

The National Museum in Beirut closed its doors in 1975 when civil war broke out in Lebanon. Demarcating lines, drawn soon after, made this museum's location more famous than its collection. What was once a prominently civic building soon became no more than a stoic sentinel guarding one of Beirut's crossings, which separated the city's East from its West. Such a location's military importance was the pretext for armies or militias to use this building for shelter or strategy. Bellicose function transformed halls and galleries into barracks and bunkers where soldiers slept, fought, and died. The museum's walls provided for almost two decades protection from the caustic effects of war and were slowly disfigured into morbid bas-reliefs sculpted by shrapnel, bullets, and a great deal of madness. When military battles were no longer being waged in Beirut, this museum reopened its doors for a period of ten days and a flood of curiosity poured in only to be reminded of war ravages and be faced with graffiti soldiers left behind. Yet this curiosity was no doubt startled to find that part of the museum's antiquities collection had been transformed into a series of concrete caissons that had been built as casemates to shield the collection's larger pieces, and which withstood years of fighting. These seemingly permanent parallelepipeds were strewn in the National Museum's galleries and had been built at the rhythm of cease-fires as the sand bags with which they were first covered slowly turned into stone. Concrete parallelepipeds were now to become the objects (and subject) of a temporary exhibition.<sup>1</sup>

One might have expected that after so much atrocity and years of abandonment, the museum would be empty, probably looted. Some of the collection was indeed lost due to a civil war's swift escalation. Most of the collection, however, never left the museum, it was buried by curator Maurice Chéhab who had the instincts of an Egyptian high-priest as he sealed off the sepulchral objects in the name of posterity. The antiquities collection was literally entombed under tons of concrete and hidden behind secret passages and double walls. The hostile climate induced by war provoked a curator to "encrypt" an antiquities collection that for the most part had itself come from funerary crypts. Burying the collection may have been a protective measure taken in times of war, it was, however, an act akin to archaic notions of death wherein one recedes beneath the ground's surface in order to precede eventual resurrection. The collection was wrapped in sheets of reinforced concrete just as a body might have been mummified in order to prolong its after-life. War, in fact, had brought back the museum to its archetypal origin: the mausoleum, wherein bodies and art-collections are carefully preserved. Ironically, the museum's original architect could not have foreseen how his choice of a neo-Egyptian style would, half a century later, become complicit with the activities of those who were ultimately in charge of the collection's safeguard. The museum's front portico, for instance, is

an adaptation of an Egyptian architecture, which as a style had found renewed vogue after the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922. Examples of such a style are abundant in 1920's and 30's decorative arts as well as in many other architectures of spectacle.<sup>2</sup> This Museum's literal reference to an Egyptian edifice remains uncanny, however, in that it approximates two distant institutions that have suddenly a great deal in common: the National Museum guards, just as a mausoleum would, the secrets of its crypts, isolating them within the civic space of its grand architecture.

While Egyptomania alone might explain the museum's architectural style, the specific choice of exterior lotiform columns with closed buds seems premonitorily deliberate. The premonition being that one day the museum would become the mausoleum of a culture that no longer builds any. Lotus capitals are usually open when on a building's exterior — closed buds are reserved for interior columns — and there being closed might suggest that this "museum/mausoleum" was once the inner chamber of a much larger structure. Four large columns fronting the museum with their closed Lotus capitals might therefore indicate a semantic slippage between what might seem as an academic mistake and the fictional fact that these columns may have once guarded the interior crypt of a colossal edifice. These columns hint at an evidence that was to be amplified by a state of siege or by a war that served to heighten what in a museum seems latent: a process of entombment. A process that began on the architect's drafting board, was later made real by a zealous curator, and which was only to be revealed, perhaps completed, with the temporary re-opening of the National Museum in November of 1993. Latent or apparent, entombment became the paradigm that was to carry the meaning of a destroyed museum now to be temporarily re-opened after seventeen years of war. The public was invited to see its museum "mummified" just as one would have come to see the collection of sarcophagi that was once on exhibit in the same halls. The difference being, however, that there was now an element of mourning which Phoenician, Greek, and Roman sarcophagi lost once they had been put on display.

The function of the concrete parallelepipeds may have once been one of safeguard, yet having inhabited a space of exhibition and having been appropriated as the objects of a temporary spectacle, they clearly exceeded the utility of their function. Attributing titles to these concrete volumes was all that lacked for them to be transformed into a series of "Untitleds," which had been forgotten by the history of modern art. Their strict geometry indicates nothing but itself while protecting a famous collection of antique sarcophagi that had once been emptied out for exhibition purposes. They stand as minimal volumes and were exhibited as if they were a series of minimal sculptures, left bare, since that alone



was already reeking with the smell of melancholia, anguish, if not with death itself. After all, they hold within and outside them the memory of those who died in their proximity (militia men and ancient kings).

The concrete parallelepipeds were tagged with the title of what was inside them and construction for the exhibition simply consisted of a series of temporary walls made of galvanized metal and a large mirror box that occupied a prominent position in the main hall. As a surface, the wall's corrugation was similar to that of shipping containers that had been used during the war for all sorts of military purposes. These walls were built not only as a background for the parallelepipeds but as bandages or shields that could be used, abused and later replaced much like the many protective architectural details a war tends to invent. As for the trucated mirror box, built for the occasion and placed in the central hall, it served to complete that process of entombment that was latent in the building's egyptomaniac style and which was later made real by burying the collection in the basement and transforming the sarcophagi into giant monoliths. The slanted mirror prism was the final tomb in which the museum itself could be folded. It contained, if only allegorically, the building's interior in reflected and refracted form as if to blur, once and for all, the distinction between the museum and its funerary precedent.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The exhibition was entitled "Uprooted Heritage" and it opened on November 18, 1993 for a period of ten days. It was designed in situ and out of a collaboration between architecture, archaeology, and much benevolence: Anne-Marie Afeiche, Amaly Beyhum, Claude Doumet-Serhal, Suzy Hakimian, Carole Codsí, Helen Sader, Helga Seeden, Mona Yazbeck.
- <sup>2</sup> As in movies, movie theaters, and even in the design of steamships' interiors such as those launched by the French *Messageries Maritimes* in the 1920's, one of which, the "Champollion," sank during a storm on the beaches of Beirut in 1952.



Museum interior during "Uprooted Heritage" exhibition



Concrete parallelepiped & metal wall installation