded attractions and objects (such as those displayed in the colonial sections of international exhibitions, or the "Skansens") became valued commodities to trade, and spectacles for all to see. Model villages, heritage-themed parks, hotels and restaurants became what Benjamin called the new "sites of pilgrimages to the commodity fetish."<sup>9</sup>

As these new artifacts of the leisure and entertainment industries gained popularity, museums, which had traditionally been viewed as educational establishments, felt it necessary to enter into competition with them. To broaden their appeal, some deliberately dropped the term "museum," and in its place, "village" became a favored suffix for many types of heritage-themed experience. The resonance of Skansen can be seen, for instance, in the birth of places like Sturbridge Village, Colonial Williamsburg, and Greenfield Village in the U.S., all conceived in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>10</sup> In the rapidly urbanizing world of the second half of the twentieth century, the village theme became further glorified and romanticized. And, eventually, threats to place, national identity, and a sense of continuity with the past led to a mushrooming of the heritage or "live-village" concept. Especially in the U.S., heritage villages were invented to celebrate the history and traditions of certain localities or people, and even to regenerate economically depressed old towns

(e.g., Ukrainian Cultural Heritage, Spanish American Heritage, Dallas Heritage, Pinellas County Heritage).

Today, the concept of a heritage village is one of the most popular themes that the leisure and entertainment industries use to cater to short attention spans — not only in the U.S. and Europe, but worldwide. Thus, in the Middle East, Hatta Heritage Village, in Dubai, opened to the public in 2001, selling the experience of the desert to adventure-seeking visitors. Meanwhile, the traditional village-like environment of heritage-themed restaurants like Kan Zaman (in Amman) and al-Qariah (in Damascus) offer visitors a one-stop historical and cultural experience. The art of selling such places involves the promotion of both authentic, locally rooted traditions and cultural motifs unassociated with the places where they are reproduced.<sup>11</sup> This has been the case, for example, with the Old Souk of Zouk Mikhael in Lebanon, which was renovated in 1995 into a pedestrian area with restaurants, coffee shops, traditional ateliers, and stalls selling artisanal products. It is also evident in Beirut's Central District, which now includes restored showcase buildings, heritage trails, traditional events, and exhibitions.

Al-Saha Village belongs to this genre of self-conscious heritage place. Located off the busy airport road, in a congested area between Burj al-Barajneh and Haret Hreik (i.e., outside the main hub of Beirut nightlife), its challenge was to establish a destination that could compete with thousands of other restaurants and tourist enterprises (FIG. 1). The nostalgic recreation of a simulated old Lebanese village seemed an ideal way to distinguish itself. Al-Saha opened in 2004, selling the Lebanese village lifestyle to a predominantly middle-class Muslim Shiite clientele. In addition to the restaurant, it comprises a hotel and cultural center (a hall for cultural seminars, exhibitions and poetry) in an effort to be simultaneously entertaining, educational, cultural and social. At a time when almost all aspects of social life in Beirut are being commodified, it is not surprising that al-Mabarrat decided to pursue such a themed development.

In discussing his design for al-Saha, Makke (who heads al-Sanabel for Urban Studies and Architectural Design, a branch of al-Mabarrat), explained that nostalgia is one of the strongest human sentiments — and one common among Lebanese people, regardless of religion or occupation.<sup>12</sup> Al-Saha's largely urban clientele long for an experience that will take them beyond their everyday lives, and the displays of waning pasts are meant to take them to such a different time and place. The old village setting, with its *saha* (open space), *ain* (well), food services, and waiters in themed attire, provides an escape that aspires to be both entertaining and pleasant to the eye (FIGS. 2, 3). But its design includes both the innovation and invention of tradition. Indeed, its creation, re-creation and exhibition of traditional cultural motifs follows a similar strategy of place-selling as that employed in the Old Souk of Zouk Mikhael, the reconstruction of Beirut's Central District, and other recent projects in Lebanon. Yet,

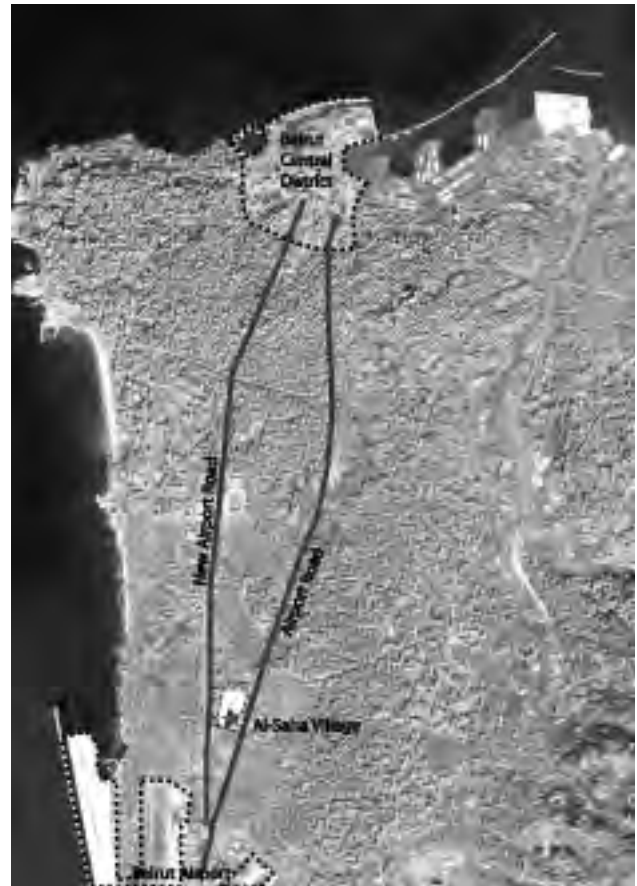


FIGURE 1. The location of al-Saha Village in Beirut.

unlike typical commercial projects, the motives behind al-Saha go beyond mere profit-making: it is specifically intended to help finance al-Mabarrat's growing social and charitable activities, among which are five orphanages and sixteen academic and vocational schools, including a school for the deaf and the blind. Its goal is thus multidimensional: economic, social, environmental, cultural, and tourism related.<sup>13</sup>

According to Makke, al-Mabarrat started to seriously consider the construction of revenue-generating projects in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States. After that time, Islamic charitable organizations came under increased scrutiny, and wary of being accused of "terror financing," some donors stopped supporting the association.<sup>14</sup> As an alternative, al-Mabarrat decided to establish a tourist-related enterprise to augment its other profitable projects, which include bookstores and several large gasoline stations, named al-Aytam (The Orphans).

However, Al-Mabarrat's interest in developing a tourist-related enterprise can also be understood in relation to larger trends in tourism in the Middle East. The 9/11 attacks not only affected funding of Islamic institutions but also the entire tourism industry in the Arab World. Since the "War



**FIGURE 2. (ABOVE)** *General internal view of the village with its pointed stone arches, wooden balconies, and traditionally dressed waiters.*



**FIGURE 3. (RIGHT)** *General view of the village square (al-saha), from which the project took its name.*

on Terror” began, the biggest loser in terms of income has been Tunisia, a country that relies mainly on European and North American leisure-oriented tourism. On the other hand, Lebanon has been the biggest gainer.<sup>15</sup> Of the more than one million tourists who visited the country in 2002, 59 percent were citizens of Arab countries, 38 percent were of

Lebanese origin, and less than 3 percent were of non-Arab origin (as opposed to 15 percent in 2001).<sup>16</sup>

Across the Arab world such changes have alerted both the public sector and private developers to the need to invest in new tourism infrastructure and develop new long-term, multiconcept strategies. This is especially true in light of

reports by the World Tourism Organization (WTO) indicating that longer cultural-tourism visits in the region are losing out to short-stay leisure and shopping trips. In anticipation of further negative impacts on the sector, and in response to anti-Arab and anti-Muslim publicity, the idea of intra-Arab and intra-Muslim tourism has been seen as one possible response.<sup>7</sup> Al-Saha belongs to this sort of enterprise. For example, it respects the fundamentals of the Islamic religion, it is alcohol free, and it is run by a self-proclaimed Muslim organization. At the same time, it embodies a contemporary “commodity mind-set” in that it transcends its functional aspect to compete on the basis of experience.<sup>18</sup>

#### A JOURNEY IN HYPER-REALITY

Al-Saha Village is intended to be a journey to the past, to the traditional village in which “our grandparents lived 100 years ago.”<sup>19</sup> The inspiration for Makke’s design, however, was the Lebanese village portrayed by the Lebanese writer Anis Freiha in a 1957 book *al-qaria al-lubnaniah: hadharah fi tariq al-zawal* [*The Lebanese Village: A Civilization on the Road to Extinction*].<sup>20</sup> Freiha’s interest in Lebanese village folklore stemmed from a fear that the Lebanese village — with its customs, traditions and lifestyles — was being obliterated by Western culture. His study focused on the villages of the Matn area (and mainly on his hometown of Ras al-Matn) because he saw a resemblance in their geography, people, and social and economic life to the villages of the Shuf and other spots in North Lebanon. Even in this limited geographical zone, Freiha was also mainly interested in tracing folkloric similarities and commonalities, and differences were largely dropped from his account.<sup>21</sup> Muslim folkloric traditions were also dropped, because he believed that those who had not lived in what was previously called Old Lebanon — the subject of his study — were city dwellers, not village dwellers, and their habits and folklore were “completely” different from those of the Christians and Druz.<sup>22</sup>

Freiha’s book, therefore, looked at folklore from one perspective only. He drew a dichotomy between city dwellers and village dwellers, between Old Lebanon and the new lands acquired by the country in modern times; but most importantly, he drew a line between the traditional and the new. For him, folklife was a source of spiritual richness, and he wanted to record it before it was forgotten. It was “beautiful, simple and close to the heart, just like poetry and music.”<sup>23</sup>

Freiha opened his book with a nostalgic, sentimental reprise of memories of the village of his birth and childhood. He recalled *al-ain* (the well) and the road to it, the apple tree, the roof terrace, the attic, and other features and places. He then argued, rather poignantly, that this culture was on its way to extinction. Western influences had invaded most Lebanese villages, even remote ones, and transformed them dramatically. Children no longer knew the place where their

fathers lived. The houses had changed; so had the furniture, the local shop, the wedding, the funeral, the bread, the water source, and so forth. Villages now had modern bakeries that provided fresh bread daily. And the water fountain — where people had once met to chat, complain and quarrel — now lay deserted because water was being supplied directly to houses from a distant source.

It can be inferred from this account that Freiha’s nostalgia was not only for the artifact of the village, but for its social life. On the one hand, he valued the village as a container of memories — both those of his childhood and those of his father and grandfather. On the other hand, he also saw it as representing a specific form of social interaction. Thus, all modern transformations, even beneficial ones like piped water, were a threat. With the modernization of water supply, *al-ain* lost its function as a public space, and as a result villagers no longer met to chat or fight or quarrel. In fact, what Freiha, and many of his generation, lamented most was the loss of shared feelings of pleasure and pain.

These views recall Ferdinand Toennies’s concept of *Gemeinschaft*, “[t]he very existence [of which] rests in the consciousness of belonging together and the affirmation of the condition of mutual dependence which is posed by that affirmation.”<sup>24</sup> For Toennies, *Gemeinschaft* is fulfilled in intimate communities where people live together, work together, and act together. He contrasted it to a *Gesellschaft* society, which “signifies the normal and the regular process of decline of all forms of *Gemeinschaft*,” and the first appearance of which takes place in cities.<sup>25</sup> Toennies’s concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* have been largely misunderstood, however (the first being associated with virtue, and the second with vice), and Freiha’s work seems to partake of this misunderstanding. His book evokes a simplistic dichotomy between the village and the city, leaving the general impression that the former was good and caring, while the latter was ugly and unpleasant.

Ironically (and contradictory as it may seem), Freiha also presented the old Lebanese village as a place of escape and spectacle for the superior urban dweller. The concluding chapter of his book lists the vices of the Lebanese villager, the first of which was a collective mind that lacked creativity and dynamism and that idolized customs and traditions. Freiha attributed this lack of individual thought or action to a lack of courage and an unwillingness and inability to embrace progress. Indeed, he related all transformations of the physical village and the lifestyle of its residents to external forces, and not to any internal desire for change or renewal.<sup>26</sup> He ascribed the villagers’ “frozen” or “static mentality” to their lack of taste and ability to enjoy beauty and pleasure (as city dwellers do), and to their simplicity and easiness to be pleased and satisfied. His ideal old village, then — should it have remained untouched by modern construction (and, as he put it, by the destructive influence of educational institutions) — would have remained faithful to its old customs and

legends, which the conservative villagers would have continued to embrace generation after generation.<sup>27</sup>

It is unfair, however, to rest all blame for the homogenizing and romanticizing of views about rural life on modern sociology. The traumatic social and spatial transformation brought by modernity has given rise to contradictory reactions, and in Lebanon, as elsewhere, there is widespread acceptance of the idea of “loss”: loss of traditional space, architectural identity, heritage, public life, community spirit, and so forth. This perceived end of tradition has generated dangerous remorseful sentiments and a desire to return to the past. In general terms, Richard Sennett has argued the construction of the past through images of “the rise and fall” of a treasured lifestyle gives rise to a perilous “sense of regret.” In *The Fall of Public Man*, he wrote: “While it produces empathy for the past, and so a certain insight, regret induces resignation about the present, and a certain acceptance of its evils.”<sup>28</sup>

However, the notion of an idealized lost past, as Sennett and other scholars have argued, is ultimately an illusion — as is the idea of a homogenous old way of life. In *The Uses of Disorder*, Sennett disputed the dichotomy between “village-community” and “city-group.” With reference to empirical social evidence, he contended that the image of community homogeneity and purity is frequently false, and indeed, in opposition with real experience. He further argued that “stereotyped thinking about ‘working class’ or ‘ethnic’ culture . . . inhibits us from seeing the kind of variety cities [and villages] possessed in the past.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the ideal rural community and traditional lifestyle that dominates a lot of the cultural production in Lebanon is a myth. In Pierre Nora’s terms, Freiha’s village and folklore are “*lieux de mémoire*,” sites of collective cultural memory and identification.<sup>30</sup> They are “beautiful, simple and close to the heart,” but they do not necessarily reflect people’s actual former everyday practices and preoccupations.

In these terms, al-Saha Village can be considered an embodiment of the national imaginary and the collective memory. It is an example of what Umberto Eco has called the “hyper-real,” and what Guy Debord has described as a “spectacle.” Borrowing Jean Baudrillard’s explanation of these concepts, al-Saha can be conceived as a simulacrum without an original, a copy of a real without reality. It is a model built upon the model of the Lebanese village — as created by Anis Freiha out of memories and collective imagery.

In actual practice, Makke set out to design a traditional Lebanese village, inspired by Freiha’s description of the traditional Lebanese village. It would consist of a small tightly knit group of buildings around a central open square (*al-Saha* in Arabic). Named for this space, the project also included many characteristic features of the villages of Mount Lebanon described by Freiha: *al-ain* (the well), *al-qalaa* (the fort), *al-qabu* (the cellar), in addition to an artificial spring (FIG. 4). Yet, at the same time, to make it more suited



FIGURE 4. The water well (*al-ain*).

to the character of the institution it represented, the village also became a museum for Arab and Islamic heritage. Thus, quite unlike Freiha’s model, its design incorporated Islamic architectonic elements and motifs, like domes and arabesques (FIGS. 5, 6).

In producing this fantasy, Makke also mixed modern and traditional construction techniques (FIG. 7). He used natural stone, glass, concrete, and recycled building materials such as stone, wood, tiles and discarded architectural artifacts salvaged from buildings bound for demolition. To make his creation look real, he also adopted a decorative aesthetic based on the reuse of old objects of everyday use. Thus, *al-nawraj* (rectangular pieces of wood once used to separate two different kinds of grain) were reused as tables and chandeliers (FIG. 8). Large wheels from old carriages were reused in making two-seat benches (FIG. 9). Old rifles and swords were used to decorate the walls (one of which Makke attributes to the Arabs of the seventeenth century), and other artifacts were inserted in corners and niches (FIG. 10).<sup>31</sup> Finally, still tableaux and live performances (like coffee- and bread-making) have been used to make the village more entertaining and culturally enlightening (FIG. 11).

Such were also the techniques of the World Fairs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The colonial

**FIGURE 5. (RIGHT)** General internal view of the village.

**FIGURE 6. (BELOW)** An eclectic spatial composition showing a dome, the typical triple arch feature of traditional Lebanese buildings, and decorative frescos. In the foreground is a discarded water wheel decorating an artificial water stream.



sections of these exhibitions combined various elements and motifs from different historic periods and buildings. One famous example was the Egyptian pavilion built by the French for the Paris World Exhibition of 1889, which included the Rue du Caire, a neighborhood of twenty-five houses carefully designed to imitate a chaotic, winding street in old Cairo. Dirty paint, musicians, dancers, artisans and donkey drivers were all deployed to give the street a spectacular, realistic appearance, and recycled architectural fragments, such as portals and *musharabiyyas* from demolished buildings, were integrated into the design. The outcome was an eclectic architecture, in which proportions and building heights were frequently adapted to the exhibition needs. Yet, its architects claimed it was more authentic than the real Cairo, because it was “untouched” by new construction.<sup>33</sup> Thus, they “purified” their creation in order to make it match their image of the Orient as an exotic place.<sup>33</sup>

Like the colonized sections of the world expositions, al-Saha discards unwanted reality, and in the name of nostalgia it purifies the image of the village from recent intrusions. But it does so by disguising its underlying modern construction and recycling of old items, making it impossible to tell the “real fake” from the “fake fake,” or the recycled item from the new one that has been given an aged-look.<sup>34</sup> Its strategy, then, is to take artifacts from the past and put them to use in the service of a new clientele. Following the arguments of Michel de Certeau and Luce Giard, it moves artifacts from one system of practice to another, and pulls them away from yesterday’s everyday practice to today. “Even dis-



**FIGURE 7.** *Mixing modern and traditional construction materials and techniques.*

tributed outside the patrimonial temples of memory and placed at the inhabitants’ disposal, restored objects turn into museum pieces,” they wrote. They become “theatrical, pedagogical, and/or scientific” objects and a subject of “curiosity, information, or analysis.”<sup>35</sup>

Detached from time, space, and all aspects of real life, a spectacle like al-Saha Village offers, in Debord’s terms, a “fragmented view of reality” that fails to recover the unity of the real. Instead, its “fragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a separate pseudoworld that can only be looked at,” deceiving everybody, even the deceivers.<sup>36</sup>

SOCIO-CULTURAL INVOCATIONS OF THE SPECTACLE

Infatuation with the theme of the traditional Lebanese village might be interpreted as part of a larger quest for meaning and security in an epoch that seems increasingly homogenized. Indeed, the architecture of al-Saha induces numerous questions related to cultural identity — a topic intensively debated by Lebanese professionals and academics. According to Jad Tabet, the emerging building style in Beirut expresses “conflicting cultural values”; the architectural scene is overwhelmed with commercial clichés, concealing



**FIGURE 8.** *A discarded carriage wheel reused as chandelier.*



**FIGURE 9.** *Two-seat bench made out of discarded carriage wheels.*





FIGURE 10. A niche displaying old daggers.



FIGURE 11. The spectacle of coffee: Arabic coffee, traditional Arabic costume, old brass kettles, and mihbaj (a traditional Bedouin implement used both as a coffee grinder and a musical instrument).

modernity with traditional masks. In the name of reclaiming cultural identity, much contemporary architecture is a combination of “gingerbread historical detail pasted onto ill-conceived concrete structural boxes.”<sup>37</sup>

Of such forms of decorative pastiche, Samir Khalaf has written:

*Unfortunately, many of the public manifestations of nostalgia so rampant today in Lebanon have scant, if any, concern with what Christopher Lasch has called a “conversational relationship with the past.” Instead, they assume either the construction and embellishment of grandiose and monumental national symbols, or the search for roots, the longing to preserve or invent often contrived and apocryphal forms of local and communal identities. More disheartening, this valorization of or escape into the past, particularly at the popular cultural level, has taken on some of the garish symptoms of commodification of heritage into kitsch and the vulgarization of traditional folklore and indigenous artifacts.<sup>38</sup>*

Whether al-Saha ultimately fits into this genre of commodified heritage is debatable. Makke’s nostalgic design expresses conflicting desires — both for a “conversational relationship with the past” and present commercial success. Meanwhile, al-Mabarrat’s endorsement of the traditional Lebanese village theme stems less from a nostalgic impulse or a rejection of modernity than an attempt to celebrate the local over the global and counteract the procedures of cultural homogenization.

Above all, al-Saha aspires to give the act of leisure and entertainment a more local and regional cultural context. It aims to reorient the visitor away from destinations loaded with Western culture, and toward Islamic historical and cultural sites. Thus, it endorses the objectives of Islamic tourism — which al-Hammarneh and Steiner have summarized in three points: “first, the revival of Islamic cultures and the spread of Islamic values; second, economic benefit for Islamic societies; and, third, the strengthening of Islamic self-confidence, identity, and beliefs in the face of negative stereotyping in comparison to other cultures and lifestyles.”<sup>39</sup>

These objectives are controversial to a certain extent. Referring to articles in the bilingual Arabic/English magazine *Islamic Tourism*, al-Hammarneh and Steiner highlighted some radical phrases used in describing the objectives of this movement, including the protection of “spiritual beliefs of Muslims and Arab” from “attacks of other cultures.” At the same time, they drew attention to the progressive goal of Islamic tourism. As disclosed in the magazine, this is “not to replace existing tourist activity . . . but [to open up] new and existing opportunities for growth, as well as [to market] a new type of commodity for which [Islamic countries] are convinced there is an urgent need.”<sup>40</sup>

No doubt, the investment of a religious charity in the nostalgia industry is saturated with an ideology of piety and

charged with political content. Leaving the rhetoric of heritage and identity politics aside for a moment, al-Saha is clearly an ideological project. Its tourism profits are linked to specific political and cultural ends. Al-Mabarrat's mission is founded on the fundamental belief in the duty of Muslims to pursue justice. Above all, Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah has said it is his aim to establish a "humane state" for everyone, one in which justice prevails and the social and economic oppression of the downtrodden is to be alleviated.<sup>41</sup> Quite explicitly, Fadlallah has asserted that he is not presenting the slogan of "humane state" as an alternative for a Shiite Islamic state in Lebanon. Nonetheless, some critics doubt his motives.<sup>42</sup> Although al-Mabarrat is completely autonomous, many associate it with Hizbullah, and with the Islamic Republic of Iran. A quick exposé of the political circumstances surrounding the position of Lebanese Shiites, and Fadlallah's own religious/political thought, is needed to understand these complexities.

Succinctly, following Lebanon's independence in 1943 the country's Maronite Christian-dominated government aggravated the existing socioeconomic and political deprivation of its Shiite Muslim population. In the late 1960s, however, Arab nationalist and socialist and communist organizations began to mobilize Lebanese Shiites politically. Worried about this increased secularization, Fadlallah — a Lebanese Shiite cleric born and brought up in Najaf in Iraq — moved permanently to Lebanon in 1966 (at the age of thirty-one). There he formed a political movement coextensive with the "Movement of the Deprived" of Musa al-Sadr, to present Lebanese Shiites with a viable political alternative.<sup>43</sup> The young, according to Fadlallah, "would go elsewhere unless given a Shiite Islamic response to their yearnings for political, social, and economic justice."<sup>44</sup>

Using the mosque as his center, Fadlallah advocated a "factually normative" Islamic tradition of conduct.<sup>45</sup> And he set out to teach a new generation of Shiites a socially conscious reading of Islam, as well as Islamic principles, morals and jurisprudence. It is thought that these theoretical formations influenced the political thought of the more radical Lebanese Islamist party, Hizbullah, but the actual connection between Fadlallah and Hizbullah remains vague. While some political observers, like Martin Kramer, believe that Fadlallah is Hizbullah's "oracle," both Fadlallah and Hizbullah assert that this information is erroneous. The spiritual leader of Hizbullah is the Iranian, Ali Khamin'i, the Wali al-Faqih (leader jurisprudent) — and not Fadlallah. Nonetheless, Fadlallah's ideological thought, as Cheikh Naim Qassim, Hizbullah's deputy secretary general, has recounted, guided Hizbullah through a "mature vision of Islam" during the early years of the party's creation.<sup>46</sup>

As Qassim has also pointed out, "Fadlallah refused any participation in organized factional activity, opting to remain a cleric, overseeing all fields from his vantage point and supporting those Party directives that he deems harmonious with his

views."<sup>47</sup> In fact, as a preeminent religious cleric (*mujtahid*), Fadlallah has "a much higher social and political value than any association he might have had with a particular political party. If anything, his organizational affiliation with [Hizbullah] would have undermined his independence and alienated many of his followers who did not identify with the party."<sup>48</sup>

No doubt, Fadlallah's progressive thought, eloquent speech, and acceptance of cultural and religious plurality afforded him a position of great respect, not only among poor Shiites but also among many Lebanese intellectuals from all confessions. Unsurprisingly, however, Fadlallah's denunciation of U.S. political interference in the Arab region, support for Hizbullah resistance to the occupation of south Lebanon, solidarity with the Palestinians, and rejection of the legitimacy of Israel make him a highly controversial figure in the ideological War on Terror. Furthermore, although Fadlallah and Hizbullah are independent in the institutional and organizational sense, they both identify with a "single social environment and culture," or *al-hala al-Islamiyya al-Shi'iyya* (the Islamic Shiite situation).<sup>49</sup> Both have numerous educational, social and religious institutions, and both perceive justice as one of the fundamentals of the Islamic religion. However, in Lebanon, Hizbullah's social services overshadow Fadlallah's in number — even if all help to fill the gap caused by the failure of the public sector.

This is an important issue that should not be overlooked. Lebanon's long history of unbalanced development, inadequate public services, and political and social marginalization has accentuated its division among religious/political factions. By way of serving their constituencies, these factions have engaged in social, human and developmental work, in many cases assuming the role of the state. A brief glance at the socio-spatial geographies of Beirut is enough to explain the severity of the country's political, social, and spatial fragmentation. Postwar reconstruction has also favored grand projects (Beirut Central District, the expansion of the airport, the sports city), while inadequately responding to pressing social problems. Thus, the reconstructed historic city center (Solidere) is today Beirut's spectacle and showcase, but it is also an elite district, isolated from the rest of the city by bridges and highways. Meanwhile, the rest of the city, mainly its southern suburb (al-Dahyieh), the turf of Muslim Shiites, has little that is similarly exotic or dazzling to exhibit. Reconstruction there has corresponded to the realities of everyday life. Ironically, al-Saha Village, fake and inauthentic as it is, has become Dahyieh's spectacle and showpiece.

Considering these conditions, it becomes apparent how Al-Mabarrat's choice of the Lebanese village as a theme can reflect a stance against globalization, but not modernism. To Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, heritage — whether language, religious studies, philosophy, politics, literature or art — lends itself to multiple readings.<sup>50</sup> These readings are framed by what he distinguishes as two extremist attitudes. On the one extreme, strict modernists consider the traditional

to be the mindset of the past, an impediment to progress. They argue against customs and traditions because they conflict with the scientific knowledge and achievements of the modern era. Advocates of this view see in modernity the sole opportunity for progress and for coping with the predicaments of our epoch. On the other extreme, strict conservationists look at the present through the eye of the past.

Within the Muslim world, they call for a severe adherence to the views of ancient scholars, intellectuals and philosophers who were supposedly closer to intellectual and spiritual sources of reality (i.e., authentic Islam). Such preservationists reject modernity, equating it with a loss of spirituality, and associating it with a secular and profane way of thinking that denies any religious reality, particularly that of Islam.

Fadlallah himself takes a middle stance regarding the question of heritage. To him, not all that is old is sacred, or even deserving admiration. As he has put it, there are only a few basic Islamic realities that are unquestionably divine; other than that, all Islamic thought, including Islamic heritage, is a byproduct of the human mind, and only represents reality when it meets our standards. Fadlallah has called for the critical study of intellectual ancestral experiences, beliefs and principles to assess them against contemporary intellectual arguments. Based on this inquiry, he has contended that a new methodology can be derived that has traditions for its intellectual basis, and modernity for its methods and aspirations.

This is what al-Saha seeks to do. It takes heritage and folklore as its theme, with all the cultural and social values they signify, manipulates them to suit the fundamentals of Islam, and then promotes them for the gaze of visitors. Thus it seeks to employ modern technologies and modern management and marketing tactics without digressing from the ethics of Islam. The pleasures it admits are of the *halal* (lawful) type — i.e., ones accepted by God. Whether singing, chanting, *dabkeh* (Lebanese folk dance) are *halal* or *haram* (lawful or unlawful), Fadlallah has explained, depends on their content and the rituals or practices that accompany them. Islam desires eternal, not temporary, happiness to human beings; Fadlallah has thus prohibited performances (music, singing, etc.) that provoke the instincts or desires. He has further added that Muslims have to act responsibly on all occasions and should not deviate from God's path of truth. This is best put in the words of Imam Ali: "*I'mal li duniak kanak ta'ish abadan, wa i'mal li akhiratika kanak tamout ghadan* [Work for your life as if you will live forever, and work for your end as if you will die tomorrow]."<sup>53</sup>

All this is by way of arguing that, like Debord's spectacle, al-Saha "presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification."<sup>52</sup> It is a Lebanese village, a museum of Islamic art, a site for Islamic tourism, and a symbol of unity in a country that has lost its unity. Yet, as Debord has also warned, the very fact that the part of the society it represents is "separate" causes "the unification it achieves [to be] nothing but an official language of

universal separation."<sup>53</sup> Thus, to some, the most fascinating aspect of al-Saha is its design concept and the fact that a religious charity lies behind it. However, to others, this might be what is most repelling about it. In particular, those who fear and reject the Islamization of Lebanon would certainly like to trivialize and vulgarize it and attribute it to a delusive model and a false national consciousness.

In the highly fragmented Lebanese society, social and cultural biases are to a high degree shaped by conflicting cultural values and ethnic prejudices. Goods are consumed as status objects that express the personality of the buyer. Through lifestyle choices and tastes — like association with certain places, brand names, and activities — people distinguish themselves and assert their belonging to certain groups or social classes. Often it is the religious/sectarian dimension of identity that generates antipathy and irreconcilable conflicts. The "tyranny of intimacy" — an expression coined by Richard Sennett — is thus not generated by force but rather by "the arousing of a belief in one standard of truth to measure the complexities of social reality."<sup>54</sup> Indeed, many Lebanese adopt a binary worldview made of Muslims versus non-Muslims, Christians versus non-Christians, Shiite versus non-Shiite, civilized versus vulgar, us versus them. Even the "ethics of compassion" is frequently divided; as Robert Mugerauer has observed in his analysis of traditional and nontraditional people and environments, it is more plausible to help *our* orphans and widows and those of *our* relatives, neighbors, comrades, fellow citizens and co-believers, than it is to help those of *others*.<sup>55</sup>

Despite all the controversial reactions it might arouse, al-Saha has proved to be successful. It primarily aims to win conservative Muslim visitors — a noteworthy and growing population, whether in Lebanon or elsewhere in the Muslim-Arab world, who have to date been largely alienated from the tourism industry. Nonetheless, it is also a place to which other locals and tourists come. And while the majority of the village's patrons are Shiites — presumably homogenous on ideological grounds — the apparent mix and diversity of visitors argues that social identity among Shiites is full of differences and contradictions. In other words, al-Saha's clientele provides good evidence that it is simplistic and naive to assume that lifestyle choices and tastes are singular. People have multiple identities, and possibly multiple lifestyles; where one goes with family is not necessarily where one goes with friends. Indeed, al-Saha attracts a wide variety of social and age groups — the conservative and nonconservative, the traditional and the fashionable, the Lebanese Arab as well as the foreign tourist.

Unlike Beirut City Center, which is being reconstructed as an inclusively elitist space, al-Saha also caters to popular taste and modest budgets. It is affordable, family oriented, and strategically located within an area that lacks other venues for leisure and entertainment. Moreover, as a pleasant private setting, it acts as a public gathering place in a city

where public open space is scarce. No doubt, al-Saha's *hallal* food and pleasures give its conservative clientele a sense of security, a guarantee that they will rub shoulders with people of similar social status, lifestyle and beliefs. But its ambience also attracts impartial customers, and it offers the pleasure of inquisitiveness to a curious visitor who, like Maxine Feifer's "post-tourist," knows that there is no such thing as "authentic" stage-set experience, but who may still be attracted to the inauthenticity of the spectacle and the way it is commodified.<sup>56</sup>

The project is also financially successful. According to its architect, it not only paid back the initial investments shortly after it was inaugurated, but it also generated additional funds to complete the remaining phases of construction. The restaurant alone served around one million clients in its first year, and those numbers are expected to increase once the hotel, now in the final stages of completion, becomes functional. The further success of al-Saha Village is evident in the number of other people who have benefited because of its construction. Profits from al-Saha today support more than 17,000 needy students, including 3,500 orphans and 350 physically disabled children sheltered by the al-Mabarrat association.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, the project has been recognized for its design, having recently been awarded the Arab Towns Organization prize. The prize aims "to promote innovation and modernization in architecture based on the Arab Islamic architectural style, and to preserve the identity and heritage of the Arab city, as well as to restore and maintain historic buildings and sites."<sup>58</sup> The arbitrating committee awarded al-Saha Village the prize for being "a viable project in harmony with social, economic and environmental circumstances."<sup>59</sup>

In its city context, the simulated village is both real and unreal. Its hybrid architecture, with its arched openings and heavy stone facades, stands out within a muddled and architecturally featureless urban surrounding (FIGS. 12, 13).

Despite its eclectic discordant external composition, al-Saha is a catalytic project that could potentially trigger the social, economic and cultural development of an area that needs to be planned and restructured (FIGS. 14, 15).

## WORLDS OF CONTRADICTION

Al-Saha Village is a journey of the imagination and an architectural work of pastiche and allegory. Like the colonial-era World Fairs, its simulated experience conveys a sense of theatricality and a real without reality. Like Freiha's ideal village, it is a fragment of history frozen in time, and a spectacle to an urbanite society. As Mike Robinson has described the phenomenon, al-Saha is also a "spatial fetish" that does not acknowledge "issues of belonging, 'placeness', and 'territoriality'."<sup>60</sup>

Instead, using the concept of the spectacle, it alters its spectators' notions of time and space. It brings the village into the city to offer its viewer snapshots of reality that pretend to regroup themselves into a new unity. It espouses Lebanese, Arabic, Islamic and contemporary architectonic forms and elements. But the result is a hyper-real, hyper-traditional, hybrid mixture that desires authenticity, and achieves it only "through the manipulation of images and experiences" à la Disneyland or a Wizard of Oz type experience.<sup>61</sup>

Yet, al-Saha is also imbued with cultural connotations that reflect the values of its manufacturers and consumers. Its aesthetic values respond to market demands, and its ethical stance adheres to the fundamentals of Islam. It Disneyfies cultural heritage by way of appealing to a consumer society. At the same time it deploys the concept of the spectacle for the benefit of less privileged sectors of society. In this regard, its theme and techniques have proved profitable and successful. The common concern for historical authenticity is clearly not an issue here. Al-Saha is a politi-



FIGURE 12. (LEFT) The immediate context of the village: a traffic node surrounded by midrise buildings of no architectural or historical significance.

FIGURE 13. (RIGHT) Street view of the fortress-like motel.



FIGURE 14. (ABOVE) General street view of the village as it looked in December 2006.

FIGURE 15. (RIGHT) Detailed view of al-Saha still under construction. Taken from the southwest corner of the site.



cally charged project, and to frame it “in terms of authenticity — of the choice of traditional values, authentic forms, undiluted identities — is to miss the point.”<sup>62</sup>

The standard here is not the fake versus the real but the relative virtues of the imitation. There are good fakes and bad fakes, with the good ones presumably being an improvement on reality.<sup>63</sup> Al-Saha can claim this ability. It recycles memories, phantasms and building materials from the past, and puts them to use for another time and clientele. In doing so, the authenticity of the process of cultural remaking and reinvention no longer privileges the recycled object, but its present beneficiaries.

Paradoxically, while the village theme signifies unity, a decorative architectural production like al-Saha does not necessarily arouse any complete sense of collective memory or local identity. As Nezar AlSayyad has pointed out, tradition here has become “the rhetoric for both inclusion and exclusion.”<sup>64</sup> Staged and promoted by an Islamic organization, al-Saha affirms the fragmentation of Lebanese society into political and social communities distinguished by different tastes, appearances and lifestyles. Despite its resemblance to many other contemporary cultural productions in Lebanon, al-Saha is politicized both by those who built it and by their reasons for doing so. Unsurprisingly, the investment by a religious organization in the heritage industry has stirred a sense of the religious dimension of identity, rather than any broader nationalist sentiment. This leads, as AlSayyad has speculated, “to the invocations of superiority and isolationist tendencies.”<sup>65</sup>

Al-Saha attempts to anchor itself to the Lebanese village and connect to the sense among Muslims and Arabs of a golden past. Yet, despite being a politically and ideologically motivated heritage project produced by an Islamic group that rejects the cultural globalization and homogenizing tendencies of Western popular culture, it does not contest the society of the spectacle. To the contrary, it is itself consumed by it. It embraces market aesthetics and image-making strategies, and packages itself for visual consumption. Likewise, al-Mabarrat’s new al-Saha restaurants in Sudan and Qatar are also designed — like the Beirut original — as romantic escapist wonderlands “mainly devoted to consumption.”<sup>66</sup>

It might be helpful, by way of reflecting on all this, to recall the story, recounted by Nezar AlSayyad in the introductory chapter to his edited volume *Consuming Tradition, Manufacturing Heritage*, of a Mexican merchant’s success at producing accurate simulacra of Cartier products. What was striking about this story was not only its demonstration of “the primacy of the copy over the original,” but also its embodiment of Robin Hoodian justice, since the merchant’s copies were priced at “the true cost of producing [the originals] in Third World environments in the first place.”<sup>67</sup> Fakery here seems justified as long as it involves stealing from the exploitive rich to give to the deserving poor.

The example of al-Saha transcends this distributive justice paradigm to adhere to the ideologies of the Islamic religion. Its concept of social justice is more in line with the definition provided by Iris Young. It is about “the elimination of institu-

tionalized domination and oppression” through educating and empowering unprivileged groups and individuals that have been hitherto largely excluded from society.<sup>68</sup> Yet, like the Cartier example, critical analysis of al-Saha leads “far away from cultural effects and . . . toward political-economic causes.”<sup>69</sup> In this sense, al-Saha is another example in support of Dell Upton’s views on the rhetoric of heritage, identity and authenticity. Here again, such rhetoric has been revived in a period of major political and economic upheaval, by “way of claiming or challenging power where — traditional political — economic authorities and ideologies close off more direct routes.”<sup>70</sup>

Sept. 11, 2001, was surely a turning point in history. While the War on Terror that followed has jeopardized funding of Islamic organizations, regardless of their activities, the manufactured traditional architecture of the many al-Sahas

challenges this injustice by attracting enough capital to sustain non-profitable charitable ends. This is not, however, to suggest that thinking about revenue-generating activities did not exist before Sept. 11 — only that the risk of reliance primarily on alms donations has become clearer since.

That said, the crucial question remains whether the Islamic tourism and heritage industry will generate just another type of exotically commodified good targeting new markets and new consumers. It is only legitimate to fret the society of the spectacle if the long-term effect is to further colonize culture, architecture, events, and everyday life — to produce “Muslimlands” versus “Disneylands” in the name of rectifying the social ills and injustices generated by Western capitalism and materialism. What is at stake here is not “authenticity” but architectural creativity and innovation.

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All photos are by the author. All Arabic quotations are translated by the author except as indicated.

