

NATION-BUILDING MICRO-NARRATIVES FROM LEBANON AND KUWAIT

The journey of Sami Abdul Baki

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ABSTRACT

The golden age between the 1950s and 60s in Lebanon witnessed the return of talented Lebanese architects who pursued their architectural studies abroad and numerous successful collaborations between local and foreign architects. This period was characterized by maturity in modern architecture that was described as an ‘assimilation’ of the modern ideals. Similarly, Kuwait represented an attractive experimental ground for testing new ideas, designs and construction techniques, that were closely associated with Western architects’ contributions. The history of modern architectural development both in Lebanon and in Kuwait has been dictated with these grand narratives disregarding the lived experiences and professional works of those who are not part of the dominant culture or main plot. This paper examines the case of the prominent but not well-known figure Sami Abdul Baki. The aim is to reconstruct one portion of the narrative of cultural exchange between the two countries that was not properly covered by the dominant narratives.

KEYWORDS

modern architecture, nation-building, dominant narratives, micro-narratives, corporate architecture

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In the past centuries, Lebanon has been continuously reinvented and transformed by the long historical sequence of migrations, conquests, trades, and internal conflicts. The Lebanese state borders mutated frequently and the current capital Beirut has been part of numerous empires and systems of government including, Phoenician, Persian (6th-4th century BCE), the realm of Alexander the Great (4th BC), Hellenistic Seleucid Kingdom, Roman (1st century BC, part of the Roman province of Syria), Byzantine, Crusader, Mamluk, Ottoman and French mandate. More recently, in 1943, Beirut has become the capital of the Republic of Lebanon. Although characterized by a long sequence of historical events and urban transformations, today, it remains a unique city, not comparable, out of the ordinary and out of every norm.

In the literature, we can find many debates about multiple re-construction phases of Beirut, which mainly refer to the Ottoman and French proposals of regeneration, in the after-effects of World War I (Bou Khaled, 2018; Kassir, 2010; Davie, 2001; Nasr and Verdeil, 2008; Larkin, 2009; Alaily-Mattar, 2008). Some authors argue that Beirut was mainly the result of the Ottomans urban planners, who were responsible for the first phase of Beirut modernization (Kassir, 2010; Davie, 2001). The Ottoman reshaping plan, called *Tanzeemat* (1830s-1910s), modernized Beirut's building norm and upgraded its infrastructure. Until the mid-19th century, Beirut persisted in being a small provincial Ottoman town, but later on, a series of governmental reorganization progressively changed its configuration. The urban migration from Mount Lebanon rushed the growth of Beirut, especially in the 1860s during the civil war between the Druze and Maronite population (Davie, 1991; Kassir, 2010; Saliba, 1998; Salibi, 1990).

After the World War I, the new capital was chosen by the French as the principal city of Lebanon, Beirut thus was recognized as the dominant regional trade centre, an international node for air-sea-land transport and communication, a prominent historical and touristic place and a dominant core for banking and professional services. The new condition of the Lebanese capital was the complex result of a broader cities modernizations framework (Sawalha, 2010; Hanssen, 2005) and the spread of new town colonial planning ideas. The demand to modernize the city indeed came from abroad, but it also met the wish of the Lebanese elites. The new urban projects in Beirut, completed by the end of the 19th century, also had the purpose of staging the new Lebanese nation (Verdeil, 2001; Nasr, 1999; Rowe and Sarkis, 1998; Al-Harithy, 2010; Ghorayeb, 1994). However, the political tension increased overtime to reach the 1975-1990 Lebanese war. Today the city development remains driven by the private sector with little monitoring by the State.

The first traces of human settlements in Kuwait date back to 6500 years BC to the first regional maritime commercial interactions and trade connections between Mesopotamia and Eastern Arabia. Kuwait City, located in the Persian Gulf, established its origin by trading with some eastern African regions and Indian coasts. The Kuwaiti territory was colonized in the 4th century BC by the ancient Greeks and later

on the city was part of Alexander the Great's Empire. In 224 AD Kuwait was under the rule of the Sassanid empire when the city was a famous port and fertile area frequented by the pilgrims and caravans as a resting place on the way from Mesopotamia to Arabian Peninsula. In the 18th century, Kuwait City became one of the most frequented trade centres in the maritime route with Constantinople, Baghdad, and Aleppo, and it remained a prosperous port until the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, Kuwait City grew as one of the most important centres for commerce, pearling, and shipping in the Persian Gulf, and later on between 1946 and 1982, it became the most significant economic centre among the Middle East, by experiencing a period of prosperity called the 'golden era' (Fabbri, Saragoca and Camacho, 2018, 2016). At that time the Kuwaiti rich merchant families started a tradition of international cultural exchanges between Eastern and Western regions that grew rapidly in other countries.

With the end of the British protectorate, in 1961, Kuwait became independent by establishing a new constitution and the first parliamentary elections were held in 1963. Since the 1950s and until Kuwait was invaded by Iraq in 1990, Kuwait has witnessed an accelerated modernization growth thanks to the National Development Program (DP) that imposed the fundamental modern guidelines for planning and constructing the urban development. Many architectural ideas and technological inventions in the architectural field were imported from Western culture and adapted by British experts working abroad. The Kuwaiti urban planning institutions renewed the old master planning schemes and diffused the ideas of Modernity through the construction of many nation-building projects to represent the new growing middle class. The Kuwait City urban transformations and renovations were spectacular by adopting the innovative architectural and urban planning ideas to express the reached independence of the country and the establishment of a new Nation identity. During the 'golden era', many foreign and local architects exchanged ideas and collaborated in the construction of many relevant modern architectures.

Dominant Narratives of two Nation-building projects | Lebanon is a country with a disputed history, contradictory narratives, and a multitude of collective memories (Bou Khaled, 2018). The capital, Beirut, is a place where past and future events are intertwined, documented through told and untold stories, and the works of known and unknown people. It is so expected that its built environment, including a wide range of specimen architectural projects and memorial structures, do not reflect neatly its complex map of knowledge and cultural exchange nor represent precisely the project for building the nation. However, there seems to be a consensus that after its independence in 1943, Lebanon adopted a Liberal economy and instituted a relatively democratic political regime which attracted private enterprises, intellectuals and artists from around the region and the world fostering cross-cultural exchange and making Beirut a regional centre. While the country was observing this prosperous period also called the 'golden age', political elites and intellectuals have expressed a strong desire for modernity.

Talented Lebanese architects who have pursued their architectural studies abroad returned to their homeland and established numerous successful collaborations with foreign architects. This period is widely acknowledged for its maturity in terms of modern architectural development that was described as an ‘assimilation’ (Arbid, 2014) of the modern ideals in the local construction and praised for its commitment to social improvement through design. During this period, Kuwait was witnessing a restructuring of the state to overcome several challenges to the sovereignty of the country. Sheikh Abdullah Al Salam Al Salem opted then for modern reforms and capitalized on the revenues earned from the discovered oil as a mean to build a new capital city that represents his aspiration for an independent and modern state. This process was driven by the 1952 Development Program (DP) with an ambitious social, economic and political agenda for the entire country (Al-Ragam, 2015). The implementation of the DP heavily relied on the management of the British experts who imported their design and planning principles to an environment that is not familiar and a country they barely knew.

The adoption of the DP resulted in an unprecedented urban renewal and an expansion of the country’s infrastructure creating numerous social and economic opportunities for the Kuwaitis and ensured the hegemony of the state over a heterogeneous society in an unstable region (Al-Ragam, 2015). A new architecture (also referred to as ‘Al Imara al Haditha’) that is radically different from the traditional vernacular construction emerged and soon became emblematic of the project for building the nation and the backdrop of the most dominant narrative in the history of Kuwait.

Literature review | The term narrative comes from a philosophical field that strands aside from architecture and urban planning. In the 20th century, many authors nurture a flourished discuss the concept of narrating the urban growth and development of modern cities through the comparisons of various disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, architecture and urban planning. The debate reached the highest level of contributions around the 70s, when many thinkers and philosophers in Europe, such as Henri Lefebvre (1996), Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984), and Kevin Lynch (1960) adopted the narrative as a strategic tool for analyzing, observing and interpreting the urban growth of modern and post-modern cities and the urban phenomena.

Recently Wachsmuth (2014) referred to this term to express the design intentions related to the dynamism of the urban space. In the contemporary cultural debate, the narrative is also interpreted as a tool to enhance the value of architectural design discipline. In this way, the architectural and urban narratives fully interact with design practices, by proposing new ideas that anticipate planning strategies inside the urban complexity, and also promote and stimulate new debates inside a cultural frame that usually lead to decision-making models through the formulation of innovative urban and architectural theories. As an instrument that operates on/with urban practices, the narratives fulfil various roles: on the one hand, they are methods for understanding the ongoing transformations in the city; on the other hand, they are approaches that work

as a social and cultural incubator activating transformative phenomena in the city while developing new urban strategies for it.

The methodology of research | A series of semi-structured interviews with family, colleagues, friends and collaborators were conducted to collect relevant accounts depicting the discourse on modern architectural production in Lebanon and Kuwait and to identify main tendencies, inspirations and ideologies that shaped the work of Architect Sami Abdul Baki. Previous interviews with the deceased architect, his biographical notes and academic thesis project were also considered as primary sources. Equal importance was attributed to the unbuilt projects, as they also do contribute to a better understanding of the ideas that were not so well-received by the public and of the struggle between the political elites/decision-makers as well as the architect's relation to them. A comparative analysis between relevant projects was developed based on photographs taken by the authors on-site or other visual documents while sketches and drawings did not constitute the primary method for the analysis.

Finally, seminal texts describing the historical evolution and the physical transformation of both Beirut and Kuwait were consulted to reconstruct the dominant narratives of modern architectural development in the region. The professional journey of Sami Abdul Baki and other anecdotes related to his education, commissions and personal relations were verified against these dominant narratives and conclusions with regards to whether they fit within these accounts or not as well as whether they have an impact on or are just submissive to the process of nation-building will be described in the results of this paper.

The case of Sami Abdul Baki | The absence of urban planning and architectural regulations in Beirut and the implementation of the Land Acquisition Program in Kuwait permitted extensive freedom of expression and experimentation during the 50s (Maskineh and Pedrazzoli, 2018; Alnajdi, 2014). Modern architectural production represented the architects' cultural backgrounds, talents, passions, and freedom in interpreting contemporary trends and experimenting with new materials and technologies. Authors of these projects are not all as famous as Antoun Tabet, Farid Trad, Joseph Philippe Karam, John Harris, Scott & Wilson, Ernst Von Dorp, Michel Ecochard and Sayyed Karim. Some are less known, and among these architects is Sami Abdul Baki, a Lebanese Druze architect who graduated with an MSc. in Civil Engineering from the American University of Beirut (AUB) in 1947 and who was able to seize important architectural opportunities in some of the most significant places in Beirut and symbolic of the new nation-state in Kuwait.

Politics, ideology and belief | Sami Abdul Baki was born in 1926 when the first Lebanese constitution was promulgated and modelled after the French Third Republic. He grew up in a wealthy and well-educated family from the mountains in Lebanon,

who strongly believed in an independent Lebanon within a unified Arab State. His father Mohamad Abdul Baki was an active member of Osbat Al 'Amal Al Qawmi (which translates in English as the National Duty League), whose members explicitly fought against the mandate of the British and the French. He died in 1940, just a few years before Lebanon's independence. In his biographical notes, Sami Abdul Baki puts forward his injury while carrying the New Lebanese Flag in the front rows of the demonstrations against the French during the independence marches in 1943 in Beirut. He enrolls at AUB in the program of civil engineering this same year and graduates in 1947 within a rising concern of the administration towards Arab Nationalism and the promotion of the Pan Arab state in the country.

In his final year thesis supervised by Dr Khosrof Yeramian, Sami Abdul Baki clearly expressed his concern with regards to the new architectural language that was being imported from the west at the expense of 'continuing past construction techniques and architectural forms'. His research focused on the evolution of residential palaces in Europe and the Middle East through which he expressed his interest in the new opportunities that emerged from new materials and technologies and argued that they have released the construction from the burden of thick masonry walls and enhanced the relationship between inside and outside. In the concluding chapter of his thesis, he describes his design of the New Palace of Baal in Ain Baal as a mixture between world tendencies and a 'reluctance to abandon traditions of planning and architectural style'. It is thus important to situate Abdul Baki's thesis in the context of the architectural discourse development in Beirut at the time to better understand his position.

Since the declaration of greater Lebanon, the new state has been seeking a new identity to represent the modern nation that is independent of the Ottoman Empire. There seemed to be a consensus that modern architecture is a good and acceptable representation of this national aspiration. While some have argued that in the 1950s a balanced coexistence between modern and traditional construction was achieved through the oversimplification of details and exposed structure also described as a process of 'assimilation' (Arbid, 2014), others considered modern architecture to stand as a reminder of the French colonial period that preceded the independence and symptomatic of Lebanon's dependency on and attachment to the West. It is very probably that Sami Abdul Baki's political affiliation and ideological beliefs resulted in him siding for those who were willing to develop an Arab national identity and incorporate regional styles in architectural projects.

Trends and influences | Sami Abdul Baki's professional practice mostly flourished in the 1950s when he was active both in Lebanon and in Kuwait. His journey naturally started in Lebanon where he was commissioned several projects in the most significant places of the city and/or sitting on highly visible sites. While these projects are not comparable in terms of construction techniques, craftsmanship and character they stand out because of their inspiration from other architect's work and close reproduction of



iconic architectural forms (Fig. 1). One of Sami Abdul Baki's earliest commissions was a vacation house for businessman Chaffic Qassem. The project is located on a beautiful plot by the sea and along the main coastal road linking Beirut the capital to the south. It is referred to as the Umbrella by the residents of the area, about its pure concrete geometric shapes, and is believed to be a replica of an Italian villa that the client has visited during his trips to Europe. In fact, the project was completed in 1953, one year after architect Ferdinand Dagher completed a Chalet for Dr Raja Saab in Acapulco beach on the southern coast of Beirut. The similarity between the two projects in terms of location, program, as well as architectural language, is remarkable! It is important to note that the project designed by Dagher was considered to be an icon of modern architecture at the time and represented the new desired lifestyle of the country's elite. Interestingly, one of the surviving relatives of Sami Abdul Baki's first client mentioned that the Qassem family held numerous social events and extravagant parties in the Villa.

Another project designed by Sami Abdul Baki during his early years of practice was a centre for the Druze community in Beirut on an elevated site overlooking a large portion of the city. The project was initiated by Sheikh Al-Akl Mohammad Abou Chacra, one of the most inspiring figures of the Druze community who sought to unify its different factions and build its institutions. In the absence of any reference or design guideline for a Druze place of worship or prayer, Sami Abdul Baki could express his interpretation freely. While the interior organization of spaces and the circulation inside the building did not reflect any clear strategy or quality, a great deal of attention was given to the design of the two facades facing the main roads.

The revival of the classical order was clearly expressed through the repetition of modernized classical elements and their perfect symmetry which was not reflected in the layout of the plan. The monumental facades casted an overwhelming presence on top of the hill and communicated with a language of pride and control with its surrounding. Other projects built around the same time in Lebanon such as the building of the National Museum, the UNESCO palace and the Jaffet Nami Library at AUB, and abroad such a many Fascist and Nazi buildings, the Palais de Tokyo and the Palais de Chaillot in Paris, have also used a similar language and better integrated it within the overall design. Whether the revival of the classical order was inspired by these projects representing a nationalist culture or simply a common architectural trend at the time, the design of the Druze community centre certainly did not seek any origin or influence from the mountains or the traditions of the Druze community.

Similarly, the proposal for the martyr's square memorial designed in 1953 by Sami Abdul Baki – also president of Osbat Takrim Al Shouhada' (the league for the commemoration of the martyrs), exhibited similar tendencies and was inspired by other iconic projects namely the Arch of the Empire designed by Ludovico Quaroni and the

Fig. 1 | Sami Abdoul Baki's projects: proposal for Martyrs Square Memorial, Villa Chaffic Qassem and Druze Community Centre (credit: Authors, 2019).

Missouri Gateway designed by Saarinen. The project won the first prize in a competition and was never executed partly because of its over-ambitious design and the difficulty of its execution but also because it did not really meet the expectation of the public. In fact, both the revival of classical style and the new modern forms in the representation of their national identity did not appeal to the Arab nationalists nor to the other group that was supposedly more tolerant towards the west.

Projects in Lebanon during the 1950s often looked at the future expressing technical or spatial properties and were very conscious of their modernity. This modernity was to provide all aspect of modern social life in addition to guaranteeing the best image for the nation-state. Unfortunately, it is repeatedly interpreted in its aesthetic dimension and opposition to the traditional. While some architects were convinced that they were breaking new grounds with their exploration and that their search would promote a new lifestyle and lead to social improvement and eventually spread the ideals of social justice, they very often created otherness rather than a homogeneous core.

Personal Relations and Business | Sami Abdul Baki mastered six languages which facilitated his studies and travel abroad and helped him establish business collaborations with foreign partners. In fact, after he graduated from AUB in 1947, Sami Abdul Baki pursued a Master degree in Heidelberg University in Germany between 1953 and 1956. While most of his fellow student colleagues have opted to go to France or the United States for their more advanced studies, Sami Abdul Baki thought that Germany was a more 'natural' ground for him. In an interview with George Arbid in 1998, Sami Abdul Baki said that it was not his first time in Germany and that he held strong ties there. One of his relatives mentioned that his father who was active during the quest for the independence of the country in the middle of the 30s also had a network of connections in Germany. Correspondence between him and Hitler was also mentioned but no record of or more details about it was provided. During his stay in Germany, Sami Abdul Baki claims that he has partnered with the famous German Architect Ernst Von Dorp, based in Bonn, and delivered several projects together of which the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in Rio de Janeiro in 1956 and other residential and institutional projects in Bonn.

In the meantime, Kuwait was witnessing an unprecedented urban renewal and building its institutions led by British experts. This period coincided with the Nakaba and the subsequent rise of Arab Nationalism. Sheikh Fahd Al Salem Al Sabbah, who was the President of the board of development and known for his opposition to the ruler and the British interventions in Kuwait, appointed the brother of Sami Abdul Baki – Fouad, as an inspector general at the public works department in 1953. One year later, Shaikh Fahd was also able to shift the development politics of the country in favour of Kuwaiti contractors and Arab experts. Both events created a favourable environment for Sami Abdul Baki to capture important commissions for governmental building in Kuwait namely the Municipality complex and the Ministry of Information and guidance.

The Municipality complex was the tallest structure in Kuwait when it was delivered in 1959. Although it housed the seat of the National Assembly and became Kuwait's national symbol after the country's independence in 1961, the project was mostly recognized for its state of the art construction technologies characterized by its reinforced concrete structure, underground parking, the latest mechanical engineering systems and curtain wall façade covered with a densely articulated pattern. The Ministry of Information and Guidance, delivered in collaboration with Ernst Von Dorp, was also characterized by its adoption of the international style. It was characterized by a volumetric mass floating on pilotis, repetitive and modular sun breakers on its façade and a canopy on the rooftop that departs from the main geometry of the building. Both projects were featured on the cover of Arab newspaper and magazines as a symbol of the Arab pride and development. Despite the highly symbolic significance of these projects they mostly reflected an international approach to architecture.

There is a general consensus among theorists that the process of modernization cannot be dissociated from the West (Gaonkar, 2001) and that there is very often an explicit link between modernity and nation-building. The case of Kuwait is an excellent example of this 'catching-up' process through which the symbols of the Nation adopts forms and material from the West that are deemed capable of projecting the image of a modern nation and society (Al-Ragam, 2015). However, nuanced reading of the stakeholders and the circumstances of the commission of both the Municipality and the Ministry of Information projects to Sami Abdul Baki could lead to a slightly different conclusion. The blunt adoption of modern forms and principles is highly symptomatic of a deeper identity crisis between the different factions of the Kuwaiti elites. This statement is also an assertion of Peter Osborne's argument that 'the problematic of the modern purely applied, can help replace the problematic of national culture' (Osborne, 2000).

On this note, it is important to mention that Sami Abdul Baki was not commissioned any new project in Kuwait after the sudden death of Shaikh Fahd in 1959. During his active years in Kuwait, Sami Abdul Baki participated in several activities that go beyond his technical expertise. In fact, his negotiation skills and quality as a moderator along with his strong political connections allowed him to participate to many important petroleum-related negotiations between the state of Kuwait and other oil-producing countries before the establishment of OPEC. In parallel to his accomplishments in Kuwait, he also served as the honorary consul of Costa Rica in Lebanon for twenty-three consecutive years and run for the parliamentary elections in Lebanon twice in 1960 and 1964 as an independent candidate.

Conclusions | Sami Abdul Baki produced a range of eclectic architectural projects that occupied significant places in the city both in Lebanon and Kuwait during the peak of modern architectural development. These projects presented contrasting architectural languages, and sometimes contradictory ideological discourses. They were highly in-

fluenced by trending forms, techniques and expressions and were often associated with other architects' work. The paper attempts to describe these works in a visual comparative diagram (Fig. 2). The paper also asserts that modern architectural development in Lebanon in Kuwait is dictated by dominant or single narratives attributing it to their process of nation-building, sometimes describing it as being 'assimilated' by the local culture and in other instances representing a strong affiliation to the West. Through the case of Sami Abdul Baki, this paper argues that despite the dominance of these grand narratives, an account of parallel micro-narratives does exist and can contribute to a better understanding of the complex context of the two countries.

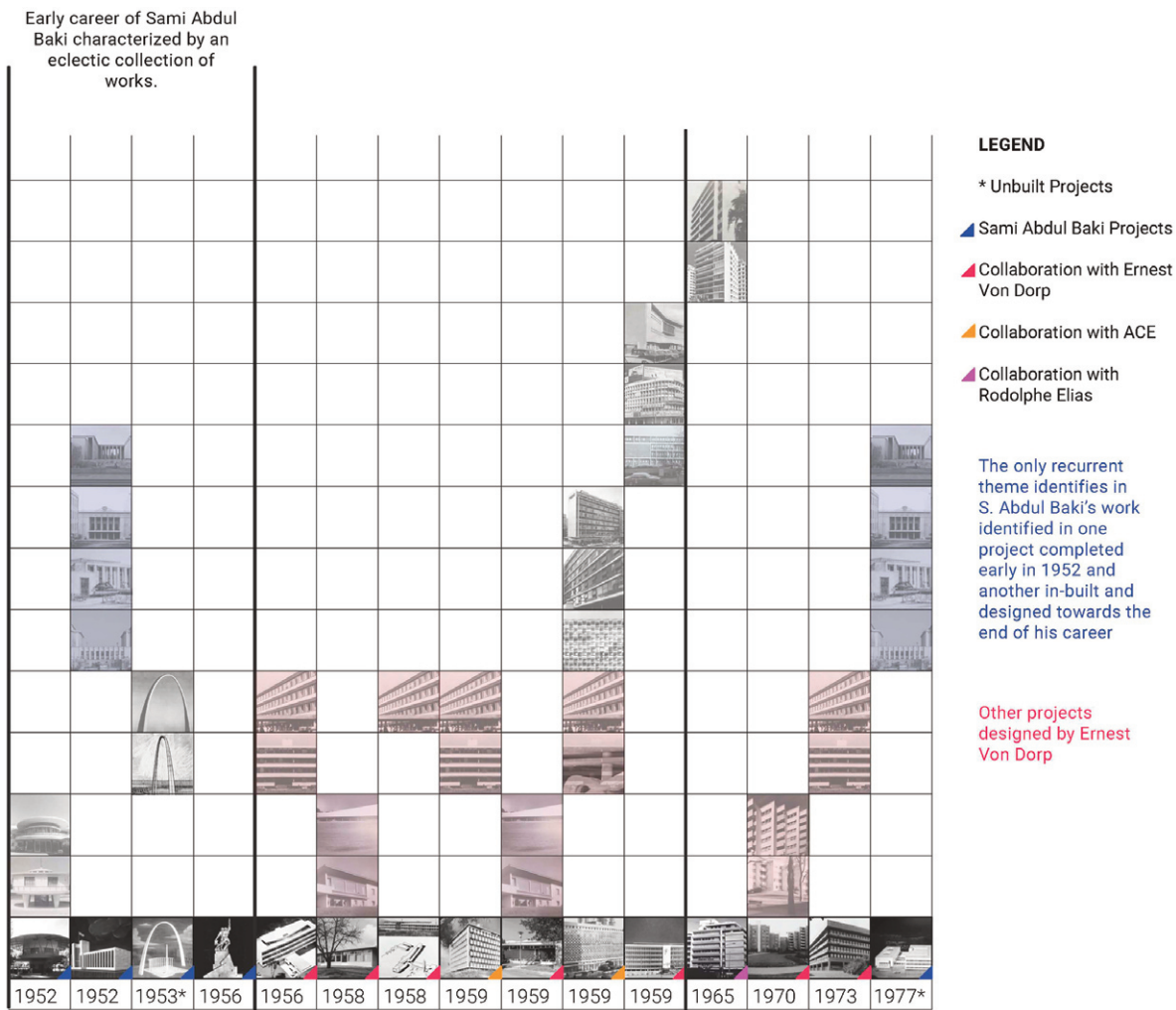


Fig. 2 | Comparative analysis of Sami Abdul Baki's projects (credit: Authors, 2019).

BEFORE	Sami Abdul Baki's projects		AFTER
The rise of Arab Nationalism	1947	The palace of Baal in Ain Baal	Assimilation of modern principles in Lebanon
Discourse on building national identity in Lebanon			
Discourse on regional architecture			
Revival of classical order in Europe and Lebanon			
Institution building in Lebanon			
Assimilation of modern principles in Lebanon	1952	Villa Chaffic Qassem	Lifestyle associated with modern construction
Discourse of new lifestyle			
Italian/European Architecture as a role model	1952	Druze Community Centre	Modern architecture in the representation of religious Institutions in Lebanon
Assimilation of modern principles in Lebanon			
Discourse on building national identity in Lebanon			
Revival of classical order in Europe and Lebanon			
Institution building in Lebanon			
Assimilation of modern principles in Lebanon	1953	Martyrs Square proposal	Intolerance for new forms as part of Lebanese National identity
Revival of classical order			
Bitterness towards the Ottoman period			
Discourse on confessional unity in Lebanon			
Kuwait modernization led by the British	1956	Municipality Complex	National Identity crisis
The rise of Arab Nationalism			Nostalgia about tradition construction
Resignation of British Political Agency			Project commissions to Arab consultants and contractors
Shift in the development of politics in Kuwait			In the flux of German Technical consultants to Kuwait
First Curtain Wall application in Beirut			Kuwaiti Sheikhs Architectural commissions in Lebanon
Kuwait modernization led by the British	1958	Ministry of Information	National Identity crisis
The rise of Arab Nationalism			Nostalgia about tradition construction
In the flux of German Technical consultants to Kuwait			Project commissions to Arab consultants and contractors

Tab. 1 | Narratives and micro-narratives framing Abdul Baki's work (credit: Authors, 2019).

While many have argued that modern architecture was adopted as an ideological tool for the promotion of political, social and economic changes, we believe that in many cases modern architecture was accepted without any prejudice, as an alternative to the past and representing a pure desire for innovation, novelty and avant-garde culture. In some other cases, modern architecture was simply rejected because of its affiliation to the West and the premises it promoted. The survey of Abdul Baki's work presents a good example of the disparate and sometimes conflicting narratives that described the development of modern architecture in Lebanon and Kuwait. These narratives not only describe the works of the architect themselves but can better describe the local circumstances, the interaction between the different stakeholders and the influences and trends that were circulating in a specific context. Narratives as thus are considered to be an efficient interpretative and investigative tool in understanding urban interventions and architectural manifestations.

Finally, by framing Sami Abdul Baki's work with the different narratives that co-existed at the time, this paper argues that these stories in some cases preceded the work of the architects and influenced it but in other cases, they might have emerged later as a reflection to it and other architect's work (Tab. 1). We believe that more research shall be conducted on the use of narratives in the analysis of the architecture and urban planning disciplines. We also think that more case studies should be undertaken in a context such as Lebanon and Kuwait to better reconstruct the circumstances that led to the development of modern architecture in the Middle East.

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