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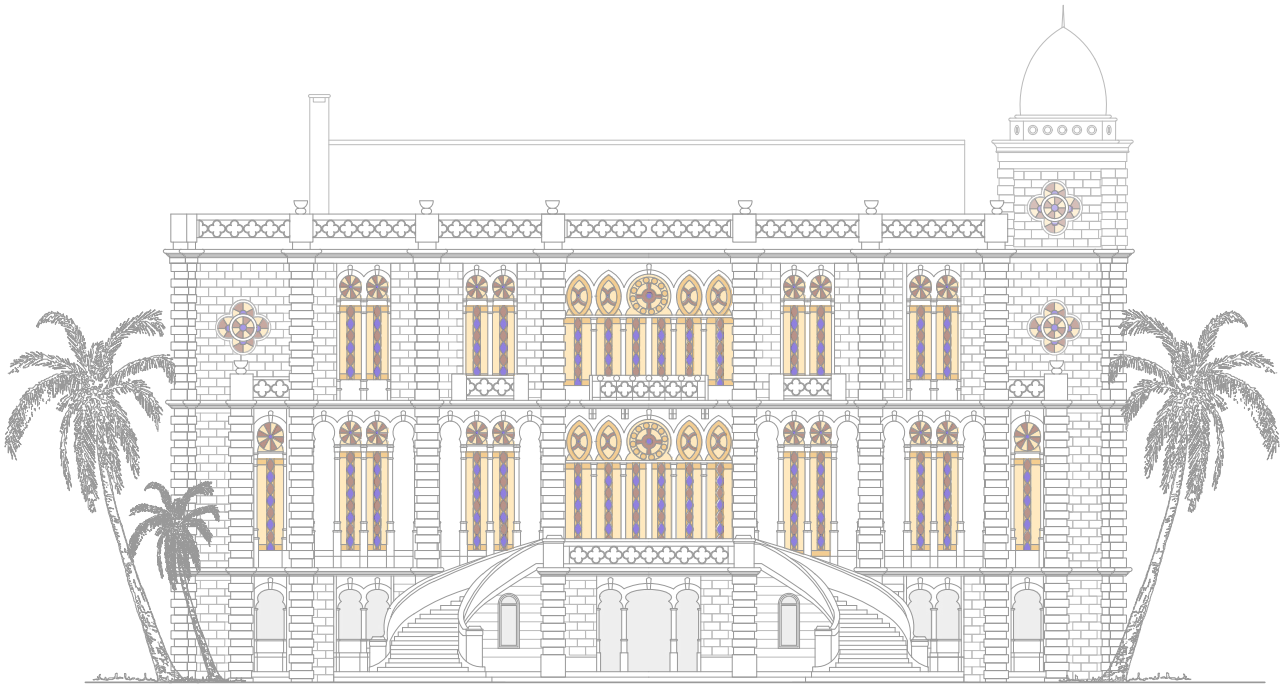
Master's degree in
Architecture for Heritage

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# Layers of Time: The Sursock Museum as a Palimpsest of Beirut's Architectural, Cultural, and Political History

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# Abstract

## ENG

This thesis examines the Nicolas Sursock Museum in Beirut as a physical record, or palimpsest, of the city's historical, cultural, and political transformations. It frames Beirut as a city shaped by successive and overlapping layers and examines how the architectural evolution and restoration of the museum reflect this condition. The research proceeds through a qualitative methodology combining historical research, site analysis, architectural analysis, and a semi-structured interview with restoration architect Jacques Aboukhaled, supported by archival material from both the museum's own collection and the Sursock family's private archive. It traces the building across three principal architectural moments: the first is its construction in 1912 as an eclectic Venetian-Ottoman villa embodying the aspirations of Beirut's mercantile aristocracy. The second is its conversion into a public museum between 1970 and 1974 under architect Grégoire Serof, whose modernist facade deliberately broke with the villa's historic character. The third is its underground expansion between 2008 and 2015 under architects Jean-Michel Wilmotte and Jacques Aboukhaled. This intervention nearly tripled the museum's area while keeping the new construction largely hidden beneath the historic villa. The thesis also examines the museum's near-total emergency restoration following the 2020 Beirut port explosion, with particular attention to conservation ethics, institutional responsibility, and international heritage funding. It then examines the museum's evolving public perception and its position within Beirut's urban pressures. Through comparisons with other cultural institutions in the city, such as Beit Beirut, it argues that the museum's continuity as a functioning institution, rather than architectural preservation alone, is what has sustained its role in the city's collective memory. The study includes architectural redrawing of the building's undocumented original form, and also redrawing of the different transformations the museum underwent over time. The drawings are not intended as an accurate representation, but as an attempt to reimagine and reconstruct the villa's appearance based on available evidence. This approach aims to situate a single building's history and architecture within the wider political and urban forces that have shaped Beirut and, at times, placed its heritage at risk.

**Keywords:** Lebanon, Beirut, Sursock Museum, Sursock family, architectural heritage, palimpsest, restoration, urban memory

# Abstract

## ITA

Questa tesi esamina il Museo Nicolas Sursock di Beirut come una testimonianza fisica, o palinsesto, delle trasformazioni storiche, culturali e politiche della città. Essa inquadra Beirut come una città plasmata da strati successivi e sovrapposti ed esamina come l'evoluzione architettonica e il restauro del museo riflettano questa condizione. La ricerca si sviluppa attraverso una metodologia qualitativa che combina ricerca storica, analisi del sito, analisi architettonica e un'intervista semi-strutturata con l'architetto restauratore Jacques Aboukhaled, supportata da materiale d'archivio proveniente sia dalla collezione del museo sia dall'archivio privato della famiglia Sursock. Lo studio ripercorre l'edificio attraverso tre momenti architettonici principali: il primo è la sua costruzione nel 1912 come villa eclettica veneto-ottomana, incarnazione delle aspirazioni dell'aristocrazia mercantile beirutina. Il secondo è la sua conversione in museo pubblico tra il 1970 e il 1974 a opera dell'architetto Grégoire Serof, il cui intervento modernista ruppe deliberatamente con il carattere storico della villa. Il terzo è la sua espansione sotterranea tra il 2008 e il 2015 a opera degli architetti Jean-Michel Wilmotte e Jacques Aboukhaled. Questo intervento ha quasi triplicato la superficie del museo, mantenendo al contempo la nuova costruzione in gran parte nascosta sotto la villa storica. La tesi esamina inoltre il restauro d'emergenza pressoché totale del museo in seguito all'esplosione del porto di Beirut nel 2020, con particolare attenzione all'etica della conservazione, alla responsabilità istituzionale e ai finanziamenti internazionali per il patrimonio culturale. Esamina quindi l'evoluzione della percezione pubblica del museo e la sua posizione all'interno delle più ampie pressioni urbane che hanno interessato Beirut. Attraverso il confronto con altre istituzioni culturali della città, come Beit Beirut, la tesi sostiene che la continuità del Museo Sursock come istituzione culturale attiva, piuttosto che la sola conservazione architettonica, abbia contribuito a preservarne il ruolo nella memoria collettiva della città. Lo studio include il ridisegno architettonico della configurazione originaria non documentata dell'edificio, così come il ridisegno delle diverse trasformazioni subite dal museo nel tempo. I disegni non intendono costituire una rappresentazione accurata, ma un tentativo di reimmaginare e ricostruire l'aspetto della villa sulla base delle evidenze disponibili. Questo approccio mira a collocare la storia e l'architettura di un singolo edificio all'interno delle più ampie dinamiche politiche e urbane che hanno plasmato Beirut e che, in alcuni momenti, hanno messo a rischio il suo patrimonio.

**Parole chiave:** Libano, Beirut, Museo Sursock, famiglia Sursock, patrimonio architettonico, palinsesto, restauro, memoria urbana

# Chapter 1
# Introduction

## 1.1 Context: Beirut as A City of Layers

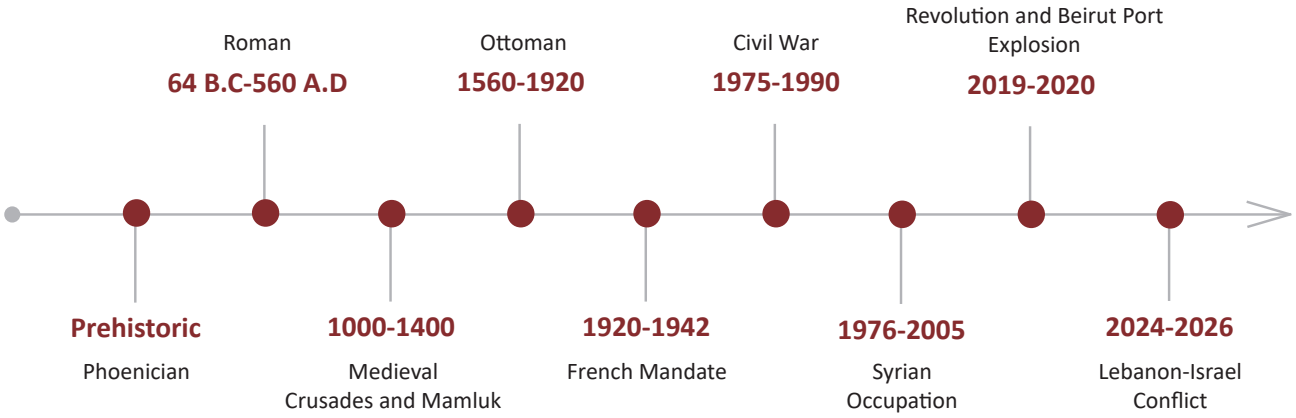



*Fig 1.1. Timeline of Beirut's historical development*

The Lebanese capital of Beirut is situated on a peninsula that projects westward into the Mediterranean Sea. The coast is diverse, with rocky beaches, sandy shores, and cliffs. Population estimates vary depending on whether they refer to the municipality itself or to the wider metropolitan area. UN-Habitat's 2021 city profile places population of Beirut municipality at approximately 1.3 to 1.5 million residents. This figure is difficult to establish precisely given the absence of national census since 1932 and also due to the large refugee and non-resident populations (UN-Habitat Lebanon, 2021). Beirut is frequently described as a "city of layers", a characterization that draws on the broader concept of the urban palimpsest, a term first coined by Thomas De Quincey in the early 19th Century to describe the layering of the individual memory, later adapted by urban theorists, archaeologists, and heritage scholars to describe cities whose physical fabric records and at times erases, successive historical periods (Seif, 2021). As Seif (2021) argues in his study of post-war Beirut, the palimpsest metaphor captures more than simple chronological layering: it also describes how different communities and institutional actors compete to inscribe their own version of the past onto the city's surface, a dynamic he terms the production of "present pasts". Beirut is known for its long history, commonly framed as stretching back over 5,000 years (Bodenstein, 2021). Its name is popularly said to derive from the Canaanite term for "wells", referring to the subsurface water table historically tapped by residents. Beirut has been, in Barakat's (2004) words, a city marked by centuries of civilizations "weaving and unweaving…. the urban environment" (p. 485), producing a city composed of overlapping and sometimes contradictory urban forms shaped by ideological, social, and economic divisions. The coexistence of diverse religious communities has further shaped Beirut's spatial organization, reinforcing patterns of segmentation and identity-based territoriality (Barakat, 2004). This layered condition is embedded in the city's physical development as much as its social one: from Phoenician, Greek, and Roman foundations, through Byzantine, Umayyad, Abbassid, Mamluk expansion, to Ottoman consolidation and French mandate planning, Beirut's morphology reflects successive historical strata. The late nineteenth century marked a particular turning point. As Beirut was drawn into European trade networks after 1860, the city underwent rapid demographic growth from roughly 5,000-6,000 inhabitants in the early 19th century to over 120,000 by 1900 alongside the emergence of a new commercial bourgeoisie that reshaped both residential patterns and architectural

expression (Barakat, 2004; Bodenstein, 2021). This class of European merchant traders, many of whom were Christian, began building summer villas in the gardens, orchards, and mulberry plantations on the hills surrounding the old city, including the slopes of Kantari, Zokak el-Blat, Moussaitbeh, and Achrafieh districts of Beirut. These villas reflected both their newly acquired wealth and their growing identification with Western cultural values (Barakat, 2004; Bodenstein, 2021, p. 17).



*Fig 1.2. Beirut around 1900. Photo source: Library of Congress. Retrieved from: https://unhabitat.org/lebanon-beirut-city-profile-2021*

Beirut's evolution is equally defined by rupture. The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) introduced profound spatial fragmentations, dividing the city along sectarian lines and producing lasting transformations in its urban structure. The Green Line became both a physical and symbolic border, reinforcing socio-political divisions and reshaping patterns of movement, habitation, and identity (Makdisi, 1997). The war's impact was not, however, uniform across the city, and this unevenness is directly relevant to the building at the center of this thesis. Barakat (2004) notes that pre-war Beirut's eastern ring, Achrafieh and Gemmayzeh in particular, was predominantly inhabited by Greek-Orthodox and Catholic communities, with the war reorganizing the city into increasingly segregated confessional territories rather than uniformly destroying it (Barakat, 2004). The Sursock Museum, which is located in the Achrafieh district, seems to have sustained comparatively limited structural damage during the civil war, a claim this thesis returns to and interrogates in Chapter 4, where the available evidence, and its limits are discussed. Post-war reconstruction further transformed Beirut's urban landscape. Large-scale development projects, particularly in the city centre, often prioritized economic interest over heritage preservation resulting in the loss of significant historical fabric, while new infrastructure and road networks disrupted existing neighbourhoods, contributing to fragmentation and discontinuity (Davie, 2001; Beirut Heritage Initiative, 2022). This dynamic was not limited to physical destruction: as Seif (2021) documents, Beirut's post-war reconstruction also became a site of contested heritage narratives, in

which different religious and political communities used the restoration, discovery, or new construction of monuments to reassert their claims within the city's downtown core. This process was largely undertaken by SOLIDERE (Société Libanaise de Développement et de Reconstruction), a Lebanese real-estate and urban development company established in 1994 to rebuild and redevelop Beirut's historic Central District after the Lebanese Civil War and, at the time, one of the country's largest real-estate actors in terms of assets. SOLIDERE itself described its approach as "building the ancient city of the future", a phrase that Seif questions given the scale of demolition the reconstruction actually involved (Seif, 2021). Contemporary Beirut reflects the cumulative imprint of these processes, or *a-thar*, the Arabic term for "trace". A 2021 UN-Habitat Lebanon report highlights that Beirut is shaped by rapid urban growth, informal development, and socio-spatial disparity. These dynamics were intensified by recent crises, particularly the 2020 Beirut port explosion, which caused widespread damage to historic districts such as Achrafieh and threatened the existence of heritage buildings.




*Fig 1.3. Martyr's Square in Beirut's Central District, showing the religious diversity in Lebanon through the proximity of different religious sites. Graphic adaptation. Source: Google Earth, 2023.*

Today, the priorities surrounding Beirut's heritage shifted from the restorative drives that followed the 2020 explosion toward a state of emergency preservation demanded due to an intensified regional war. The scale of this threat is evidenced by UNESCO's decisions to place Lebanese cultural sites under "enhanced protection"- the highest level of international legal safeguard available under the second protocol to the 1954 Hague Convention. Thirty-four properties, including the Nicolas Sursock Museum itself, received this designation in November 2024; a further thirty-nine were added in April 2026, bringing the cumulative total to seventy-three (UNESCO, 2024, 2026). This contemporary crisis, marked by airstrikes and by UNESCO's use of satellite imagery, in partnership with UNOSAT, to monitor damage in real time, has redefined heritage sites not merely as historical relics but as active frontlines in the defence of national identity (UNESCO, 2026). In this context, Beirut can be understood as a palimpsest: an urban identity continuously rewritten, in which historical continuity and disruption coexist. This framework is essential for understanding historical sites such as the Sursock Museum, which both embody and interpret the city's layered identity, and which, as the UNESCO designation suggests, are now recognized internationally as being actively at risk rather than safely historical.

## 1.2 Urban Development and Morphology

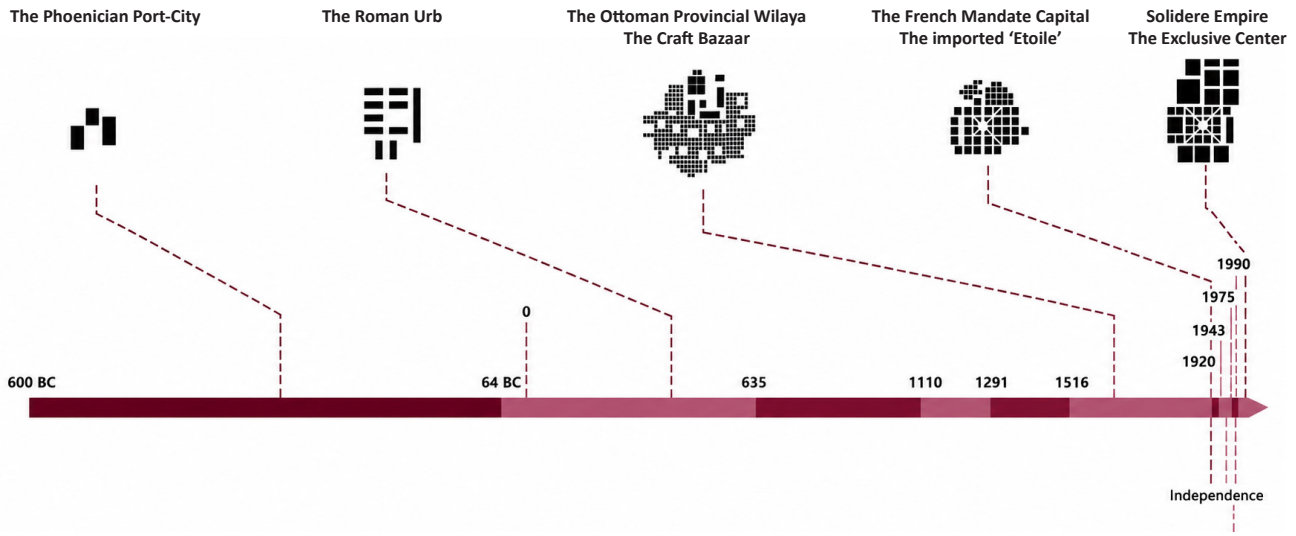



*Fig 1.4. Timeline of subsequent foreign Influences and Beirut's associated roles, focused on the Beirut Central District. Graphic adaptation. Source: https://webthesis.biblio.polito.it/27593/1/tesi.pdf*

Beirut's urban morphology is characterized by fragmentation, heterogeneity, and rapid transformation. Historical maps illustrate the city's transformation from a compact coastal settlement into a dispersed metropolitan region. Early cartography depicts a dense, walled urban core; later maps show expansion into the surrounding areas following the demolition of the city's last Ottoman-era wall in 1915, undertaken by Ottoman military authorities to create wide modern thoroughfares, and completed by the French in the 1920s around what became Place de l'Étoile, which displaced inhabitants and traders from the old city centre without compensation (Barakat, 2004; Bodenstein, 2021, pp. 18-19). The development of transportation systems and planning interventions facilitated this growth, transforming Beirut into a more interconnected urban system. This extra-mural expansion was itself shaped by regulation: an 1896 Ottoman building law mandated street alignment and set maximum building heights in the pericentral districts, a framework later reinforced under the French Mandate, while the establishment of a formal land cadastre in 1920 clarified individual parcel boundaries and made subdivision by inheritance or sale substantially easier than before (Fischfisch, 2011, as cited by Aoun et al., 2020). A 1931 proposal, which envisioned Achrafieh developing as a "garden city", was never approved and had no lasting effect on the district's form (Davie, 2001, as cited in Aoun et al., 2020). The civil war introduced fragmentation reflected in spatial discontinuities, and contemporary mapping highlights ongoing challenges related to expansion and governance (UN-Habitat Lebanon, 2021). Rather than expanding in a linear or uniform manner, the city has evolved through successive cycles of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction, producing a complex and often fragmented spatial and social structure, a condition that is not only visible in the built environment but embedded in the city's collective memory and identity.

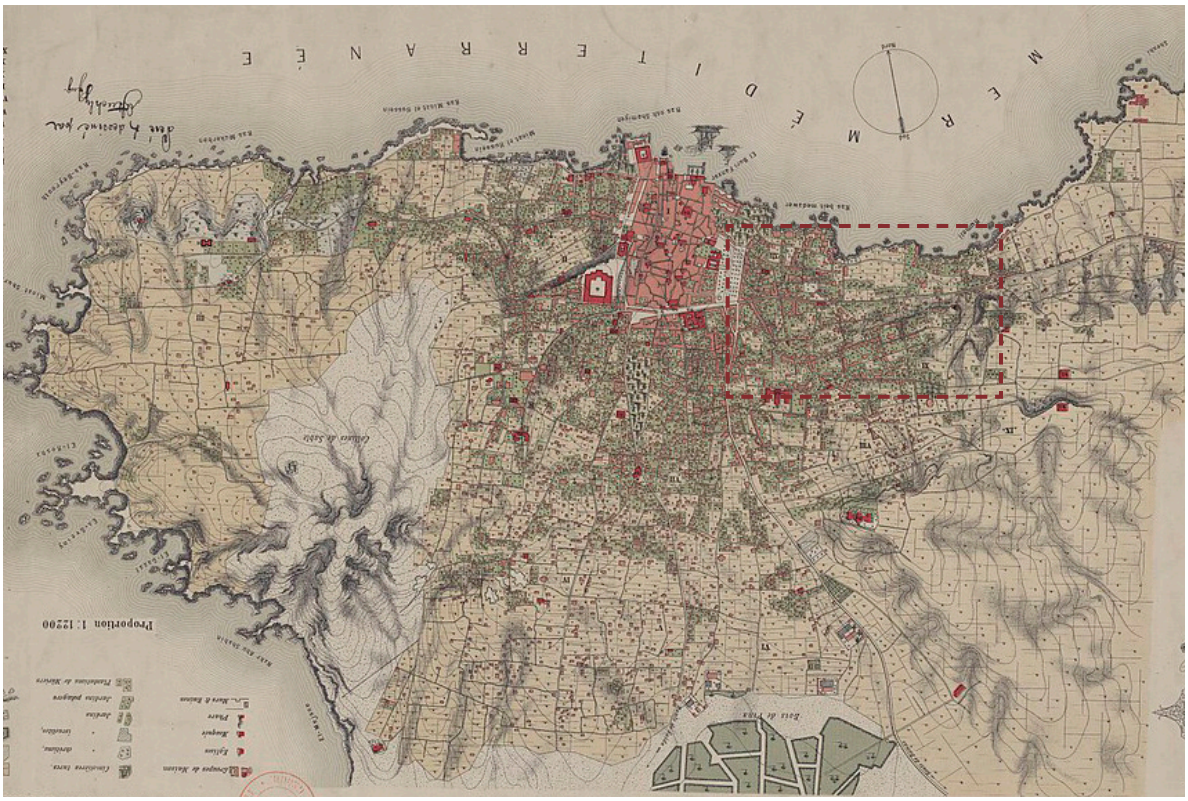





*Fig 1.5. Historical map of Beirut, 1876. Source: Bibliothèque Nationale de France Gallica.*

*Fig 1.6. Detail of the 1876 map of Beirut showing the site before the Nicolas Sursock Museum was built*

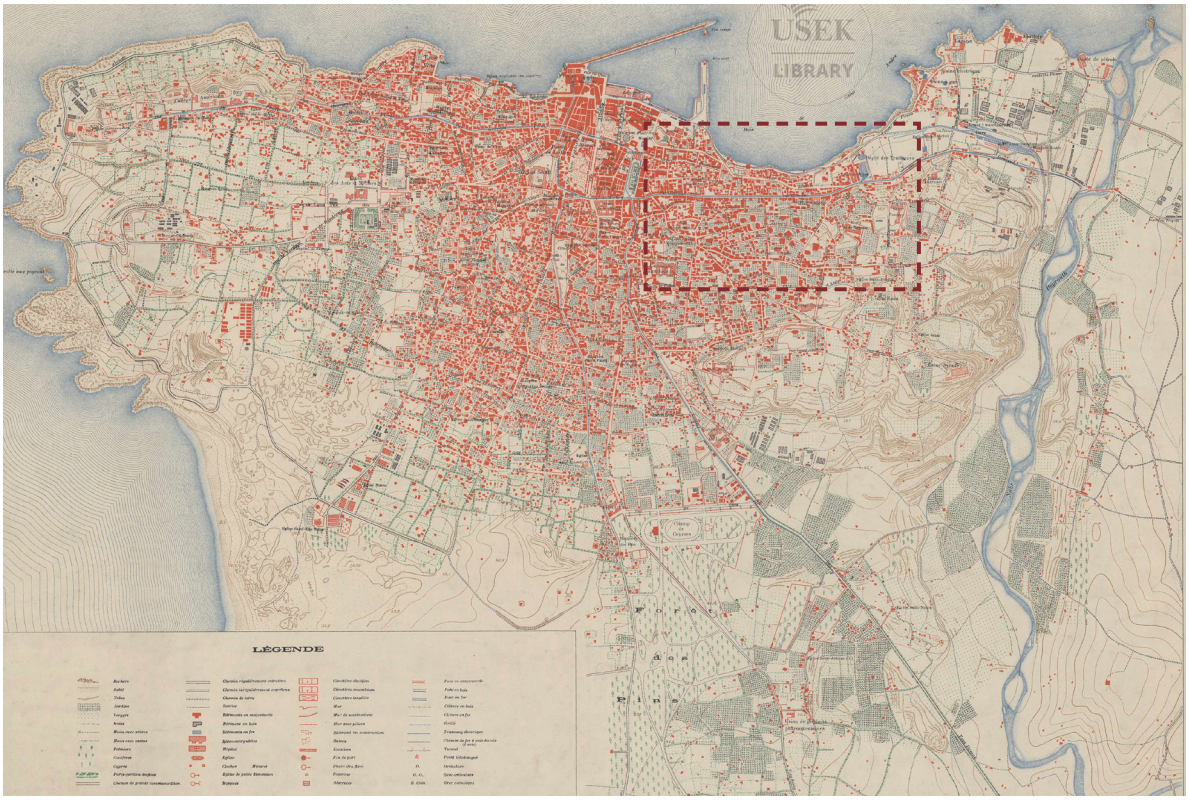






*Fig 1.7. Historical map of Beirut, 1922. Source: https://libguides.usek.edu.lb/blog/Map-of-Beirut-1922.*

*Fig 1.8. Detail of the 1922 map of Beirut showing the approximate location of the Nicolas Sursock Museum.*



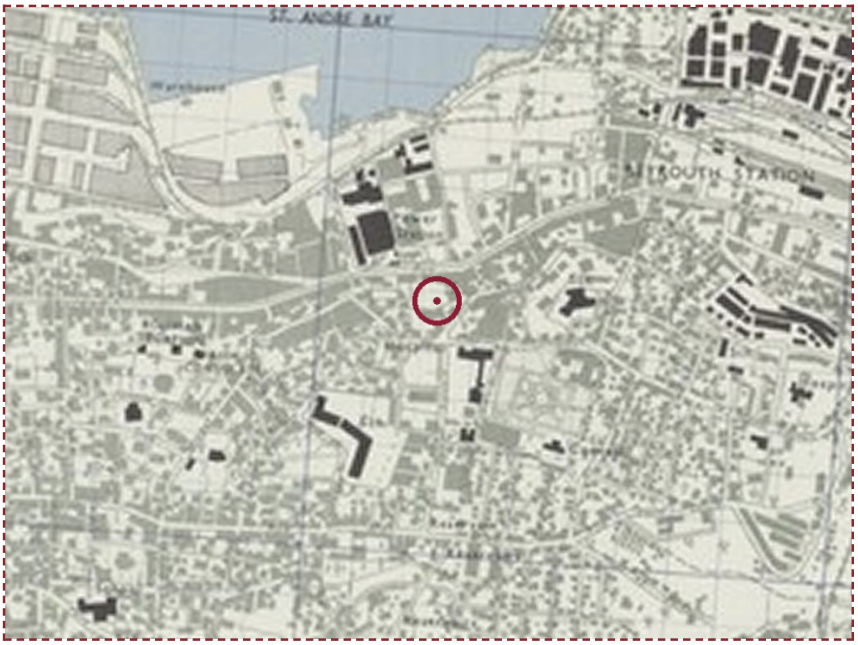




*Fig 1.9. Historical map of Beirut, 1961. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Old_maps_of_Lebanon.*

*Fig 1.10. Detail of the 1961 map of Beirut showing the approximate location of the Nicolas Sursock Museum.*

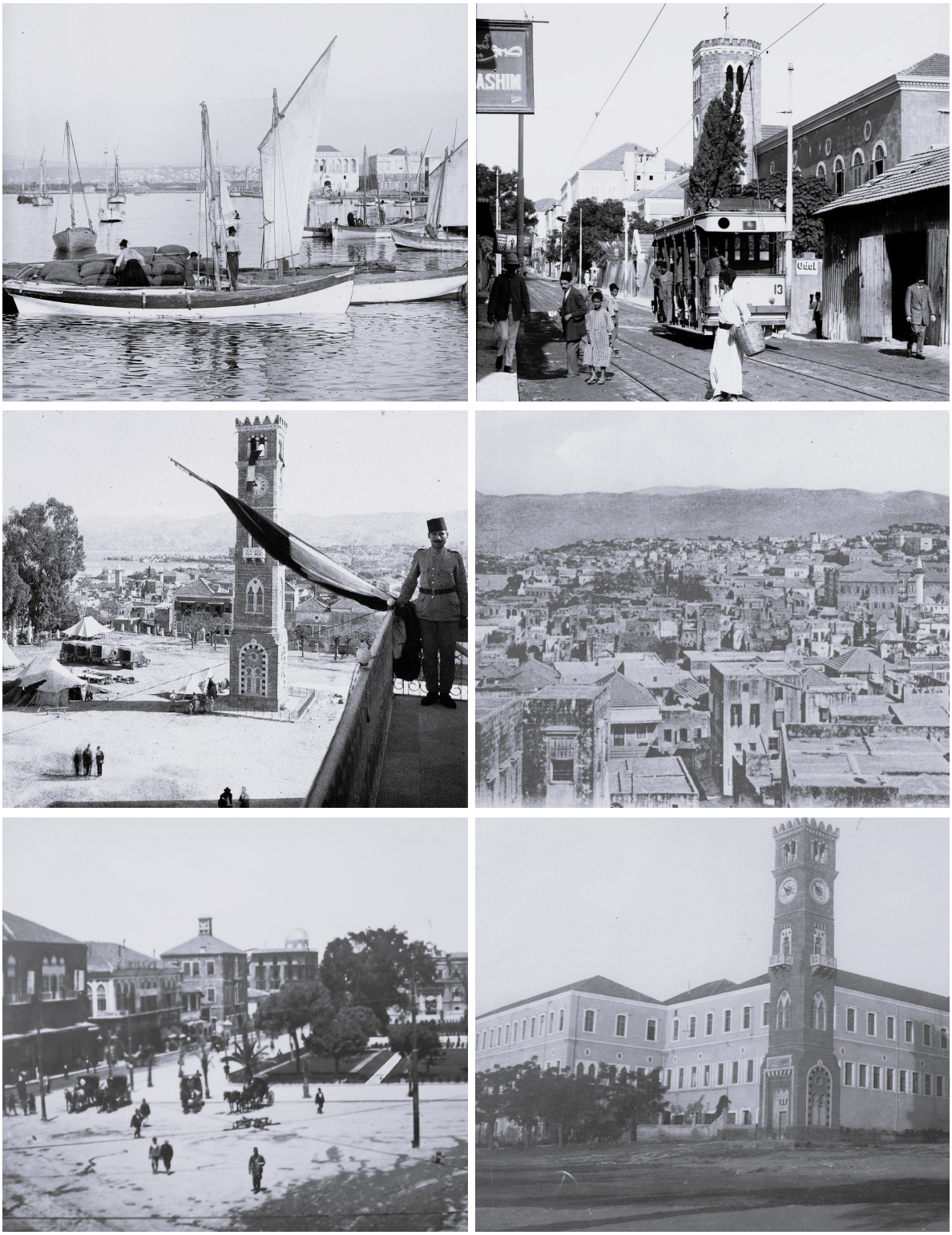


*Fig 1.11,1.12,1.13,1.14,1.15,1.16. Photos of Beirut from the early twentieth century (1900s-1920s). Source: https://oldbeirut.com/*




*Fig 1.17,1.18,1.19,1.20,1.21,1.22. Photos of Beirut from the 1960s and the 1970s. Source: https://oldbeirut.com/*




*Fig 1.23,1.24,1.25,1.26,1.27,1.28. Photos of war-torn Beirut during height of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). Source: https://oldbeirut.com/*



*Fig 1.29,1.30,1.31,1.32,1.33,1.34. Photos of Beirut post-war reconstruction in the 2000s. Source: Geogle Earth Pro, 2026.*

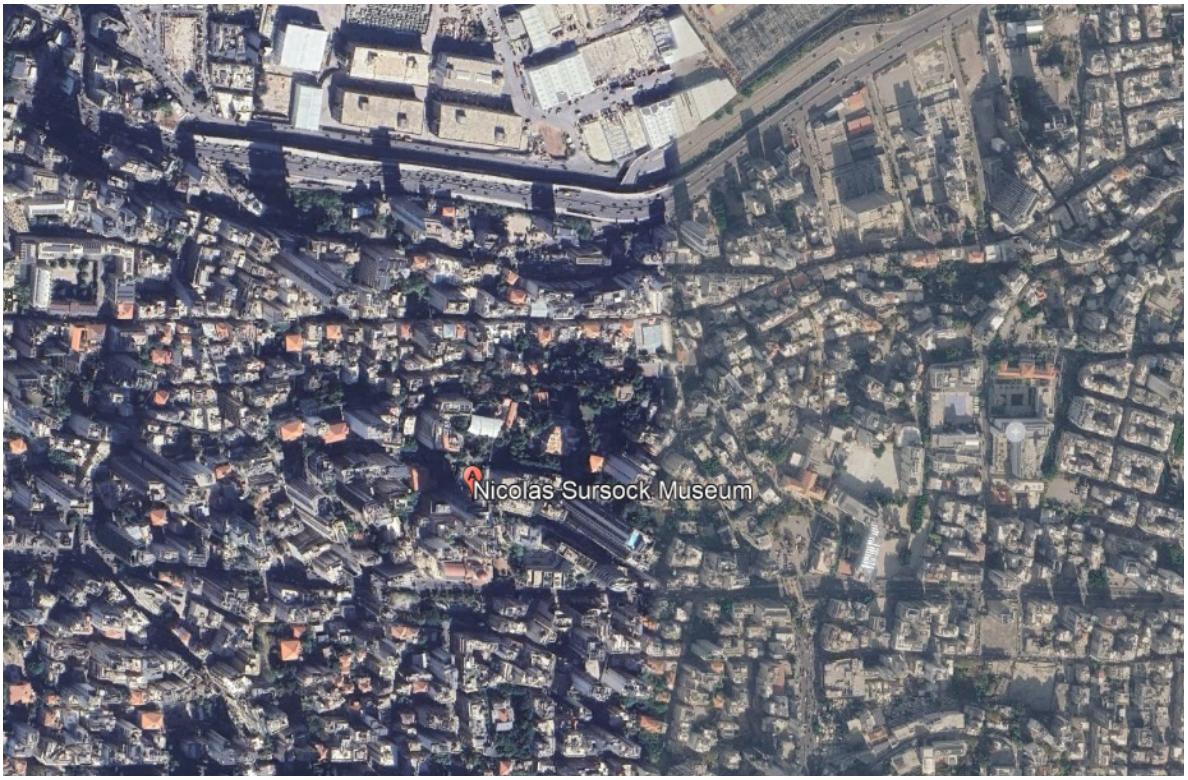
## 1.3 The Importance of the Achrafieh District and Sursock Museum

Achrafieh emerged as a key residential district during the 19th and early 20th centuries, closely associated with Beirut's Christian bourgeoisie, and in particular its Greek-Orthodox and Catholic communities (Barakat, 2004; Bodenstein, 2021). Initially characterized by freestanding villas and gardens built on former hillside plantations, the area later underwent significant densification as Beirut's "first-ring" suburbs filled in over the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Bodenstein, 2021, p. 18). Its architecture combines the local building traditions with European influences reflecting the aspirations of the families who developed the area during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Achrafieh is not a single large district, but it is actually a collection of smaller neighbourhoods, each holding its own character. Sassine, sits at the very top as the area's central high point. Mar Mitr is home to one of the city's main Greek-Orthodox cemeteries, while Mar Naqoula (or Saint Nicolas) showcases the grand palatial villas of the Sursock Street. Nasra, named after the prominent Dames de Nazareth girl's school, and Sodeco, a busier commercial square that is a gateway to the district's edge. Beyond the Sursocks, several other Greek-Orthodox merchant families are said to have driven Achrafieh's development, most commonly named as the Trad, Tueni, Gebeily, and Bustros families, who reportedly built their fortune through the silk trade, currency exchange, and taxation, and had become the district's largest property owners and taxpayers by the 1860s and 1870s. Several villas attributed to these families are said to still stand today as architectural comparators to the Sursock Museum building: Elias Sursock's palace, which reportedly hosted the General Gourard during the French Mandate before its demolition in the 1960s; Moussa Sursock's Palace, completed around 1870; the Fadlallah Bustros Palace, completed around 1863; and the Tueni family's Taswinat al-Tueini, built in the early 1860s (Hanssen, 2005; Saliba, 1998). Achrafieh's villa landscape did not simply erode gradually; its transformation was substantially accelerated by a specific planning mechanism. The 1954 Beirut Master Plan divided the city into ten zones and set density regulations under which the central heritage-rich districts, Achrafieh among them, received the highest permitted exploitation ratios, raising land pressure on existing low-rise heritage buildings and creating a strong economic incentive to demolish freestanding villas and their gardens in favour of higher density apartment construction (Fischfisch 2011 as cited by Aoun et al., 2020).

The Sursock Museum is an example of this transformation. Originally built as a freestanding residence within the villa landscape of Achrafieh, it reflects the shift from traditional urban forms toward more open, suburban patterns of living. The building originated as a private residence in 1912 and later became a public museum in 1961. This change gave the existing villa a new civic function while keeping much of its architectural identity, which represents a shift in the role of architecture within the city that aligns with the broader international trends toward adaptive reuse and heritage preservation. This transition illustrates how architecture can mediate between past and present, preserving historical identity while accommodating contemporary functions. The museum's importance was also formally recognized at the highest institutional level. In November 2024, the Nicolas Sursock Museum was among thirty-four Lebanese cultural properties granted the UNESCO's "enhanced protection" status, placing it alongside Byblos, Baalbek, Beiteddine Palace, and the national Museum of Beirut as a site of recognized national and international importance (UNESCO, 2024). This recognition is particularly relevant given the damage the museum suffered during the 2020 Beirut Port explosion and the restoration that followed. The building therefore represents both the vulnerability of Beirut's heritage and the efforts made to maintain its cultural institutions.




*Fig 1.35. New borders of Greater Lebanon in comparison to previous Mount Lebanon borders. Graphic adaptation. Source: Arab News by Antonio Munioz, 2020.*



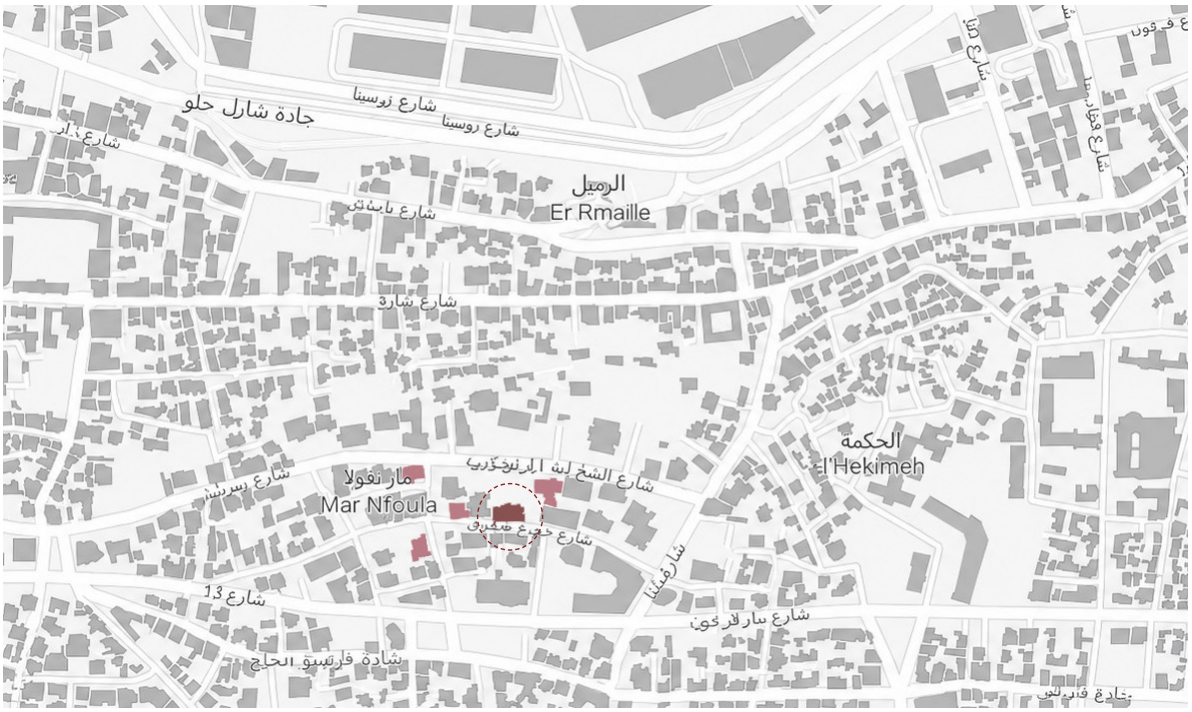




*Fig 1.36. Beirut city orthophoto marking the Nicolas Sursock Museum. Source: Google Earth Pro, 2025.*

*Fig 1.37. Map with Beirut buildings marking the Nicolas Sursock Museum and other Sursock family villas. Graphic adaptation. Source: https://beirut-built-environment-database-bul-aub.hub.arcgis.com/*



*Fig 1.38,1.39,1.40,1.41. Different villas in Achrafieh, Beirut with their private garden. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Achrafieh*

## 1.4 Research Questions and Objectives

The thesis studies the interplay between architecture, urban space, and cultural identity through the case of the Sursock Museum. The central research question is:
How does the architectural evolution and restoration of the Sursock Museum reflect Beirut's historical, cultural, and political transformations?
To address this, the research investigates four sub-questions:
1) Historical Evolution: What distinct historical phases shaped the building's original design and its subsequent transformations?
2) Socio-political Context: In what ways do the museum's changing architectural features mirror Beirut's shifting socio-political and cultural contexts?
3) Restoration Methodologies: Which preservation strategies guided the museum's transformation and expansion projects in the 1970s and the 2000s? Furthermore, which restoration techniques were applied during the emergency works following the 2020 Beirut Port explosion?
4) Memory and Heritage: How does the museum function as a living monument that shapes and mediates Beirut's memory and heritage.
The primary objectives of this thesis are: First, to analyse Beirut as a layered and complex urban system; second, to situate the Sursock Museum within this broader urban framework; and finally, to evaluate its architectural and cultural significance in relation to broader processes of urban transformation, shifting global trends in adaptive reuse, and the urgent heritage protection during times of conflict.

## 1.5 Methodology and Thesis Structure

This research relies on a qualitative methodology which combines historical research, literature review, and architectural analysis. The study draws on historical and urban studies, restoration manuals produced by the Beirut Heritage Initiative, and contemporary institutional reports, which together provide insight into Beirut's development and architectural typologies. Architectural analysis, including site observation, technical drawings retrieved from the Sursock Museum library and family archives, and semi-structured interview with architect Jacques Aboukhaled, examines the building's spatial organization, morphology, and its relationship within the urban context.

Limitations. This methodology has clear boundaries that should be stated explicitly. First, there are no records of the original technical drawings for the villa's 1912 construction. The reconstruction of its original spatial organization in Chapter 3 is therefore an interpretation built from the redrawing of architect Grégoire Serof's technical drawings on the first expansion, photographs, postcards, published descriptions, and comparison with contemporary Sursock family properties, not a measured survey. Diagrams presented in that chapter are labelled accordingly. Distinguishing confirmed elements from hypothesized ones. Second, the architectural analysis of the 2008-2015 underground extension relies mostly on a single interview with one of the project's architects; while valuable, this represents one professional perspective on a multi-stakeholder project, and is treated in the analysis as such. The technical drawings of the current building are meant to be private. Therefore, the redrawing of the current state was based on older drawings. Third, documentation of the building's condition during the 1975-1990 civil war is relatively scarce, and Chapter 4's discussion of that

period is consequently more inferential than the chapters dealing with better-documented phases. These limitations shape what kind of claim can be made with confidence versus what must be presented as informed interpretation. The thesis proceeds as follows: Chapter 2 situates the Sursock family within Beirut's cosmopolitan elite and traces the museum's institutional present; Chapter 3 undertakes a detailed architectural analysis of the building across its three major phases of construction (1912, 1970-1974, 2008-2015); Chapter 4 examines restoration practices before and after the 2020 Beirut Port explosion, along with the ethical and institutional questions they raise; Chapter 5 considers the museum's role in public memory and urban identity; and Chapter 6 concludes by drawing together what the case of the Sursock Museum reveals about layered heritage in a city, and a country, where the past remains, quite literally under active threat.

# Chapter 2
# Historical Background

## 2.1 The Museum Today

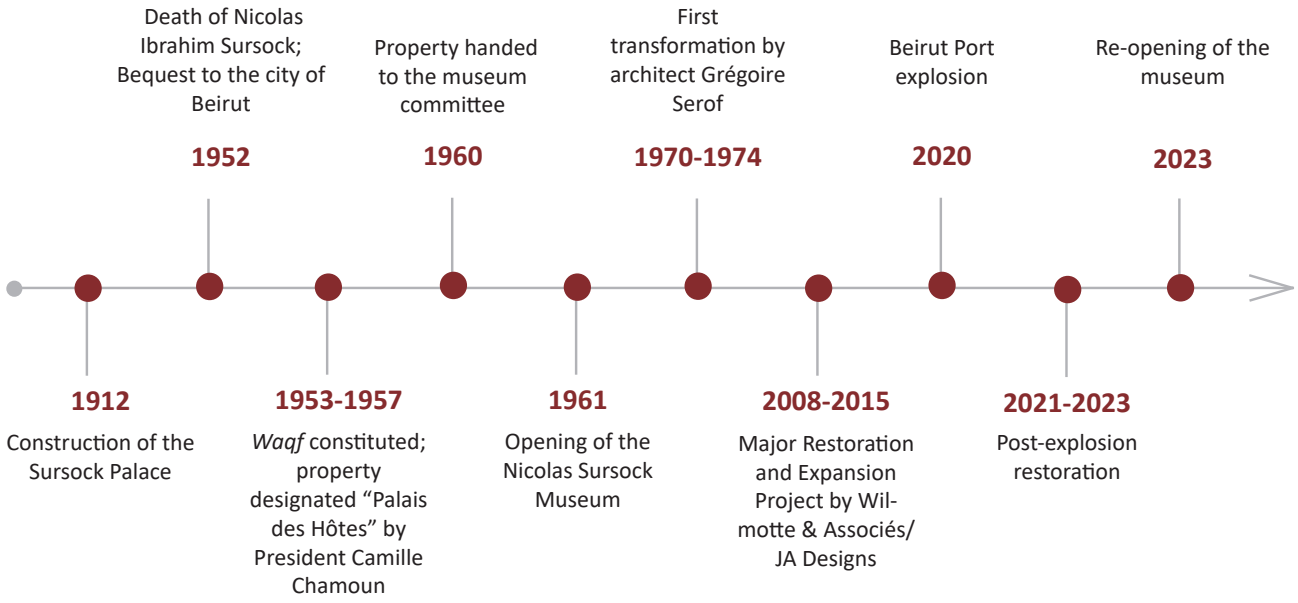



*Fig 2.1. Timeline of the Sursock Museum's architectural and institutional history*

### 2.1.1 Present Condition and Institutional Role

The Nicolas Sursock Museum continues to play a central role in Beirut's cultural landscape. Although heavily damaged by the Beirut Port explosion of August 4, 2020, the building was restored through a rehabilitation program led by UNESCO under the LiBeirut initiative, with financial support from the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), ALIPH, and the French Ministry of Culture. The museum reopened to the public on May 26, 2023 (United Nations Lebanon, 2023). The reopening marked the continuation of the museum's institutional role as both a heritage monument and a space for artistic exchange. The museum maintains the intention of its founder, Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock, by remaining a civic institution under the Municipality of Beirut while operating with curatorial autonomy. Its programme includes exhibitions and educational activities, providing a platform for discussion and reflection on heritage and contemporary art. In a context marked by social and economic instability, the museum functions as a consistent cultural presence in the city. Its work focuses on accessibility and community engagement to broaden its audience.

The museum holds considerable value for both its architectural qualities and its role in shaping Lebanese cultural identity. Built in 1912 as a private residence, the villa is a notable example of early twentieth-century architecture in Beirut (Sursock Museum, n.d.-b). Its conversion into a public museum in 1961 consolidated its transition from private patronage to public cultural institution (Osman, 2023). Beyond its architectural importance, the museum has influenced the development of modern art in Lebanon. Through its Salon d'Automne exhibitions, it provided an early platform for local and regional artists (Osman, 2023; Von Maltzahn, 2019). Architecturally, the museum reflects the layered history of its site. The 1912 villa was designed with pointed arches, colored stained-glass windows, and marble staircases, incorporating craftsmanship from local and regional traditions. The Salon Arabe, with its hand-carved Damascene woodwork imported in the 1920s, remains one of the museum's best-preserved interior spaces (Agémian & Kiwan, 2000; Sursock Museum, n.d.-b). The 1961 opening was followed, between 1970 and 1974, by an interior conversion of the villa into

an exhibition space under architect Grégoire Serof. The Salon Arabe, Sursock's office, and library were preserved as they were, while the remaining rooms became galleries, offices and storage spaces (Agémian & Kiwan, 2000). A second much larger transformation took place between 2008 and 2015, when architects Jean-Michel Wilmotte and Jacques Aboukhaled undertook a major underground expansion, extending the museum below ground while preserving the original villa above and increasing the total area from 1,500 to 8,500 sqm (Sursock Museum, n.d.-f). The restoration works following the 2020 Beirut Port explosion focused on repairing structural damage, stabilizing the facade, and updating the building's current systems to align with conservation standards (United Nations, Lebanon, 2023). What we see today is a combination of three main layers: the historic villa, the Serof-era transformation, and the Wilmotte/Aboukhaled underground extension. Together they form a coherent complex in which architectural heritage and modern museum functions meet and coexist.

### 2.1.2 The Museum Collection, Public Programs, and Curatorial Strategy

The Sursock Museum holds one of the most important collections of modern and contemporary art in Lebanon, documenting artistic production from the late nineteenth century to the present. The collection encompasses paintings, sculptures, works on paper, photography, and mixed-media practices, alongside archival materials that trace the development of Lebanese visual culture (Sursock Museum, n.d.-k). The main focus of the collection is modern and contemporary Lebanese art. The works reflect the evolution of artistic movements across the twentieth century and include themes of modernism, post-war experimentation, and contemporary practices concerned with identity, memory, and socio-political transformation. The collection features work by major Lebanese artists such as Saloua Raouda Choucair, Shafic Abboud, Paul Guiragossian, Etel Adnan, Aref Rayess, Hussein Madi, and Omar Onsi, representing diverse aesthetic and conceptual trajectories from abstraction and geometric experimentation to expressionist and figurative approaches. The museum's own current classification divides its holdings into five sections: Modern and contemporary Art; The Oriental collection, comprising Ottoman artworks, textiles, carpets, and icons; The Special Collections, which include a series of Japanese woodcut prints gifted by the Embassy of Japan following a 1966 exhibition at the museum; The Nicolas Sursock Legacy, the furniture and objects bequeathed under the founder's *waqf*; and the Fouad Debbas Collection (Sursock Museum, n.d.-k). Of these, the Debbas Collection is the largest single holding by volume: over 30,000 photographs, postcards, stereoscopic views, and albumen prints documenting Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Turkey between 1830 and the 1960s, assembled over two decades by the collector Fouad Cesar Debbas (1930-2001) (Sursock Museum, n.d.-l). The museum's curatorial programme is structured around temporary exhibitions, collection-based presentations, and research-driven projects that situate Lebanese and regional artistic production within broader international contexts. Temporary exhibitions frequently address themes such as memory, displacement, urban transformation, material culture, and post-conflict narratives, reflecting the socio-political complexity of Lebanon and the wider region.

The spatial arrangement of the building affects how exhibitions are curated. The historic villa provides the domestic scale and architectural memory, while the underground galleries accommodate experimental and large-scale installations. The museum therefore serves as a case study of continuity and adaptation in which its form is linked to evolving curatorial objectives and spatial requirements of the multi-media modern

museums (United Nations Lebanon, 2023). Following the 2023 reopening, the museum has expanded its educational and research-oriented mission, prioritizing inclusivity, documentation of Lebanese artistic heritage, and cross-disciplinary dialogue (Sursock Museum, n.d.-c). Programs such as Art Mediation Sessions, Family Sundays, and Sursock at Night aim to broaden and diversify the museum's audience and expand its social role within the city (Sursock Museum, n.d.-c). Recent exhibitions have explored subjects such as urban transformations, architecture, and the environment (Osman, 2023). The museum has fostered exchanges between Lebanese and global art scenes through collaborations with international institutions, reinforcing its position as a reference point for cultural dialogue in the region (Osman, 2023). The museum's temporary exhibition schedule has included, alongside *Je suis inculte!* (2023-2025); a tribute exhibition to the painter Abdel Hamid Baalbaki (27 February - 28 September 2025, Collection Galleries, Level 1); a presentation in the Twin Galleries running from March to June 2025; and a further exhibition curated by Marie-Nour Hechaime which ran from February 2025 and continued into 2026 (Sursock Museum, n.d.-d).

### 2.1.3 The Salon d'Automne: History and Current Status

The Salon d'Automne, launched alongside the museum's opening in 1961 following the bequest of Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock, is one of the most enduring platforms for contemporary artistic production in Lebanon. It was regarded as a recurring exhibition inspired by European models such as the Paris Salon d'Automne, designed to foster artistic experimentation and public engagement with modern art (Von Maltzahn, 2019; Osman, 2023). Per Osman (2023), the first two editions (1961,1962) were selected directly by the Museum Committee, with additional works borrowed from private collections. The third edition featured the open-submission, jury-selected format. Functioning as a recurring juried exhibition from its third edition onwards, the Salon brought together emerging and established artists and has been read as a "barometer" of evolving artistic practice in Lebanon, from early modernist tendencies to more conceptual and interdisciplinary approaches in later decades (Von Maltzahn, 2019). The Salon's history was not, however, continuous. Von Maltzahn (2019) documents that the Salon was suspended for eight years during the Lebanese Civil War, between its 9th edition in 1974 and its 10th edition in 1982. The reconvened 10th Salon opened in the year 1982. The then Museum Committee president Victor Cassir declared at the opening "we rediscover hope and light" after "dark years and long nights", while curator Loutfalla Melki framed the exhibition explicitly as a return, presenting it as "this 10th Salon d'Automne" in "the great tradition of the Museum Nicolas Sursock" (Von Maltzahn, 2019). The museum staged sixteen exhibitions across the seven years it was open that decade, twelve in Beirut and four abroad, the lowest annual average of any decade in the museum's second half-century, and its exhibition mix narrowed from the varied European/Lebanese/regional/global split of the 1960s to just two categories, European (42%) and Lebanese (58%) (Osman, 2025). The Salon continued, roughly biennially in its later decades, through at least its 33rd edition, held 25 October 2018 to 14 January 2019, with the awards ceremony on 10 January 2019 (Sursock Museum, n.d.-a). This appears to be the most recent numbered edition of the Salon documented as of this writing. Following the museum's 2020 closure and 2023 reopening, the institution did not revive the Salon as a new juried edition; instead, it mounted *Je suis inculte! The salon d'Automne and the National Canon* which ran from 26 May 2023 to 15 June 2025, curated by Natasha Gasparian and Ziad Kiblawi, a retrospective and critical exhibition revisiting the Salon's entire history "from the Sursock Museum's inauguration in 1961…. until the present day", rather than a new open call edition (Sursock Museum, n.d.-d). This reflects the museum's layered institutional history.

### 2.1.4 Documenting and Preserving Artistic Heritage

Archival work has become a central component of the museum's activities. Its documentation and digitization projects include exhibition catalogues, photographs, and artist files, which form a growing research resource for scholars and curators (Sursock Museum, n.d.-h). This approach aligns with Osman's (2023) view of the museum as a research-based institution contributing to the development of art history in Lebanon, and this documentation of past exhibitions also supports the interpretation of the museum's collection as part of the wider history of Lebanese modernity (Sabban, 2022). Beyond the museum's own institutional archive, a separate and considerable older body of material, the Sursock family's private archive, survives independently of the museum, and was consulted directly for this thesis. Following a formal request, I was granted access by Roderick Cochrane, son of Lady Yvonne Sursock Cochrane and Sir Desmond Cochrane, to the family archive housed in the Sursock Palace, a distinct building on the same street as, and facing, the Nicolas Sursock Museum. The family's archivist received me in a records room on an upper floor of the palace, containing a substantial holding of original documents relating to the family's history and assets, searchable through a digital database managed by Université Saint-Esprit de Kaslik (USEK). This material provided a source for the family and economic history. It did not, however, include architectural or technical drawings of the Nicolas Sursock Museum building, nor any documentation identifying the villa's original architect, a gap that remains unresolved and is marked here as an open question for further research. Trombetta's (2009) own study of this archive, conducted with the family's collaboration, provides a useful point of comparison and describes the collection as it stood roughly fifteen years before my own visit. He documents the materials as physically divided across three locations in the palace, the "small room" (ground floor, eastern annex), the "antechamber" (first floor), and the "cloakroom" (ground floor, beside the main entrance), organized at the time by the family's custodian, Mrs. Rita Hani, appointed by Yvonne, Lady Cochrane. He further notes a fourth, largely unexplored cache of materials held separately in the family's property administration office in the Gemmayze district (Trombetta, 2009).

The museum's own library and archives, by contrast, is a separate, public-facing institution, distinct from both the family archive and from the museum's exhibition-documentation practice discussed elsewhere in this section. Located on the museum's lower floor and open to the public Wednesday-Saturday, it holds a collection of approximately 4,000 books, publications, and periodicals alongside archival holdings that include Sursock Museum institutional records, exhibition and Salon d'Automne documentation, artist dossiers, Nicolas Sursock's personal archive, and the Fouad Debbas photography and postcard collection, among other donated archives (Sursock Museum, n.d.-h). For this thesis, I mainly consulted the library and archives at the Sursock Museum directly to retrieve books, articles, historical photographs, maps, and drawings relevant to Sursock Museum and Beirut's architectural heritage and urban planning, as well as general histories of the city, and some technical drawings and sketches relating to Grégoire Serof's 1970 renovation of the museum. I am grateful to Rowina Bou-Harb, the museum's Head of archives and Library, for her generous assistance and guidance throughout this research.



*Fig 2.2,2.3,2.4,2.5. The Nicolas Sursock Legacy Collection. Furniture and objects he collected or was gifted from various destinations.*
*Source: https://sursock.museum/content/nicolas-sursock-legacy*

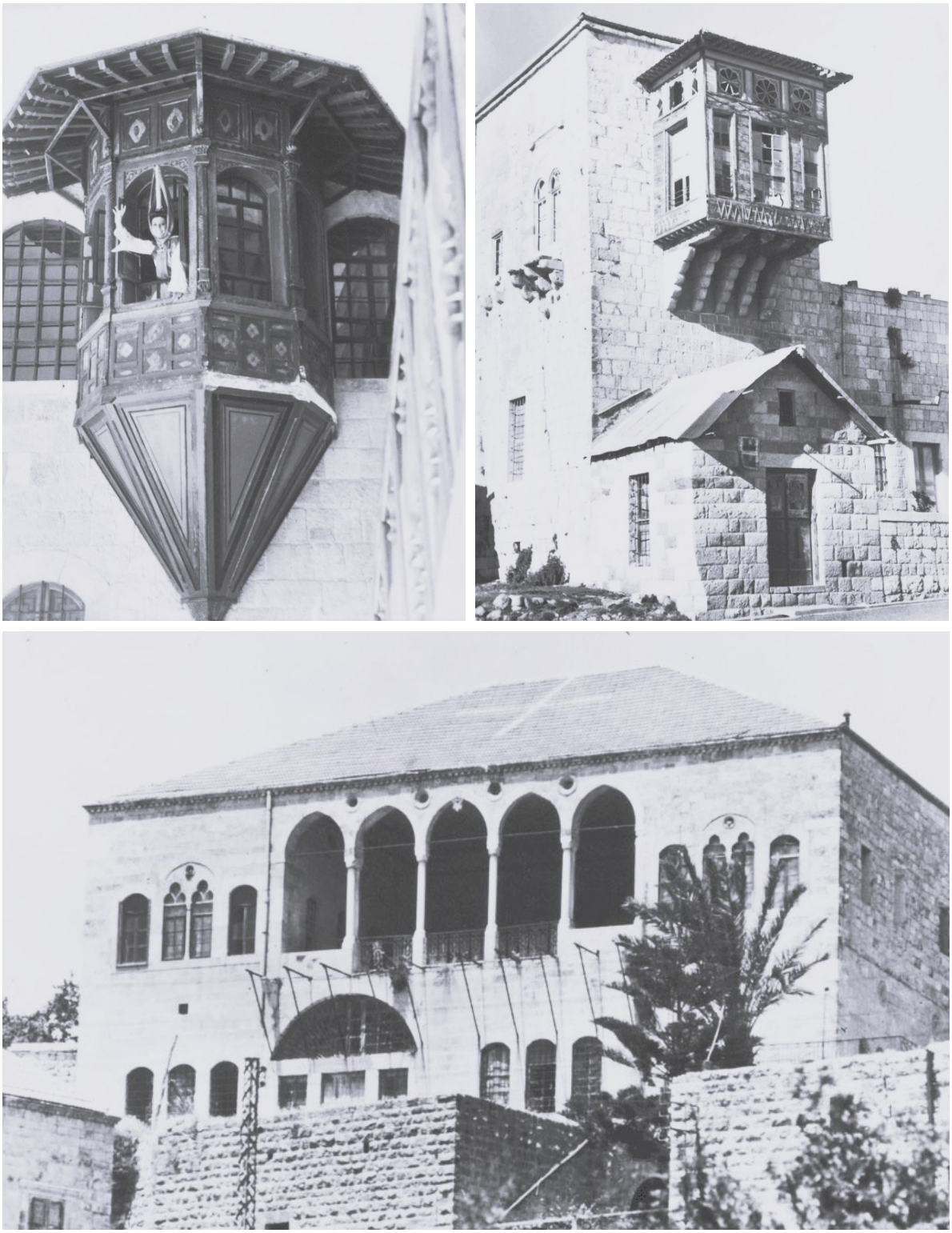


*Fig 2.6,2.7,2.8. Photos from the museum's "Special Collection" which showcase photographs of Lebanese architecture by the museum's first conservator Camille Aboussouan . Source: https://sursock.museum/content/special-collections.*







*Fig 2.9,2.10. Historical photographs of the city of Beirut from the 19th and early 20th centuries, from the museum's "The Fouad Debbas Collection". Source: https://sursock.museum/content/fouad-debbas-collection*





*Fig 2.11. The 5th Salon d'Automne, December 7, 1965. Source: https://sursock.museum/content/history*
*Fig 2.12. The 7th Salon d'Automne, circa 1967-68. Source: https://sursock.museum/content/history*





*Fig 2.13. The 12th Salon d'Automne, 1987. Source: https://sursock.museum/content/history*
*Fig 2.14. Trésors de l'Équateur exhibition, 1975. Source: Sursock Museum Archives.*



*Fig 2.15,2.16. The 33rd Salon d'Automne, 2 November 2018 -14 January 2019. Photo: Christopher Baaklini. Source: https://sursock.museum/content/33rd-salon-dautomne*



*Fig 2.17,2.18,2.19. Photos from the exhibition entitled "Je suis inculte! The Salon d'Automne and the National Canon" curated by Natasha Gasparian and Ziad Kiblawi, 16 September 2023. Photo: Walid Rashid. Courtesy of Sursock Museum. Source: https://sursock.museum/content/guided-tour-je-suis-inculte-salon-dautomne-and-national-canon*

## 2.2 The Sursock Family and Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock

### 2.2.1 The Rise of a Notable Family

The Sursock family is one of Lebanon's most prominent aristocratic lineages, with roots stretching back to the Ottoman period. The family is of Greek Orthodox origin and their history can be traced to Anatolia, where the family is documented in Mersin from the sixteenth century. The family tradition holds that their ancestors fled Constantinople after its conquest in 1453 (Trombetta, 2009). From Mersin, they moved to the Lebanese coast around Byblos in the village of Barbara, before eventually settling in Beirut in the early nineteenth century. There, the family established itself within the new mercantile elite reshaping the city's society. By 1832, Dimitry Abu Awn Sursock, considered the patriarch of the Beirut branch, had established himself as a private merchant and owner of a small silk-weaving factory (Trombetta, 2009). Dimitri became the founder of the family firm, registered under the name of his first-born son, Nicolas Sursock: Nicolas Sursock et Frères. The Sursocks built their wealth through landownership, trade, and banking. Their firm exported grain and textiles across the Mediterranean and imported European goods, developing a network that reached the cities of Manchester, Paris, and Istanbul. By the mid-nineteenth century, they were deeply involved in the modernization of Beirut and its region: financing the Beirut-Damascus Road, investing in the city's port expansion, and underwriting shares in regional railway projects. They were also financiers of Egyptian infrastructure, including the Suez Canal, and creditors to the Khedive's government during its financial crisis, while acquiring extensive landholdings in Palestine and Mount Lebanon (Trombetta, 2009). Their economic position was accompanied by increasing political and social influence. The Sursocks became one of Beirut's "municipal dynasties", with family members serving on both provincial and municipal councils under Ottoman rule. Their loyalty to the Empire, combined with strong ties to European consulates, positioned them as intermediaries between Istanbul, local communities, and Western powers: as dragomans, family members held honorary consular posts for Russia, Germany, and Persia, gaining protection and patronage from multiple foreign powers (Trombetta, 2009).

### 2.2.2 Cosmopolitan Ties and Diplomatic Roles

The Sursocks embodied the cosmopolitanism of Beirut's Greek Orthodox notables. They intermarried with families of the Egyptian, Brazilian, French, Italian, and Irish aristocracy, extending their social networks across the Mediterranean and Europe (Trombetta, 2009). Their prestige was reinforced by a series of diplomatic and civic roles documented in the family's private archive (Trombetta, 2009):

• Alfred Musa Sursock, eighth of Musa Dimitri Sursock's nine children and his third son, was a functionary of the Ottoman embassy in Paris from around 1899, rising to first secretary by 1909 and remaining in the post until at least 1913. He returned to Beirut around the outbreak of the First World War, sat on the Beirut municipal council (1919-1921), and was involved in a series of Beirut infrastructure projects, including the Société du Parc de Beyrouth, the Compagnie des Eaux de Beyrouth, and an early committee for a planned Musée National d'Antiquites et des Beaux-Arts. In 1920, he married Donna Maria Teresa Serra, daughter of Francesco Serra, 9th Duke of Cassano (1886-1966); his cousin Nicolas Alexandre Sursock married Maria's sister, Vittoria Serra di Cassano (Trombetta, 2009).

• Nicolas Dimitri Sursock (mid-19th century) hosted the Russian Grand Duke Nicolai Nicolaevich in Beirut in 1872, served as honorary dragoman of the Russian consulate, and presided over a trading empire with an annual income estimated at 60,000 pounds (Trombetta, 2009).

• Musa Dimitri Sursock invested in major infrastructure projects, including the Beirut-Damascus Road, and was, at different points, under the protection of the German consulate (Trombetta, 2009).

• Joseph (Yusuf) Dimitri Sursock (d.1923) secured a railway concession connecting Acri and the Jordan River and served on Beirut's provincial council (1888-1892) (Trombetta, 2009).

• George Musa Sursock (1855-1910) was dragoman to the German consul in Beirut and took part in regional railway-concession negotiations (Trombetta, 2009).

• Michel Ibrahim Sursock acted as a dragoman for the Persian consulate in Beirut (1910) (Trombetta, 2009).

• Iskandar (Alexander) Nicolas Sursock (1847-1925) held a seat on Beirut's municipal council (Trombetta, 2009).

• Yvonne Sursock (1922-2020), later Lady Cochrane, Alfred Sursock's only child, became a prominent figure in Lebanese heritage preservation. She served as president of the Nicolas Sursock Museum committee from 1960 to 1966 and founded the Association for the Protection of Natural Sites and Old Buildings in Lebanon (APSAD) in 1960, remaining its president until 2002. As APSAD's president, she campaigned against the demolition of historic buildings in Beirut, particularly in the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War, raising local and international awareness of the need to protect the city's heritage (Trombetta, 2009). She passed away on 31 august 2020, from injuries sustained in the Beirut port explosion of that year.

Through these positions, the family ensured their survival and prosperity in a turbulent political landscape. Their palatial residences in Beirut's Achrafieh district, surrounded by orchards, became symbols of wealth and modernity; the so-called "Sursock neighbourhood" was one of the city's most prestigious districts (Trombetta, 2009). By the late nineteenth century, the Sursocks were described as the "Rothschilds of the Orient", emblematic of Beirut's rapid rise as a cosmopolitan port city (Trombetta, 2009). Yet, by the early twentieth century, their fortune began to dissipate through mismanagement and, in particular, unwise marriage policy, leading to a gradual decline in financial power (Trombetta, 2009). Despite this, their cultural influence endured, particularly through Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock.



*Fig 2.20. Daoud Corm's 1882 portrait of Khalil Bey Sursock. Courtesy of the Emile Hannouche Museum. Source: https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2017/11/28/pioneers-of-lebanese-painting-star-in-private-museum-near-the-syrian-border*
*Fig 2.21. Portrait of Nicolas Sursock. Source: Sursock Museum Archives*
*Fig 2.22. Portrait of Alfred Sursock, circa 1929. Source: Sursock Family Archives*
*Fig 2.23. Portrait of Nicolas Sursock. Source: Sursock Museum Archives*





*Fig 2.24. Lady Cochrane Sursock with a visitor to an exhibition of Oriental carpets, 1963. Source: Sursock Museum Archives.*

*Fig 2.25. Lady Cochrane Sursock in her palace. Source: Sursock Museum Archives*

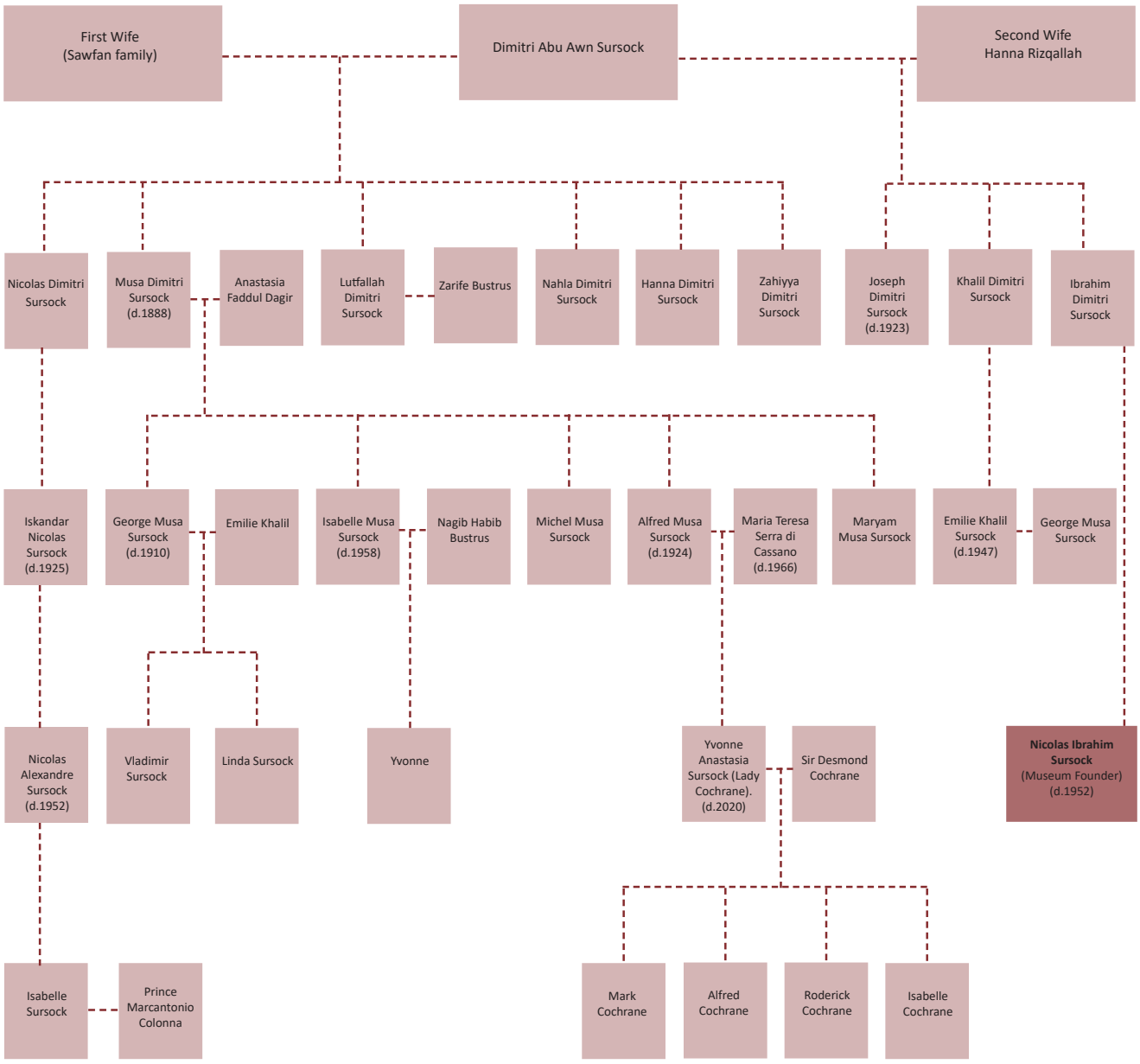



*Fig 2.26. The Sursock family of the Beirut branch: a partial genealogy. It presents a partial family tree retrieved from the sources available for this chapter, mainly from Trombetta's (2009), including family tree p.228 and extended in places by Alff (2018) and Gratien and Pitts (2014). This is not a complete or fully verified genealogy. Dimitri Abu Awn Sursock is believed to have 9 children in total, and Musa Dimitru Sursock 9 in turn, only some of whom are named in the sources available for this chapter.*



*Fig 2.27. A reception in the 1930s at the Sursock palace. Pages from " Regards sur Beyrouth: 160 ans d'images (1800-1960). Source: Sursock Museum Archives.*



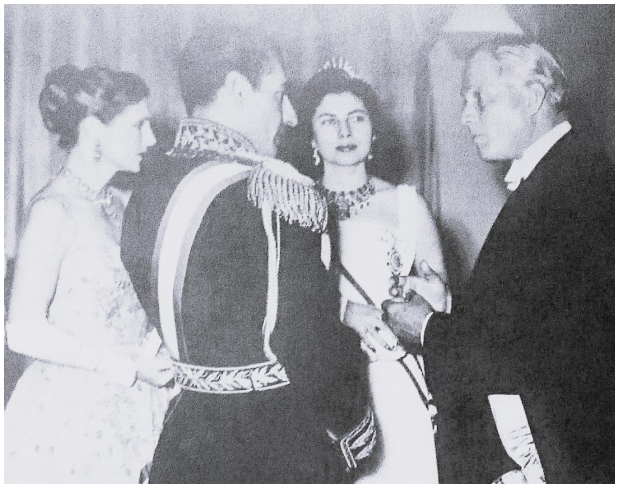




*Fig 2.28. The Sursock villa during Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock's occupancy showing a reception at the residence, circa 1934. Source: Sursock Museum Archives.*
*Fig 2.29,2.30. The palace as "Palais des Hôtes" showing the reception of the President Camille Chamoun of Lebanon and the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, during the Shah's visit to Lebanon in 1957. Source: Sursock Museum Archives.*



Le Musée d'Art de Beyrouth véritable Temple de la Femme sera prochainement ouvert au public

Le premier visiteur devant une statue d'argile

Un scandale des «call girls» menace la capitale anglaise

Une lettre au Mouhafez... et ses conséquences

L'Etat a un droit de regard

Lady Cochrane : «J'intenterai un procès»

Le portrait de Nicolas Sursock par Van Dogen.



QUERELLE AUTOUR D'UN MUSEE

par Denise Ammoun

Des hôtes inattendus pour le futur musée : Soraya et le Shah, Paul de Grèce, Fayçal d'Irak

Un musée désargenté, mais des responsables dynamiques

La Présidente doit veiller à la bonne marche des affaires

*Fig 2.31,2.32,2.33. The Sursock Museum on the headlines of old newsletters from the years 1950 and 1966. Source: Sursock Museum Archives.*

## 2.2.3 Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock (1875-1952)

*"As I love fine art and long for its development, particularly in my homeland, Lebanon... As I wish for this country to receive a substantial contribution of fine art works, and that my fellow citizens might appreciate art and develop an artistic instinct... I, Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock... set up in the form of waqf (trust) all of my estate ... in order that this property and its contents form a museum for arts, ancient and modern, originating from the territory of the republic of Lebanon, other Arab countries or elsewhere, as well as a space where Lebanese artists' work shall be exhibited ... it being understood that this museum shall remain eternally and perpetually ... This ensemble will be entitled the Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock museum, and shall be handed over to the mutawalli, who will be the president of the municipality of Beirut, regardless of which political regime will exist at the time."*

*Nicolas Sursock*



*Fig 2.34. Portrait of Nicolas Sursock. Source: Sursock Museum Archives*

Born into this environment of privilege, Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock inherited wealth as well as a cosmopolitan outlook shaped by the Arab Nahda and his European education (Osman, 2023). Described as an "aesthete" and "eccentric", Nicolas differed from his peers: while many patricians of Beirut invested in schools, or hospitals, he dedicated his fortune to the arts (Osman,2023). In 1912, he commissioned his grand villa in Achrafieh, blending local and foreign architectural elements. Its arcaded loggias, colored stained-glass windows, and eclectic stylistic references made it what Osman (2023), drawing on Melki's (2000) chapter in Le Livre, calls an "architectural jewel" embodying Beirut's cultural hybridity (Agémian & Kiwan, 2000; Osman, 2023). The villa evolved into a cultural site, serving as a gathering place for artists, intellectuals, and dignitaries, reflecting his social standing. His refined aesthetic taste is also evident in the design of the villa and in the art collection he assembled, suggesting a deep personal appreciation for the arts.




*Fig 2.35. A 1961 pen-and-ink caricature by artist Diran Agemian titled "Nicolas Sursock Offering His Private Collection."*
*Source: https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1339774/a-day-and-night-in-the-life-of-beiruts-art-scene.html*

### 2.2.4 The Museum as Legacy

Upon his death in December 1952, Nicolas Sursock left a will that transformed his residence into a cultural endowment (*Waqf*). He never married and left no direct descendants; instead, his will bequeath his residence and art collection to the city of Beirut to establish a public museum of fine arts. He declared his desire "to set up in the form of *Waqf* all my estate in order that his property and its contents form a museum for arts, ancient and modern, originating from the territory of the Republic of Lebanon, other Arab countries or elsewhere". This museum was to remain "eternal and perpetual", entrusted to the municipality of Beirut. (Sursock Museum, n.d.-f). The path from his death to the museum's opening was neither immediate nor straightforward. The *Waqf* was formally constituted on 14 January 1953; that same year, under President Camille Chamoun, the property was designated a *Palais d'Hôtes*, housing visiting heads of state, before being reinstated toward the museum's founding in 1957. The mansion was formally handed over to the newly formed Museum Committee at the end of 1960, and the Nicolas Sursock Museum was inaugurated in 1961 (Sabban, 2022). The *Waqf* is not entirely dissimilar to the western legal forms of a trust or foundation. The role of custodian of the *Waqf*, the *mutawali*, was assigned to the president of the Municipality of Beirut, "regardless of which political regime" was in power at the time, per terms of the will itself (Sursock Museum, n.d.-f). The museum quickly became Lebanon's foremost institution of modern and contemporary art, most notably through the Salon d'Automne, which institutionalized artistic production and helped shape cultural taste (Osman, 2023). While it faced some criticism, in the historiography, for the limited scope of its inherited art collection, the museum nonetheless projected an image of cultural refinement and consolidated the Sursock name as synonymous with Beirut's artistic and intellectual identity. Through Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock's vision, the family inscribed itself permanently into Lebanon's cultural landscape, and the museum stood, and stands, as a bridge between East and West, tradition and modernity, and as a monument to the role of private initiative in shaping Beirut's urban and cultural heritage (Trombetta, 2009; Osman, 2023; Agémian & Kiwan, 2000).

The legacy embodied by the museum is not separate from the vulnerabilities affecting Beirut's wider cultural heritage. The protection and preservation of cultural heritage become particularly critical in contexts of prolonged political, economic, and social instability, where institutional capacity is weakened and heritage sites become increasingly vulnerable to neglect, damage, and destruction. The government has faced increasing challenges in implementing heritage-protection policy since the financial crisis that began in 2019 and deepened with the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, responsibility for preserving the cultural assets has fallen substantially to NGOs and UNESCO. The architectural heritage of Beirut has been particularly vulnerable: at least 8,000 buildings were affected by the 2020 port explosion, among them an estimated 640 historic buildings, approximately 60 of which were assessed as being at risk of collapse (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2020). In 2017, UNESCO's regional office in Beirut launched a capacity-building project, funded by the Government of Japan and implemented with the Lebanese National Commission for UNESCO, aimed at strengthening institutional infrastructure for safeguarding Lebanese living heritage (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.). In September 2020, ICOMOS, ICOM, and ALIPH announced a joint task force dedicated to the protection of Beirut's heritage, coordinating funding and field action in cooperation with the Directorate General of Antiquities (DGA) and the wider international community (United Nations Lebanon, 2023).

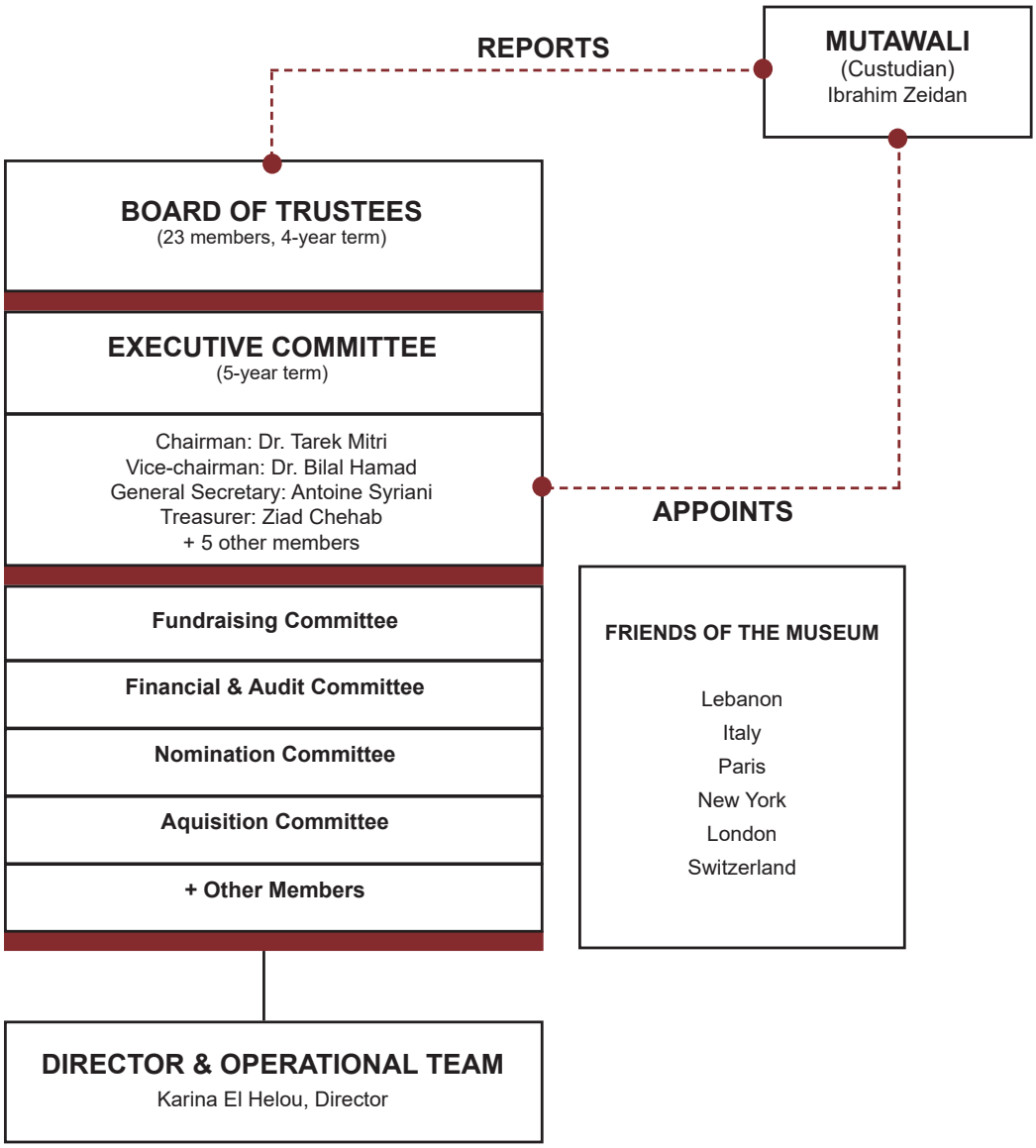



*Fig 2.36. Diagram showing the governance and the main stakeholders/actors of the Sursock Museum. Graphic adaptation. Source: https://pay.sursock.museum/upload/9863websiteSursockMuseumParisFundraisingLeaflet-EN-05-Preview-BAT02.pdf.*

# Chapter 3
# Architectural Analysis

## 3.1 Original Architecture

The Nicolas Sursock Museum was originally constructed as the private residence of Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock in 1912. The villa reflects the cosmopolitan architectural environment of early twentieth century Beirut, a period through which elite families expressed wealth and cultural identity through eclectic architecture (Davie, 2001). The architecture of the villa combines Ottoman residential elements with Venetian and Mediterranean stylistic influence, reflecting Beirut's historical crossroads between East and West. This hybrid style is characteristic of Beirut's urban architecture during the late Ottoman and early French Mandate period. This hybridity was not an isolated architectural choice, but part of a documented citywide phenomenon. Saliba (1998, p. 29) frames the "hybridization of domestic architecture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" as a "general trend that pervaded both the metropolises of colonial powers and their overseas territories", arguing that this hybridity "holds within its core the dialectic relationship between modernization and its twin phenomenon: cultural hegemony", and this dualism between tradition and modernism is legible in the "Western appliqué facades on traditional interiors" characterizing bourgeois residential buildings, "from Alexandria to Beirut to Istanbul". This framing gives the villa's East-West stylistic synthesis an explicit political dimension: the position within, and negotiation of, competing spheres of colonial and cultural influence, what Saliba (1998, p. 31), following the city's confessional and political geography of the period, terms a "cultural dualism between French-oriented Christians and Ottoman-oriented Muslims".



*Fig 3.1. Photo of Sursock Museum showing the first water basin, later removed, and the front garden. Source: Sursock Museum Archives*

The interior design of the villa housed both private and social representation. The ground floor functioned mainly as a service level, while the first floor was the principal reception space. The upper floors were used as private residential rooms. According to Aboukhaled, “the top floors were originally bedrooms, and the ground floor was the hosting floor, with the reception and the Salon Arabe” (Aboukhaled, 2025, Appendix A, Part 1, Q4). This vertical configuration of public/private functions reflects the changing organization of domestic architecture during the late Ottoman and early modern periods, where notions of privacy, social etiquette, and family structure were increasingly reflected in the layout of the house. The identity of the original architect remains uncertain. As Aboukhaled explains, there is little archival evidence concerning the building’s early history “we are not 100% sure who the original architect was…the only archives we found dated back to the 1960s change in use” (Aboukhaled, 2025, Appendix A, Part 1, Q1). This is consistent with the museum’s own institutional history: writing in the museum’s authorized volume, Melki (2000, p. 27) similarly credits no individual architect, stating that the villa “was the work of Lebanese master masons”. Saliba’s (1988, p. 46) broader account of Beirut’s aristocratic mansions generalize this pattern of missing authorship at the level of the whole building type, not just this individual case: designers of such mansions “were mostly Italians, who sometimes brought their own craftsmen, but employed local builders with advanced skills”. The resulting buildings are often, if “inaccurately,” described as “Italianate” as a generalization rather than attributed to a named architect. This lack of primary documentation appears to be part of a wider problem in the study of Lebanese architectural heritage, not a gap specific to this villa, where records identifying the architects of many buildings of this type are no longer available.

The Sursock Museum shares several characteristics with other Sursock family residences. Similarities can be observed in their spatial organization, choice of materiality, and the use of recurring architectural motifs, such as the shape and proportions of openings, ornamental windows, towers, facade typologies, and decorative treatments. Chief among these is the Sursock Palace, which lies along Rue Sursock in the Achrafieh district, facing the museum. The Palace was completed in 1860 by Alfred Musa Dimitri Sursock, rendered “Moise” in some French-language sources, and is identified in the scholarly literature as “Qasr Musa Sursock” (Bodenstein, 2012, p. 205), confirming his identity as the “Musa Dimitri Sursock” already established in Chapter 2 via Trombetta (2009). The Palace was later the residence of Yvonne Sursock, Lady Cochrane, Alfred Musa Sursock’s daughter and custodian of the family archive. Saliba’s (1988, p. 8) account of Beirut’s rising mercantile aristocracy confirms the family’s place within precisely this class of “big stone houses” near the harbour district: he names “The Sursocks, the Bustros, the Pharaons” directly, alongside the leading merchant families of the period, as constituting “the merchant aristocracy of Beirut” by the end of the nineteenth century.





*Fig 3.2. Photo of Sursock Museum showing the second water basin, later removed, and the front garden, circa early 1970s. Source: Sursock Museum Archives*
*Fig 3.3. Photo of Sursock Museum showing the second water basin, later removed, and the front garden after the civil war reconstruction, circa 1990. Source: Sursock Museum Archives.*



*Fig 3.4,3.5. Exterior views of the Donna Maria Sursock Palace in Ain Saoufar, Lebanon. Source: https://www.archnet.org/sites/18749*



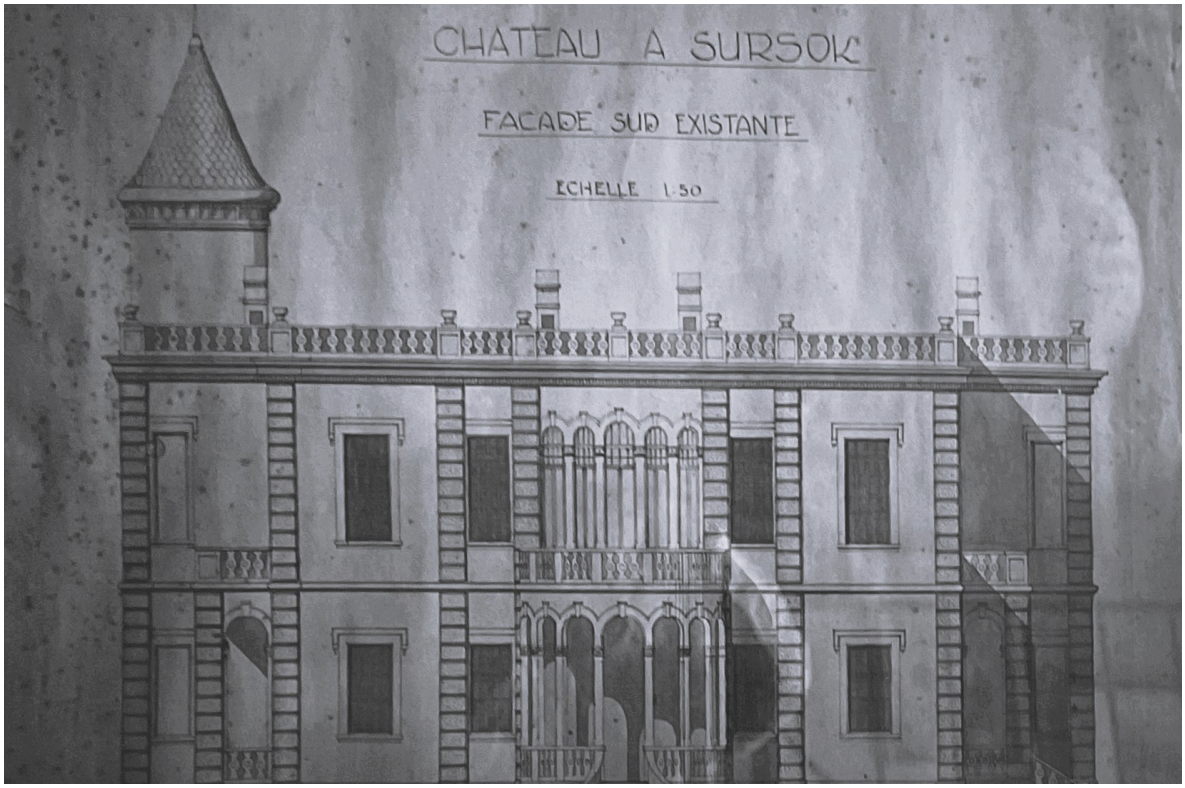



*Fig 3.6. Sursock Palace, Achrafieh, Beirut. Exterior view. Source: Sursock Museum Archives.*
*Fig 3.7. Sursock Palace, Achrafieh, Beirut. Drawing of the entrance. Source: Agémian (Dir.), Regards sur Beyrouth: 160 ans d'images (1800–1960) (2014).*





*Fig 3.8. Sursock Palace, Achrafieh, Beirut. View of the facade featuring the characteristic triple-arch motif. Source: Sursock Museum Archives.*
*Fig 3.9. Sursock Palace, Achrafieh, Beirut. Exterior view. Source: Bodenstein, R., Villen in Beirut: Wohnkultur und sozialer Wandel 1860–1930, 2012.*






*Fig 3.10. A historic photo depicting the proclamation of Greater Lebanon by General Henri Gouraud, the French High Commissioner, at the "Résidence des Pins" in Beirut, on the first of September, 1920. Source: https://www.historytoday.com/miscellanies/100-years-greater-lebanon*
*Fig 3.11. Beirut Race track next to the Sursock Pine Residence. Circa 1940. Source: https://oldbeirut.com/*



*Fig 3.12,3.13,3.14. Sursock Pine Residence, Horsh district, Beirut. Interior views and entrance. Source: https://sursockhouse.com/physical-influence/*



*Fig 3.15,3.16. Villa Khalil Sursock, Beirut. Exterior views. Source: Bodenstein, R., Villen in Beirut: Wohnkultur und sozialer Wandel 1860–1930, 2012.*



*Fig 3.17,3.18. Villa Mokbel, a former Sursock property that dates back to 1870, Beirut. Exterior views. Source: https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/2/11/villa-mokbel-new-hope-for-beiruts-forgotten-architectural-gem*

## 3.2 Materials, Layout, and Symbolism

### 3.2.1 The Central-Hall Villa in Lebanese Domestic Architecture

Before addressing the villa's own layout, it is useful to situate it within the broader typological development of the Lebanese central-hall house, of which it is a late and high-status example. Saliba (1998, p. 7) relates this typology to three main developments that influenced Beirut's residential architecture from the mid-nineteenth century to the end of the French Mandate: "1) the rise of Beirut as a colonial gateway city and the seat of the French Mandate in the Levant, 2) the formation of a Western-oriented urban bourgeoisie that gradually filled and shaped the newly created suburbs around the medieval core, and 3) the hybridization of local domestic architecture with the integration of imported construction materials and Western stylistic trends." The central-hall house itself organized around a central hall (*al-dar*) usually oriented north for sea and mountain views, per Chahine and Dagher (2021, pp. 10-11), emerged from the mid-nineteenth century as Beirut's elites moved out of the walled medieval city into new suburban districts such as Zokak el Blat, Achrafieh, and Ras Beirut. Within this typology, Saliba (1998, p. 46) further distinguishes elevations by social class: "The supra-vernacular elevation pertained to the aristocratic mansion (*Kasr*); the high and mainstream vernacular elevation to the family residence of the emerging bourgeoisie (*Bayt, or Hara*); and the lower vernacular elevation to the garden suburban house (*Bayt, or Dar*), and to the farmhouse."

The Nicolas Sursock villa, as the residence of one of Beirut's leading mercantile families, falls within the first, most ostentatious category, the *Kasr*. Saliba characterizes this category's defining features in terms directly applicable to the villa under the study: "a dignified and ostentatious elevated entrance with an elaborate staircase, a recessed or protruding central bay and highly ornate surface detailing," along with the "unrestricted use of imported materials, such as marble, in portals, staircases, balusters and handrails." Saliba also identifies the underlying compositional logic shared across all Kasr-type mansions, regardless of their individual stylistic vocabulary: each was, in his words, "superimposed on a symmetrical central bay elevation" (Saliba, 1998, p. 46), that is, an imported, eclectic stylistic skin applied over a locally rooted spatial and structural scheme. This concept of superimposition, a historically specific building technique and stylistic strategy, distinct from this thesis's own later use of "palimpsest" as an interpretive metaphor for the building's cumulative history, nonetheless anticipates and reinforces that metaphor: the villa's Venetian-Ottoman facade is best understood not as a style applied at random, but as one instance of a citywide, class-specific architectural convention in which imported ornamental and local spatial logic were deliberately layered rather than fused. This reading is reinforced by Saliba's (1998, p. 29) broader assessment of Beirut eclecticism, in which he explicitly asks whether the phenomenon represented "a significant transition or a surface veneer", "a cultivated reproduction of Western models or a conscious and transitional quest for a national style." The 1912 Sursock villa sits at the very threshold between the earlier, more "cultivated" wave of aristocratic eclecticism Saliba describes and the beginning of its wider, more derivative popularization.



*Fig 3.19. View of Zokak el-Blat district in Beirut, Lebanon in the 1890s, showing houses of diverse typologies, including numerous central-hall houses of various sizes and shapes.*
*Source: https://beirutheritageinitiative.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/HOUSES-OF-BEIRUT-1860-1925-Restoration-manual.pdf.*

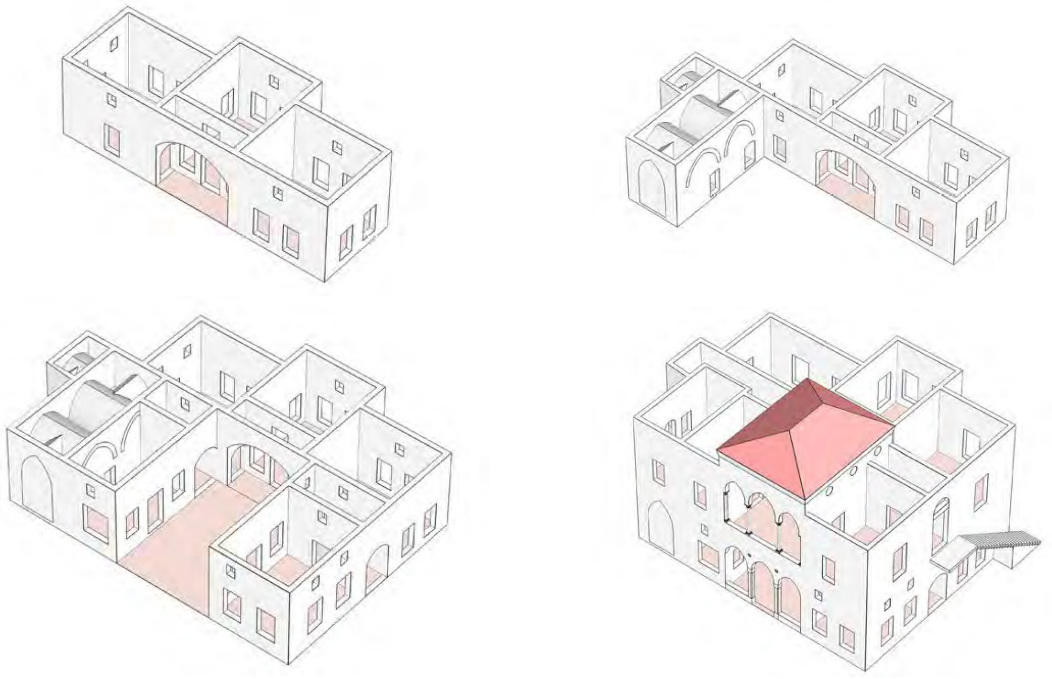
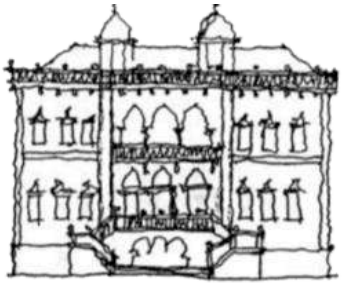


*Fig 3.20. Axonometric drawing of Bayt Aoun (Saifi 614): Example of the gradual extension of a rural līwān house and its eventual transformation into a central-hall house. The process unfolded over the mid- and later 19th century. Source: https://beirutheritageinitiative.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/HOUSES-OF-BEIRUT-1860-1925-Restoration-manual.pdf*



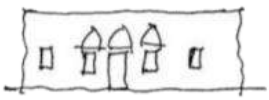
Supravernacular:
mansion or palace (*Kasr*)





High and mainstream vernacular:
family apartment house (*bayt or hara*)





Basic vernacular:
house and farmhouse (*bayt or dar*)



*Fig 3.21. Sketches of different suburban facade typologies. Source: Robert Saliba, Beirut 1920-1940: Domestic Architecture between tradition and Modernity (1998).*



*Fig 3.22,3.23,3.24. Views of the Sursock Museum's north facade, 2025. Source: Author.*



*Fig 3.25,3.26,3.27. Sursock Museum's north facade, showing the tower and opening details, 2025. Source: Author.*

### 3.2.2 Materials, Symbolism, and Salon Arabe

The spatial layout of the villa itself follows the typology of the central-hall house described above, consisting of a central hall (*al-dar*) flanked by adjacent rooms, creating a hierarchal spatial organization that accommodated both private family life and formal reception functions. As documented in Chahine and Dagher (2021, pp. 10-11), the central hall's fourth, open side was "usually oriented north, offering sea views, distinguished by multiple access doors that allowed visitors to bypass the central hall and preserve the household's privacy. The presence of a garden and a rotunda, later altered, further supports this interpretation of the villa's original layout, supported by Aboukhaled, who recalls that "the house originally had a rotunda and a garden at the back, which was later altered" (Aboukhaled, 2025, Appendix A, part 1, Q4). The villa combines traditional construction techniques with materials and structural elements introduced during the early modern period. The exterior walls are mainly built of local sandstone (Hajar Ramleh), which was widely used in Beirut and became a characteristic material of the city's historic architecture (Davie 2001). This provided both structural durability and visual continuity with the surrounding architectural environment.

Construction manuals also indicate that reinforced concrete began to be introduced in Beirut during the early twentieth century. This often resulted in hybrid construction systems in which traditional masonry walls were combined with concrete slabs and other structural elements (Dagher et al., 2022; Chahine & Dagher, 2021). As Aboukhaled explains, "when we surveyed it, I was surprised to find that many of the window surrounds and some walls were made of concrete, while the rest of the walls and the ground floor were built in sandstone, like most houses in Beirut" (Aboukhaled, 2025, appendix A, Part 2, Q1). Structurally, the villa lacks conventional foundations; instead, it relies on compacted stone trenches. This technique reflects vernacular practices adapted to local terrain. Abou Khaled describes this system: "these houses had no foundation. They were built on what in Arabic is called *rake*: ditches filled with stones, compacted, and then built upon...that is why the beginning of the building is in sandstone (in Arabic *Hajar Ramleh*) " (Aboukhaled, 2025, Appendix A, part 2, Q2). The Sursock Museum notes that the Salon Arabe where Sursock greeted his guests, remains intact. The hand carved woodwork that makes up its walls and ceiling was imported from Damascus in the 1920s (Sursock Museum, n.d.-b). This room reflects the continued importance of regional craftsmanship within Levantine architecture, a further, room-scale instance of the "layering" of imported and local craft traditions Saliba (1998) identifies at the scale of the whole building type. Other original architectural elements include decorative floor tiles, stained-glass windows, and high ceilings that enhance natural lighting and ventilation, features typical of aristocratic residences in Beirut, illustrating the integration of aesthetic refinement with environmental adaptation.

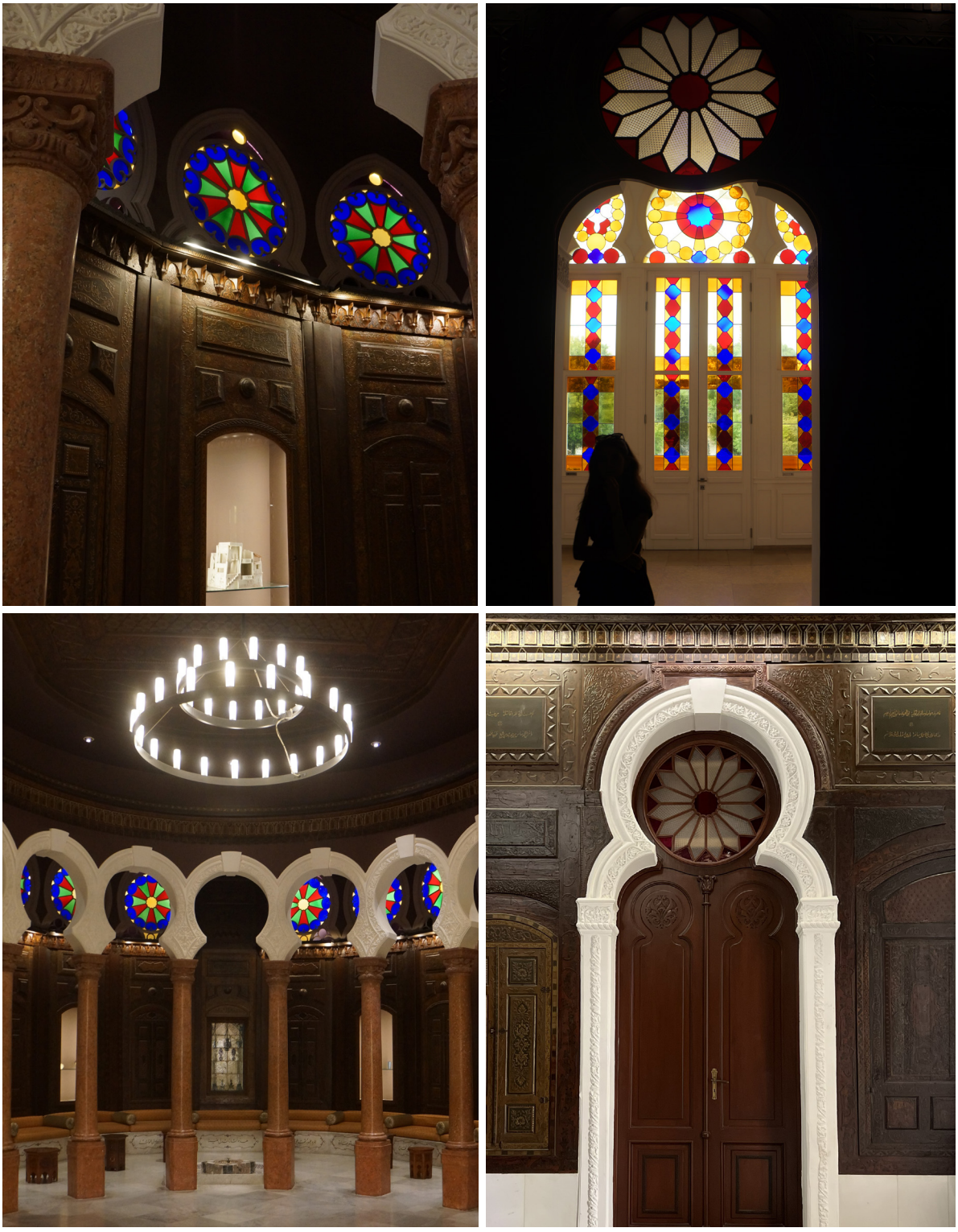


*Fig 3.28,3.29,3.30,3.31. Interior Views of the Salon Arab, 2025. Source: Author.*



*Fig 3.32,3.33,3.34. Interior views of Nicolas Sursock's office, 2025. Source: Author.*



*Fig 3.35,3.36,3.37,3.38: Interior views of the first floor rooms and corridors, 2025. Source: Author.*

## 3.3 Architectural Transformation and Spatial Evolution

### 3.3.1 The Original Villa and Early History (1912): Reconstructed Spatial Organization

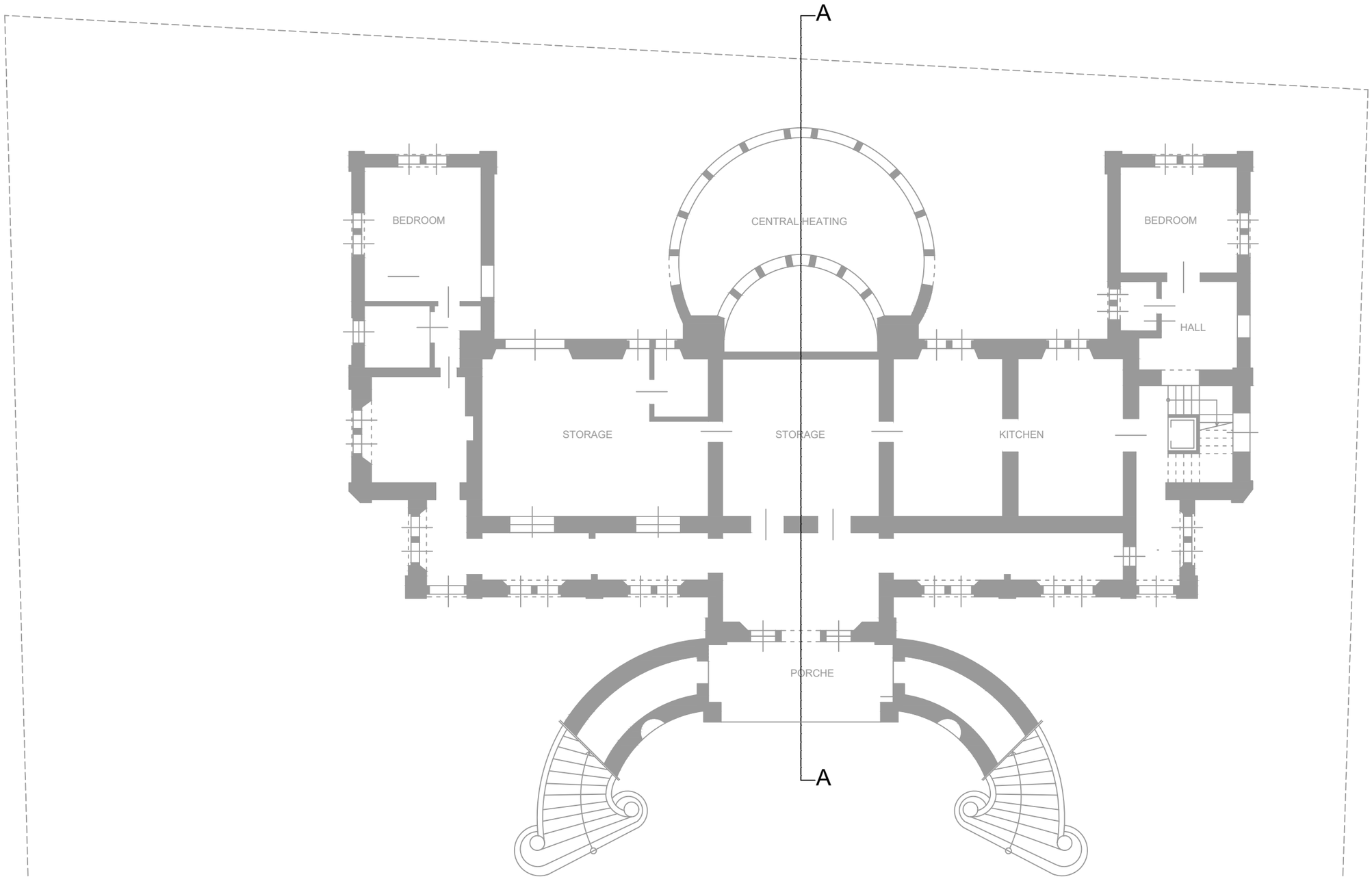
Due to the absence of the original plans, the reconstruction presented in this thesis is based on a synthesis of multiple sources. Historical photographs and postcards were used to examine the facade composition, openings and proportions of the building. Later architectural drawings, particularly those produced during the 1970s conversion, were also consulted to identify structural elements that may have belonged to the original villa. Other Beiruti villas from the same period provide an insight to the reconstruction. Studies of Beirut's residential architecture (Chahine & Dagher, 2021; Saliba, 1998) shows that the central-hall house generally followed certain organizational principles, such as symmetrical layouts, axial circulation, and rooms arranged around a central space. These recurring characteristics provide a basis for interpreting parts of the villa for which no direct documentation is available.

### 3.3.2 Redrawing and Reconstruction Methodology

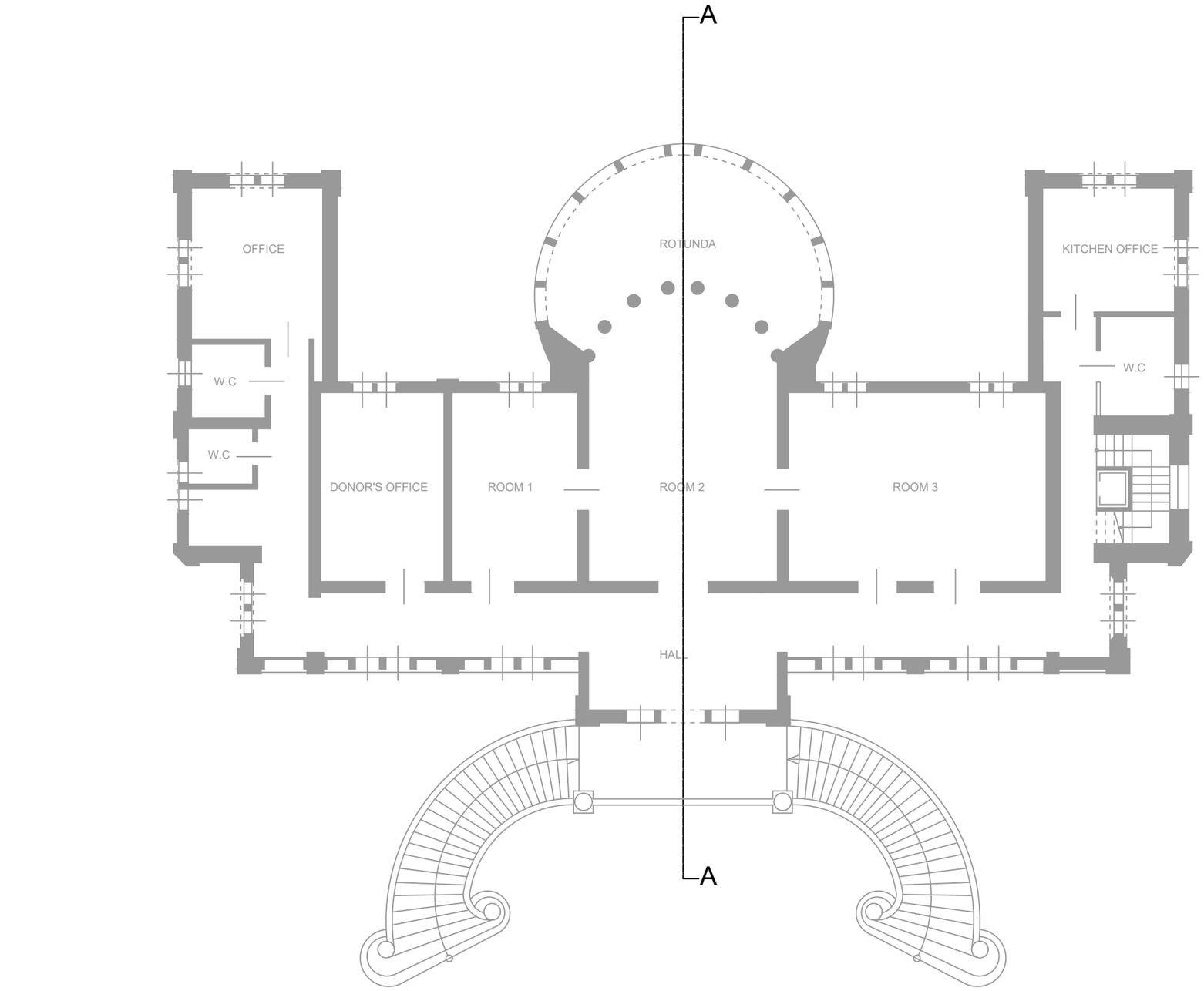
In order to reconstruct the original villa and understand the successive transformations of the Sursock Museum, the available technical documentation was systematically redrawn and compared with historical and contemporary visual sources. The reconstruction began with the technical drawings produced by Grégoire Serof for the first extension of the villa. (Serof, 1970-1974; Appendix B, separate file). The documents, preserved at the Sursock Museum Archives, include the ground floor, first floor, and second floor plans, a cross-section, and elevations of the East and West facades. They provide information on the architectural and structural organization of the proposed intervention, including the structural grid and position of the columns. A graphic legend also distinguishes between existing walls to be retained, existing walls to be demolished, and newly introduced walls. The drawings were imported into AutoCAD and scaled according to the scale bars provided in the original documents. The structural grid was established first, together with the interaxial distances between the columns. The existing walls and openings were then traced, followed by the proposed additions. This process made it possible to distinguish between different phases of the building and to identify which elements belonged to the original villa and which were introduced as part of the proposed extension. In order to retrieve the configuration of the original villa, the newly added elements were removed from the later Serof drawings, and the remaining configuration was compared with historical photographic evidence and published sources. An additional set of drawings by Serof, produced at an earlier stage of the project and identified as preliminary drawings, provided further evidence for this reconstruction. Although considerably less detailed than the later documentation, these drawings include the ground floor, first floor, and second floors, as well as a cross-section of the original villa. They were redrawn and compared with the later Serof drawings. In particular, the ground floor configuration reconstructed from the later drawings was adapted and cross referenced against the preliminary plans in order to establish greater consistency between the different stages of the project. The reconstruction also revealed discrepancies between Serof's proposed extension and the building that exists today. Recent photographs of the museum, together with the ground floor plan and sections documenting the later transformation by Wilmotte & Associés and Jacques Aboukhaled in the 2000s, indicate modifications to both the ground floor configuration and the facades. These differences required the Serof drawings to be adjusted in order to distinguish between the proposed

project and the subsequent as-built condition. Two corresponding sets of drawings were produced: the first represents the Serof Project, as documented in the available technical drawings, while the second represents an edited as-built interpretation. The comparison between these two sets of drawings identifies several differences. These include the relationship of the building to the street-that is the limit of the South facade extension with respect to the site limit facing the street, the overall length of the building following the subsequent addition, the configuration and rhythm of the facade openings of the extension, and the interior configuration of spaces. The tower, which remains an important element of the existing building but is absent from the Serof documentation, was reintroduced into the reconstructed drawings based on the later Wilmotte & Associés documentation. In addition, the roof construction system and orientation of the elements is quite different in the cross-section by Serof Project from the newer documentation by Wilmotte & Associés and current state seen through site analysis and photos. Therefore, the roof was also modified accordingly in Serof's as-built drawings. Finally, the later transformation was reconstructed through the redrawing of the ground floor plan and two sections available from the year 2000 that shows the north elevation as well. These drawings document the additional elements introduced during the second major transformation including the restaurant and souvenir shop outside, the staircases on the sides of the building, the underground levels, the skylights, and the reconfiguration of the interior spaces. These set of drawings date back to the year 2000 proposed project and are not represented as the confirmed current state of the building as some modifications have later been introduced into the project and new subsequent drawings were established, but those drawings are private documents that are not available for use.

It is important to clarify that the drawings produced through this process should not be understood as accurate measured surveys or exact reproductions of the building at each stage of its development. The available documentation was produced by different architects, at different moments in the history of the building, and with varying levels of detail, graphic conventions, and the purposes of representation. Consequently, the different sets of drawings do not correspond precisely when superimposed: differences in dimensions, alignments, wall thicknesses, structural positions, facade openings, clear height of floor levels, and spatial configurations become apparent when the plans and sections are compared. Where discrepancies occurred, the reconstruction necessarily involved a degree of interpretation, approximation, and assumption; elements that could not be established with certainty were inferred through comparison of different drawings, cross-referenced with historical and contemporary photographs. In some instances, the geometry was adjusted in order to establish a coherent relationship between drawings that could not otherwise be directly aligned, and the resulting dimensions should therefore be considered approximate rather than definitive. The purpose of this process was to develop a pragmatic analytical tool for understanding the architectural transformation pf the building overtime to be examined and compared despite the fragmentary and sometimes contradictory nature of the available documentation.

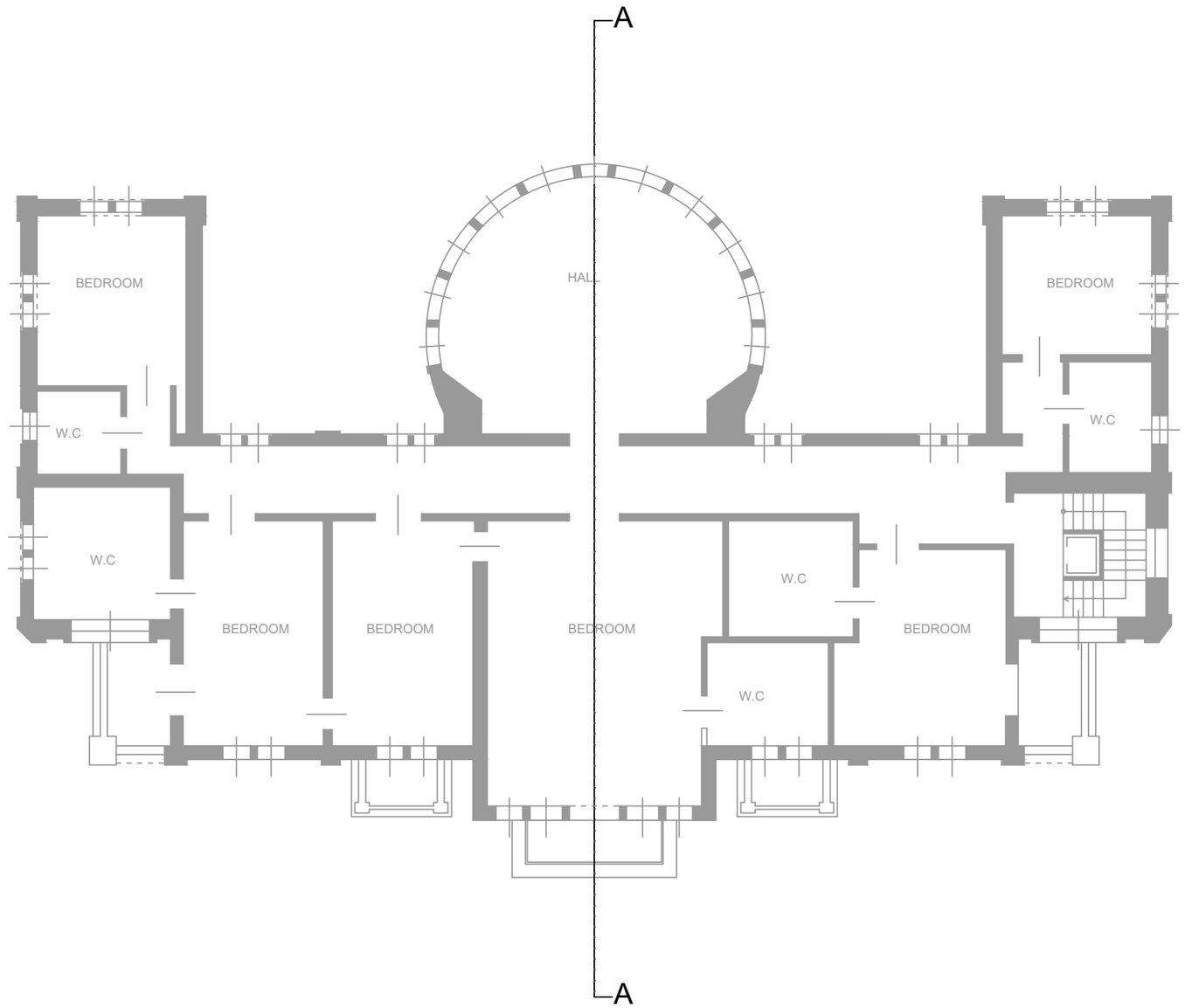



ORIGINAL VILLA - GROUND FLOOR PLAN




ORIGINAL VILLA - FIRST FLOOR PLAN

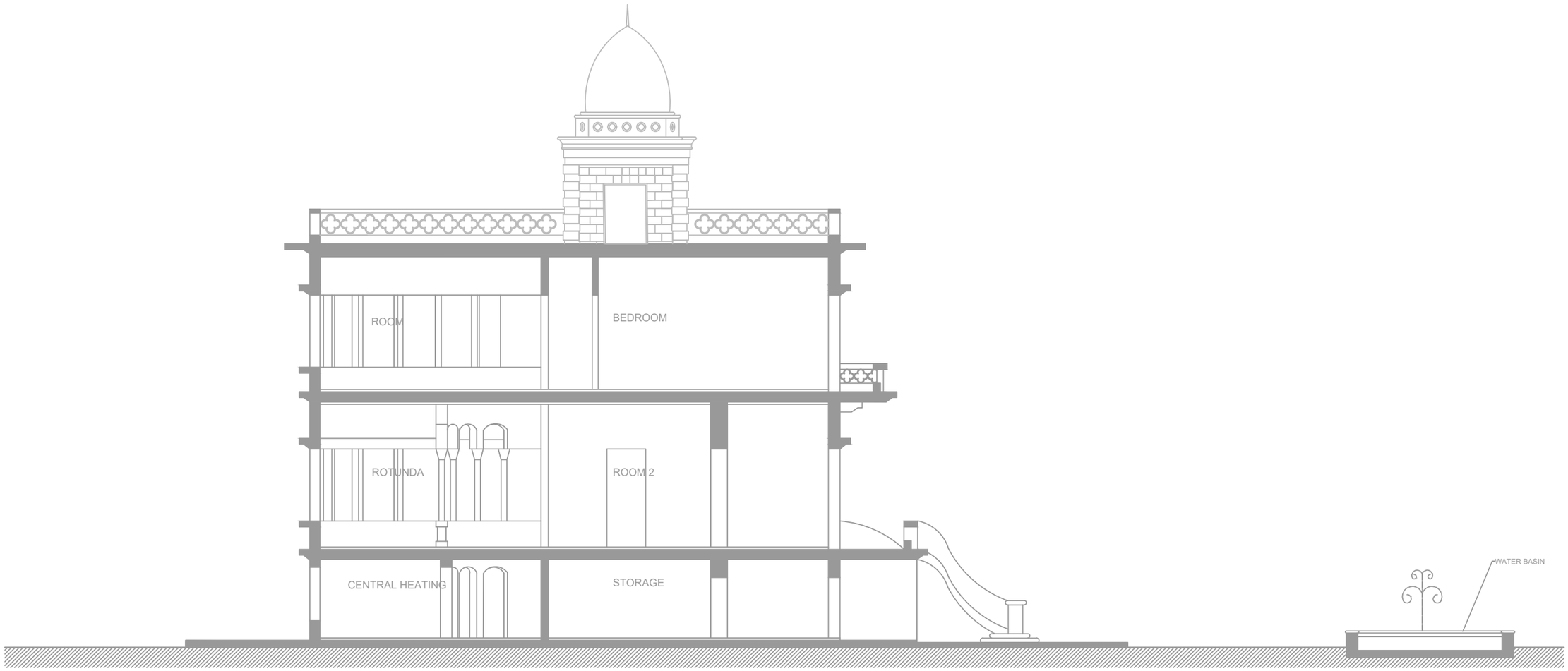
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0 1 2 3 4 5 m

ORIGINAL VILLA - SECOND FLOOR PLAN

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ORIGINAL VILLA - SECTION A-A



0 1 2 3 4 5 m

ORIGINAL VILLA - NORTH ELEVATION

### 3.3.3 First Transformation: Conversion into a Museum (1970-1974) by Grégoire Serof

The conversion of the museum in the 1970s changed both its function and the way its spaces were organized. This transformation took place within a broader post-independence context in Lebanon, when some private residences of notable families were repurposed as public cultural institutions (Agémian & Kiwan, 2000). Grégoire Serof was a Lebanese architect, urban planner, and writer. His work, influenced by modernist and brutalist approaches, contributed to the development of Beirut's built environment during the mid-twentieth century. Trained at the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (graduating in 1955), he collaborated with Michel Ecochard from 1961 to 1963 on the Plan directeur de Beyrouth et sa banlieue, the master plan for Beirut and its suburbs (L'Orient-Le Jour, 2022; Serof in Ragette, 1983, pp. 84-101). His documented body of work, the Collège des Frères Mont La Salle (1964), the Caporal et Moretti building, the Ministère de l'Énergie, the Sursock Museum extension itself (1974), and the Hotel Saint-Bernard (1966), among others (L'Orient-Le Jour, 2022), places him within the generation of Lebanese architects who came of age during the optimistic, state-building phase of the 1960s, when Brutalism and exposed concrete became the idiom through which an independent Lebanon sought to express modernity. This context helps in interpreting the Sursock intervention. Serof's own published reflections on Beirut's urban development, written contemporaneously with his practice, articulate a consistent design philosophy: he criticized mid-century Beirut for lacking "a convincing expression of its function as a national capital" and called for architecture and planning that would let "all Lebanese…identify with it and take equal pride in it" (Serof in Ragette, 1983, p.84). Read against this stated ambition, Serof's 1970-1974 intervention at Sursock, which deliberately introduced a completely different facade language rather than imitating the 1912's villa's Venetian-Ottoman vocabulary, can be read as more than a pragmatic response to museographic need. It enacts, at the scale of a single building, the same rupture with revivalist eclecticism that Lebanese architecture was undergoing citywide in this period: the shift from the imported, layered historicism Saliba (1998) associates with the pre-independence bourgeois mansion toward a modernist idiom that claimed to speak for the nation in its own contemporary terms, rather than through borrowed period styles. In this sense, the 1970s extension does not merely sit beside the 1912 villa; it argues against it, replacing one mode of layering imported style onto local structure (the villa's very own eclecticism, per Saliba) with a different, nonrepresentational architectural language altogether, itself, in time, becoming another layer in the building's palimpsest.

The intervention by Serof introduced new spatial requirements associated with exhibition design, necessitating the adaptation of domestic rooms into galleries. As Aboukhaled explains, "in the 1960s…they transformed the top floors and added small extension at the back" (Aboukhaled, 2025, appendix A, part 1, Q4). However, these adaptations were constrained by the existing structure, resulting in a spatial organization that retained traces of its domestic origin. This transformation illustrates the tension between the residential spatial logic and the museographic requirements. As Saliba (1998) documents, the central-hall house's spatial logic was built around a fixed hierarchy of reception and private rooms clustered around a central distributing space, a scheme different from the linear or thematic circulation sequences typical of exhibition design. In the Sursock Museum, circulation follows the existing division of rooms in the upper floors. The intervention introduced a distinct facade language from that of the original villa. Rather than reproducing the existing architectural style, it used a more modern expression, characterized by abstraction, new materials, and a departure from historical ornamentation This contrast contributes to the layered architectural identity of the

building and during the period. This distinction results in a legible juxtaposition of old and new. This approach can be understood within the context of Beirut in the mid-twentieth century. The city's architecture was undergoing significant changes, with architects experimenting with new materials and modernist design principles (Dagher et al., 2022). These changes also affected the organization of spaces, including the greater separation between public and private areas and more flexible approach to the arrangement of rooms. However, in adaptive reuse projects such as Sursock these innovations were often superimposed onto pre-existing structures, rather than fully realized and this makes the building an interesting visual story that merges different times and their respective styles.

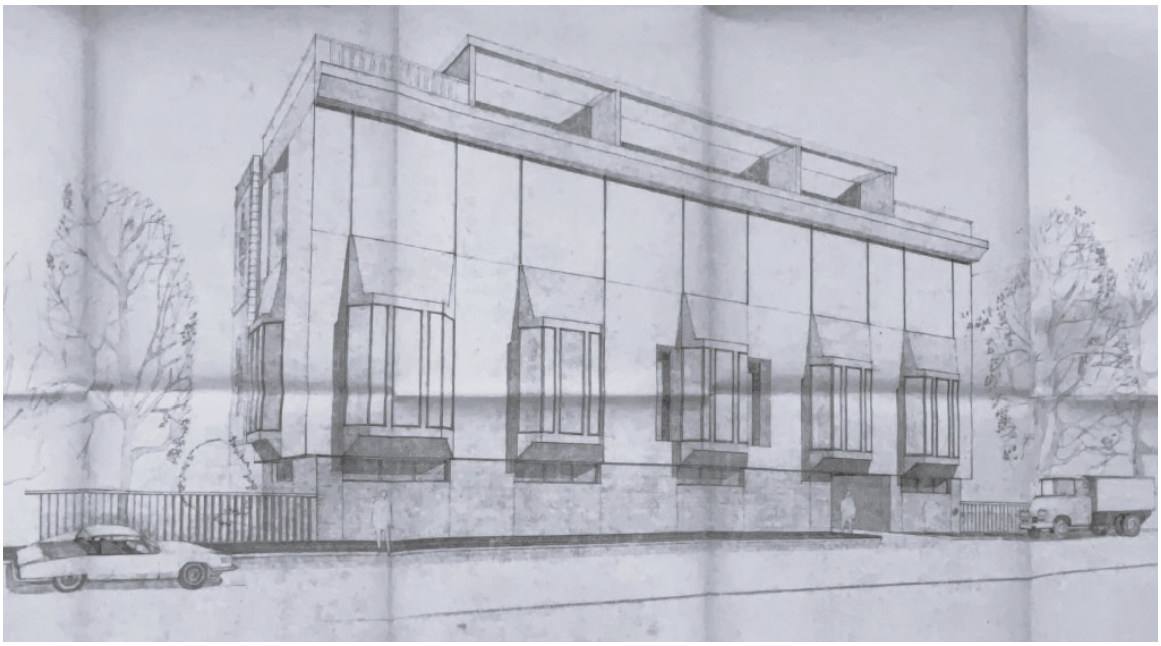


*Fig 3.39. Axonometric drawing of the Sursock Museum by architect Grégoire Serof. Source: Sursock Museum Archives.*

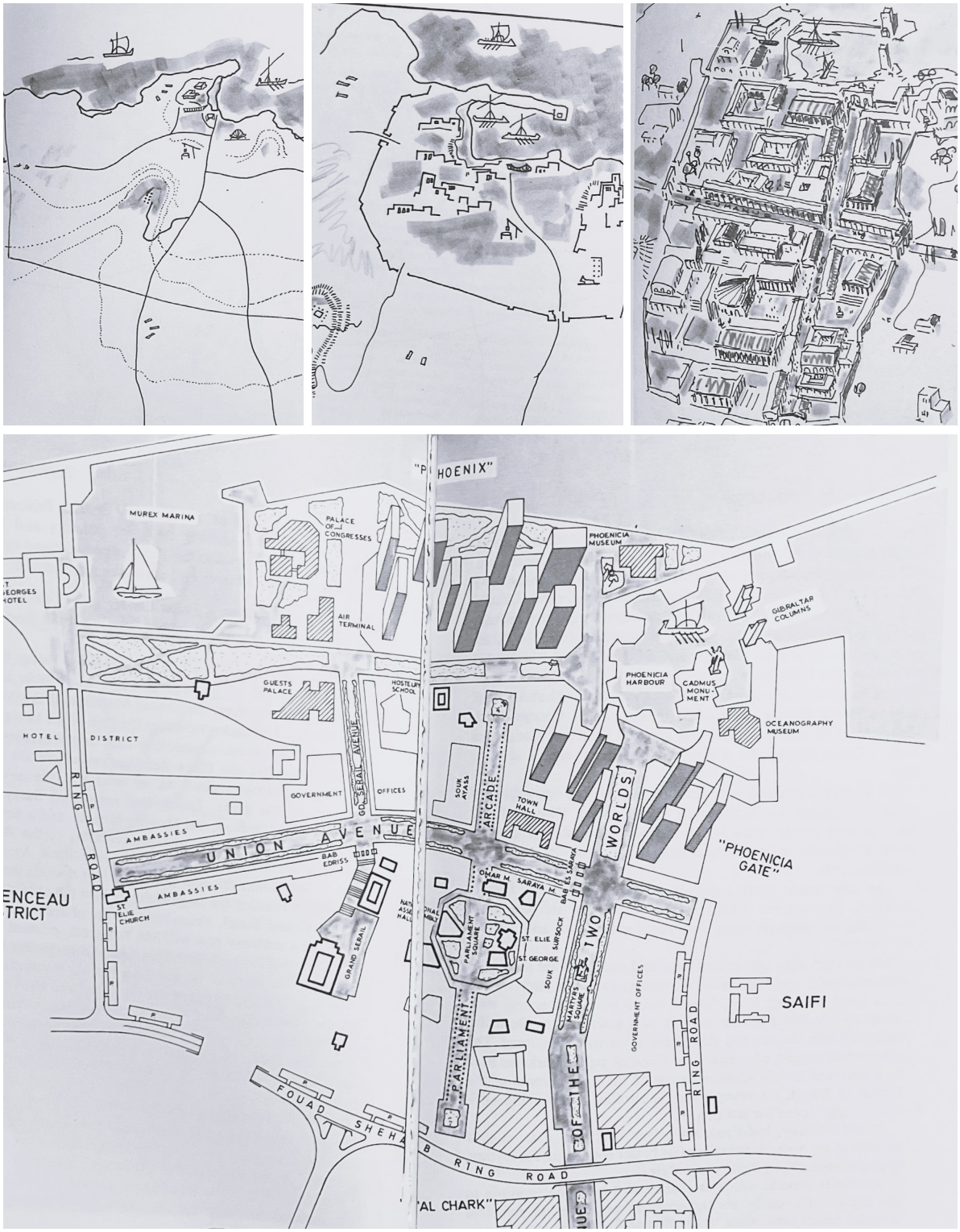



*Fig 3.40,3.41,3.42. Sketches of Beirut in different ages by architect Grégoire Serof. Source: Serof, G., "Visions of the Beirut of Tomorrow," in Ragette, F. (Ed.), Beirut of Tomorrow: Planning for Reconstruction, 1983, pp. 84–101.*

*Fig 3.43. Sketch of Beirut by Serof with the title " Sketch of an imaginary town center" . Source: Serof, G., "Visions of the Beirut of Tomorrow," in Ragette, F. (Ed.), Beirut of Tomorrow: Planning for Reconstruction, 1983, pp. 84–101.*

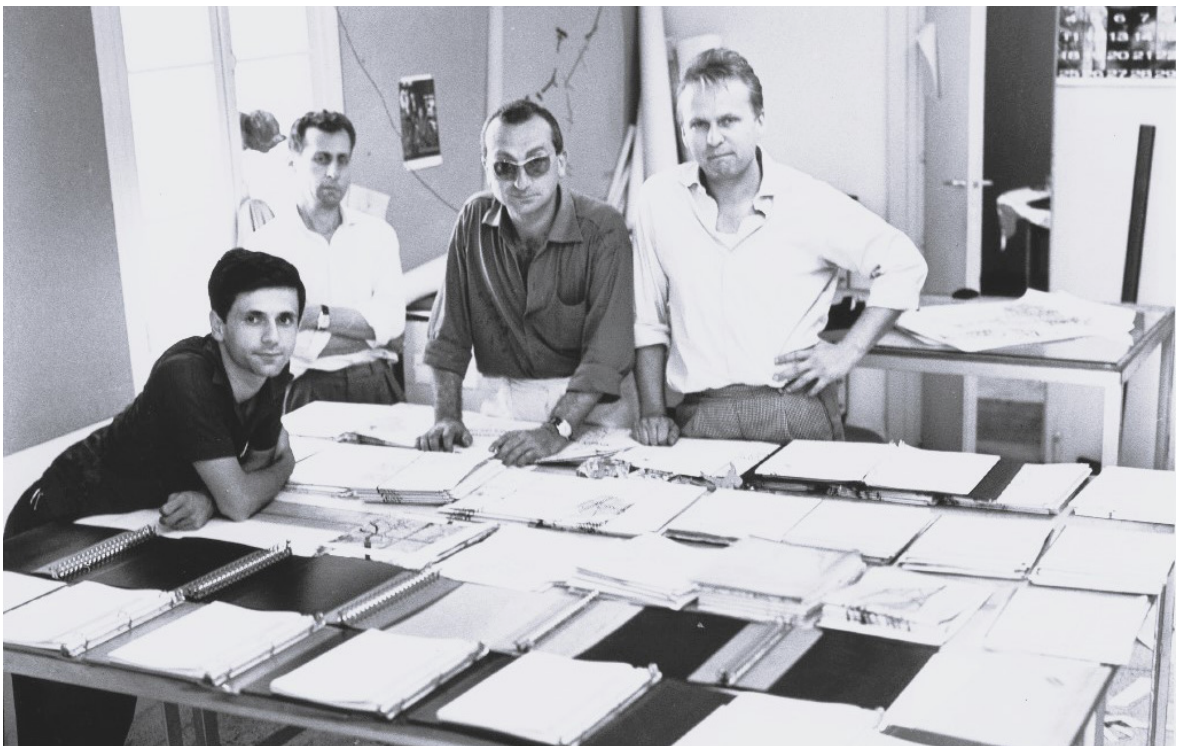




*Fig 3.44. Serof (far right) while working on the Master Plan of Beirut and its suburbs, circa 1960. Photo credit: Michel Écochard Archive, Aga Khan Documentation Center, MIT Libraries. Source: https://www.arabamerica.com/architect-profile-gregoire-serof/*

*Fig 3.45. Sketch for a project by Serof. Source: https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1357176/plus-quun-professeur-gregoire-serof-etait-un-maitre-a-penser-hors-des-sentiers-battus.html*





*Fig 3.46. Serof's project for Saint-Bernard Hotel, Located Near the Cedars of Lebanon. Credit: Ski Lebanon Website. Source: https://www.arabamerica.com/architect-profile-gregoire-serof/*

*Fig 3.47. Serof's project for Collège des Frères Mont La Salle. Photo credit: College des Frères Mont La Salle Website. Source: https://www.arabamerica.com/architect-profile-gregoire-serof/*

*"At that time, on the  right side was what had been the northern facade, a classical facade from the period...I believe it was built in 1914, in a purely Orientalist classical style. Behind it was the old setting, and I made the extension at the rear...The extension was designed in relation to the classical elements of the building. What I retained here was perhaps the idea of verticality in the life of institutions, such as a museum. It was not a question of creating something horizontal. I repeated this verticality several times on the southern facade...this brings us back to the question of identity. The intervention is strong because it expresses what the building is. The building is a museum, certainly; it is a cultural and institutional building. I think it was successful...Regarding Jean-Michel Wilmotte's intervention, I can see that he was respectful of what I had done. I know that there are extensions underground, beneath the esplanade, on several levels."*

*Grégoire Serof, interview with Elie Harfouche, translated from French.*



*Fig 3.48. View of the Sursock Museum's South facade extension by Grégoire Serof, 1974 . Source: Sursock Museum Archives.*



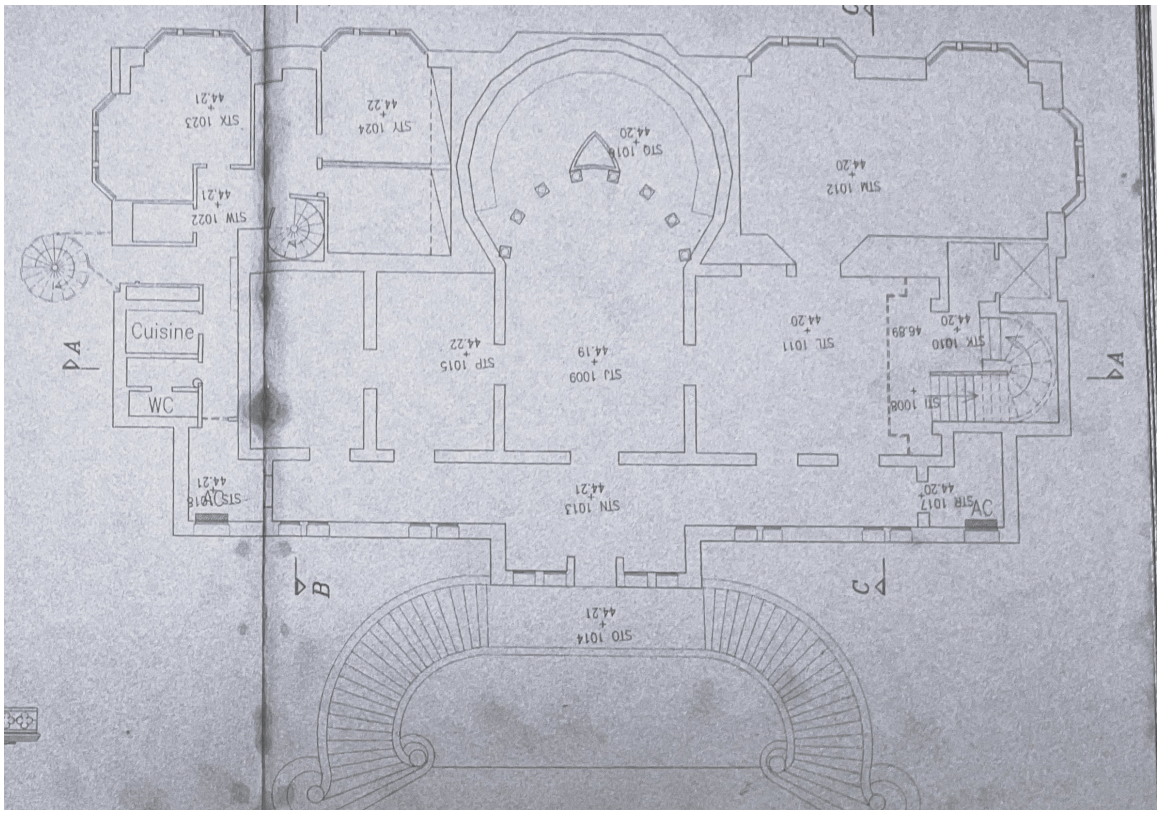



*Fig 3.49. View of the west facade by Grégoire Serof shwoing an external spiral staircase that was later removed . Grégoire Serof -Elie Harfouche Discussion. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTH6dWlv1AY*

*Fig 3.50. A floorplan of the Sursock Museum with the spiral staircase. Source: Agémian, S., & Kiwan, S. (Eds.). (2000). Musée Nicolas Sursock, Le Livre. Sursock Museum.*



*Fig 3.51,3.52,3.53. Views of the Sursock Museum's south facade extension by Grégoire Serof, 2026. Source: Author*

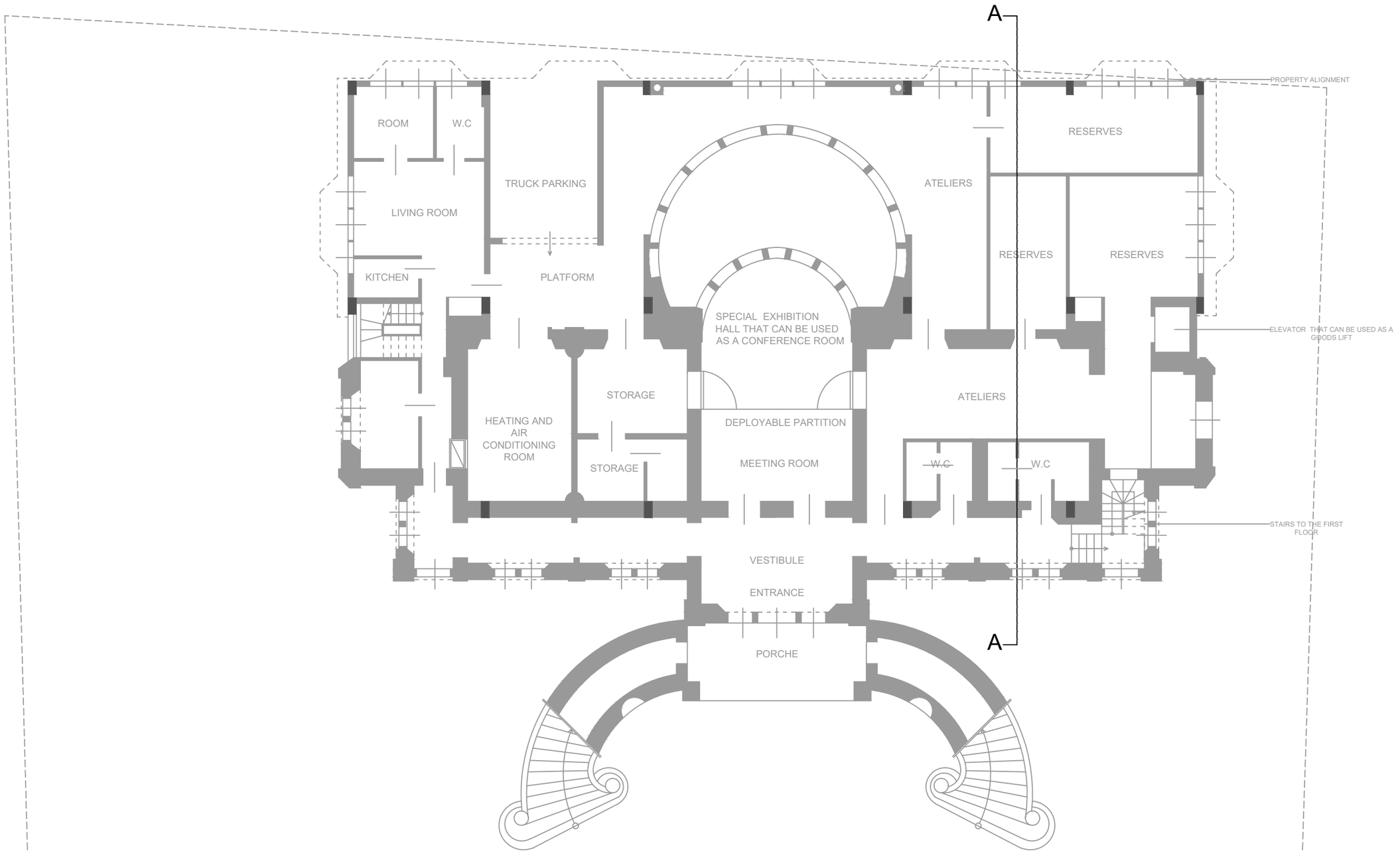
### 3.3.4 The Late Modern Turn: Brutalism and Beirut's Changing Skyline

When interpreting architect Serof's expansion project, it is important to situate it within the broader transformation of Beirut's urban fabric during the 1970s, a period in which the city's architectural identity was being reshaped by competing modernist currents just as the Golden Age approached its abrupt end. By the late 1960s and into the 1970s, Beirut's modern architecture entered a new phase of formal experimentation, marking a shift away from the rationalist and internationalist vocabularies that had defined the preceding decade. Having absorbed both the international style and Brazilian modernism, a younger generation of architects, among them Khalil Khoury, turned toward a rougher, more sculptural language shaped by Japanese Metabolism and the rough expressionism of Paul Rudolph (Tabet, 1998).

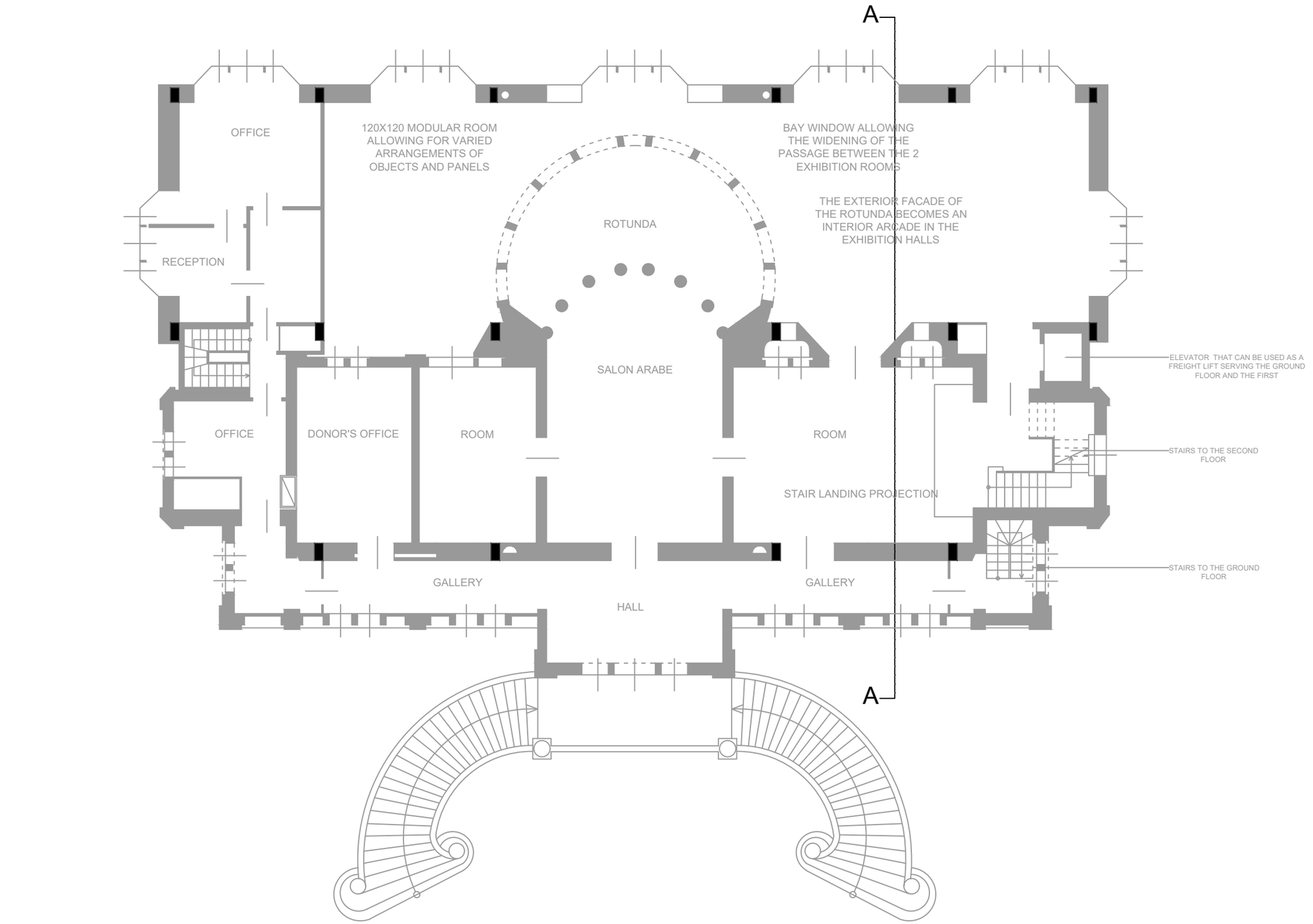
Exposed, fair-faced concrete became less a technical necessity than a deliberate aesthetic statement, echoing the later works of Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer and giving buildings a heavier, more monumental presence in the streetscape (Haddad, 2008). This transformation is visible in several landmark projects completed in Beirut during these years. Pierre Neeman's headquarters for Électricité du Liban (1966-1970) raised its mass on pre-stressed concrete columns to open a free-flowing ground plane and an unobstructed view of the Mediterranean. Joseph Philippe Karam's City Centre Complex (1968), with its distinctive domed form, became one of the era's most recognizable silhouettes. Alvar Aalto and Alfred Roth's Sabbage Centre (1967-1970) in Hamra district paired Scandinavian modernist restraint with a distinctly monumental concrete frame (Tabet, 1998). These buildings among other, emerged against the backdrop of Beirut at the height of its regional standing. Since the mid-1950s the city had established itself as a financial and touristic hub of the Middle east, benefiting from a free-market economy, an influx of Gulf oil capital, and its role as an intermediary between East and West (Kaufman, 2021). This prosperity fuelled sustained demand for new office buildings, banks, and institutional projects through the 1960s, giving architects both the commissions and the confidence to experiment formally. Together, these parallel tendencies reshaped Beirut's urban fabric: the city's low-rise, traditional grain gave way to denser, more vertical and monumental forms. This period has been described as one of architectural "consolidation", in which the formal experiments of previous two decades converged into a more assured, locally inflected modernist identity, one that would be abruptly interrupted by the onset of the Civil War in 1975 (Haddad, 2008; Trad, 2005).



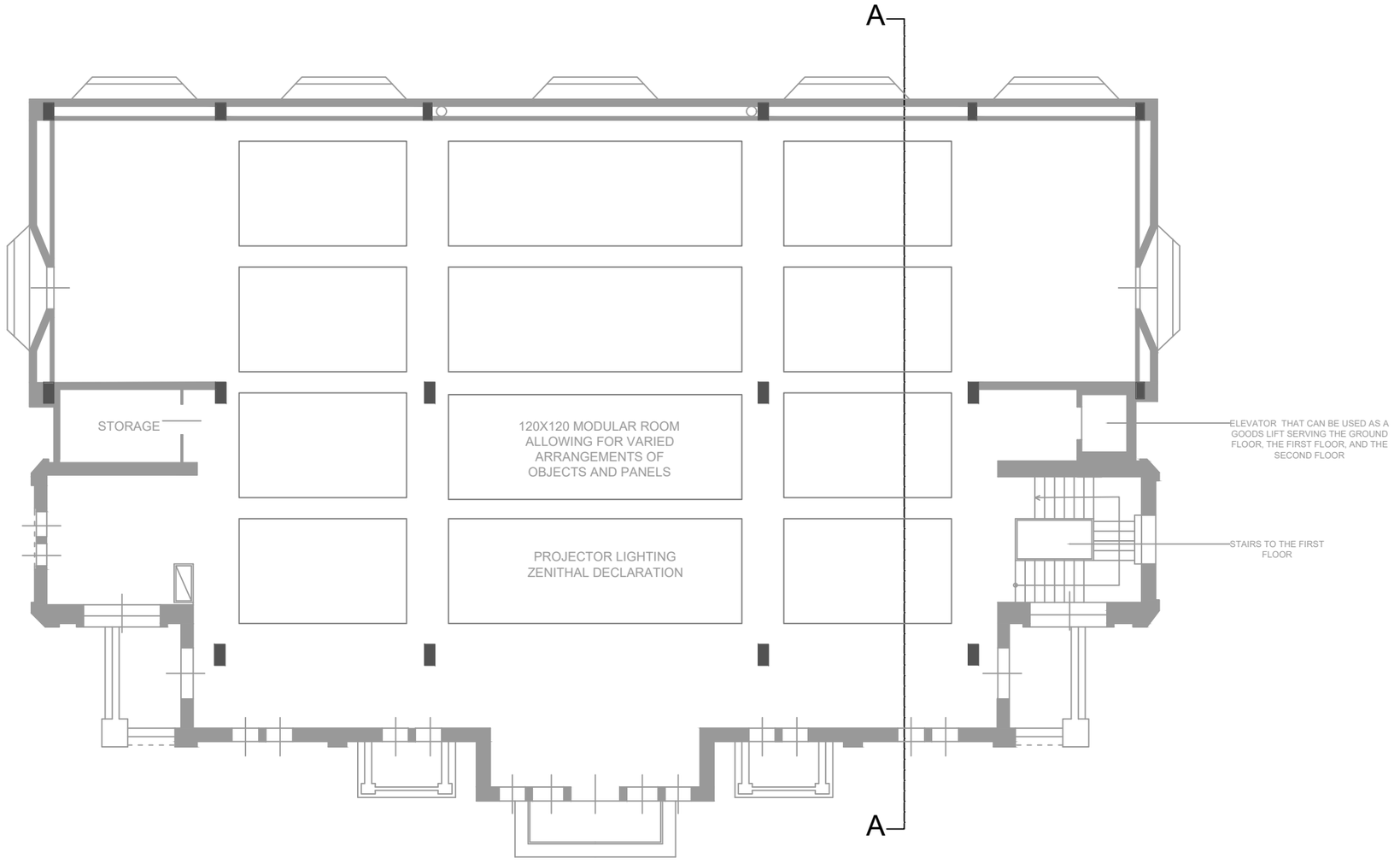

*Fig 3.54,3.55,3.56,3.57,3.58. Collage of Brutalist buildings in Beirut from the 1960s-1990s. Order from top-left: Antoine Romanos, 1972, Achrafieh, Beirut / Batimat Architects, 1997 , Furn el Chebbak, Beirut / Gregoire Serof, 1982, Corniche Al Naher, Beirut / Khalil Khoury, 1975-1997 , Hamra, Beirut / Addor and Julliard, 1963, Hamra, Beirut / Kevork Karajerjian, 1967, Hamra, Beirut.*
*Source: https://www.archdaily.com/927947/brutalist-beirut-showcasing-a-forgotten-modern-heritage*




SEROF EXTENSION PROJECT - GROUND FLOOR PLAN



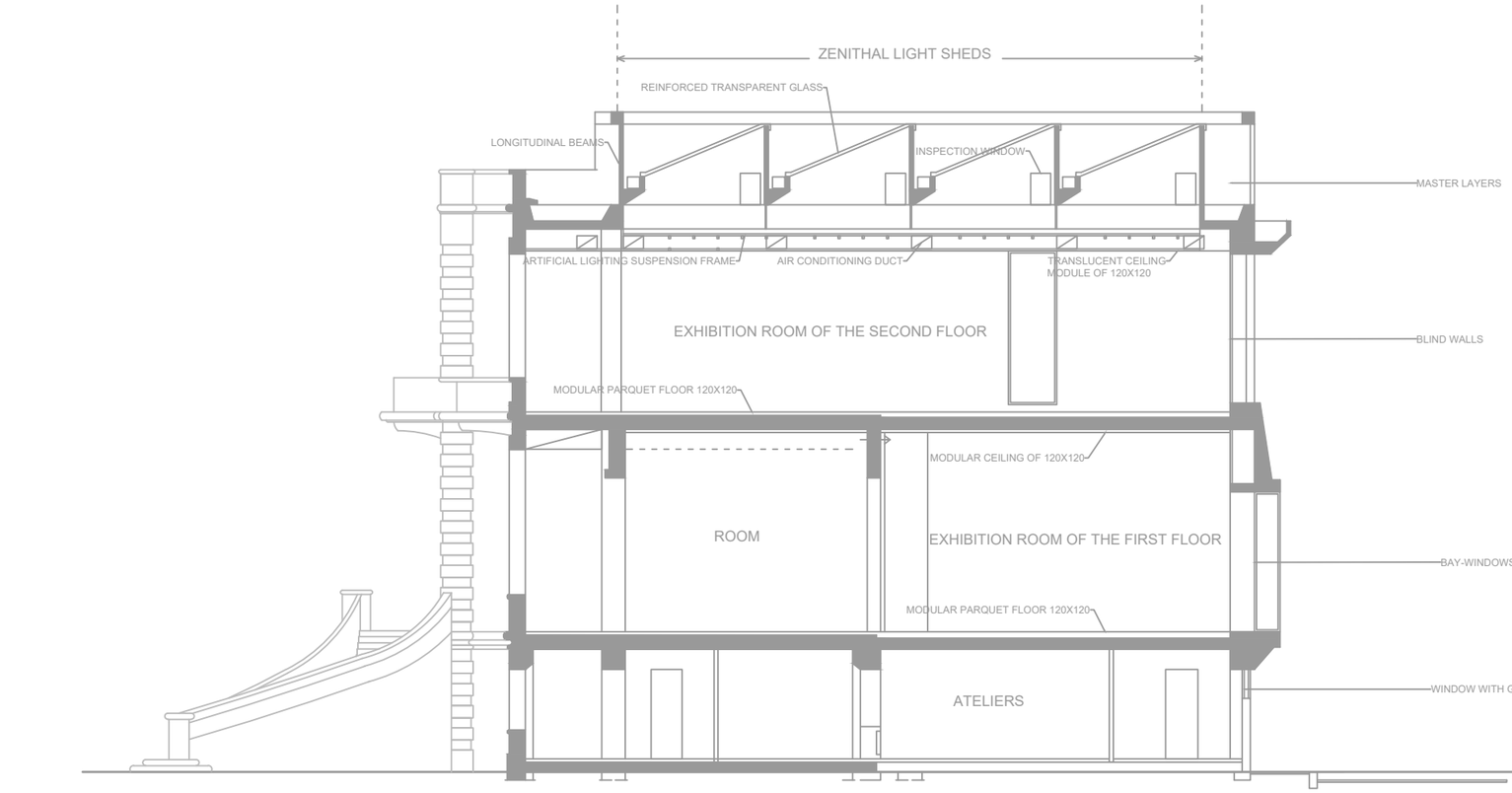

SEROF EXTENSION PROJECT - FIRST FLOOR PLAN




0 1 2 3 4 5 m

SEROF EXTENSION PROJECT - SECOND FLOOR PLAN

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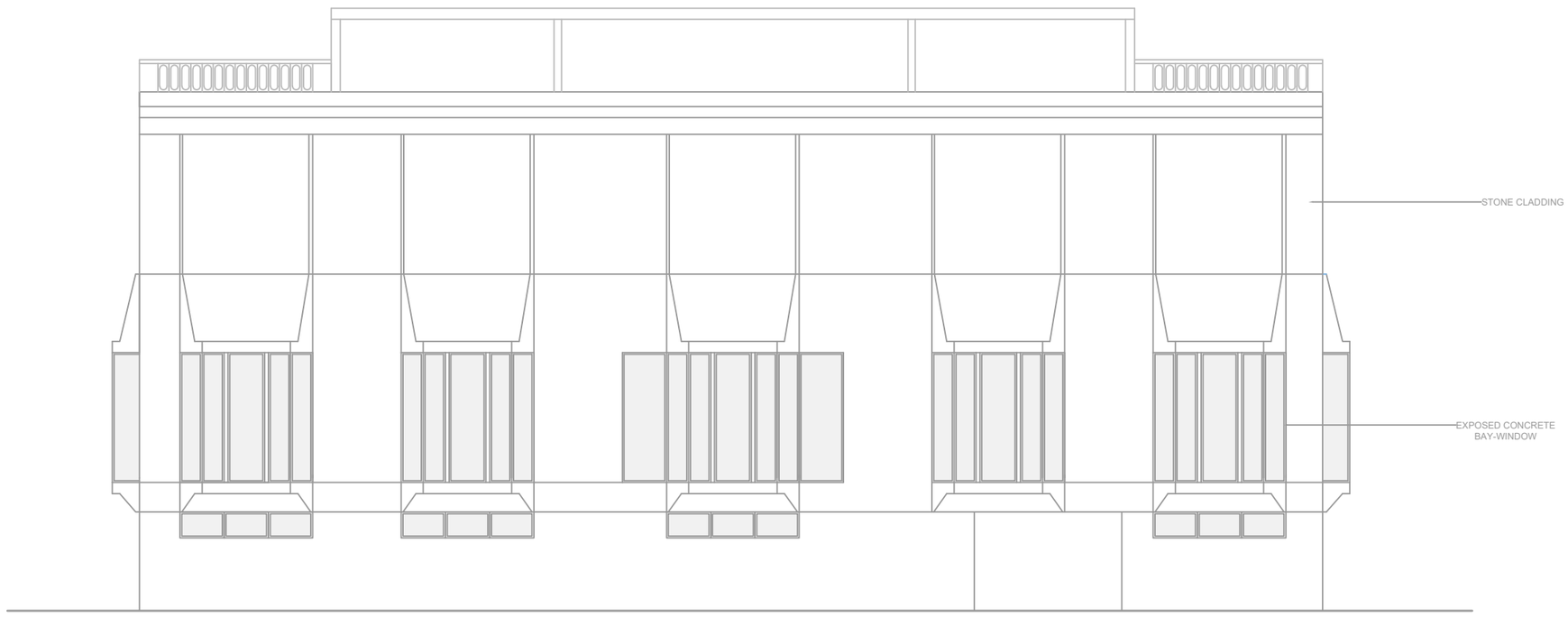



SEROF EXTENSION PROJECT - SECTION A-A



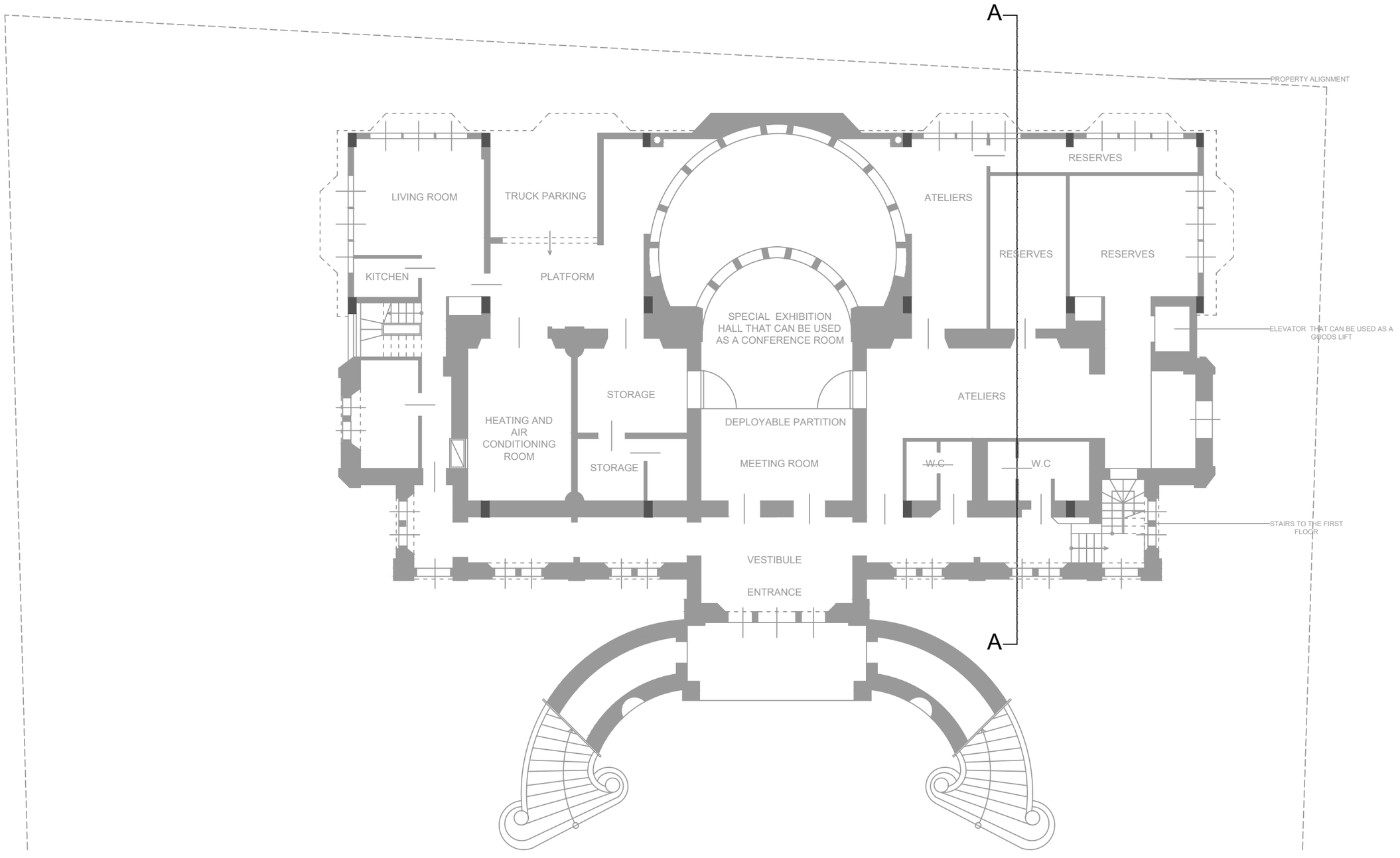

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# SEROF EXTENSION PROJECT - EAST ELEVATION

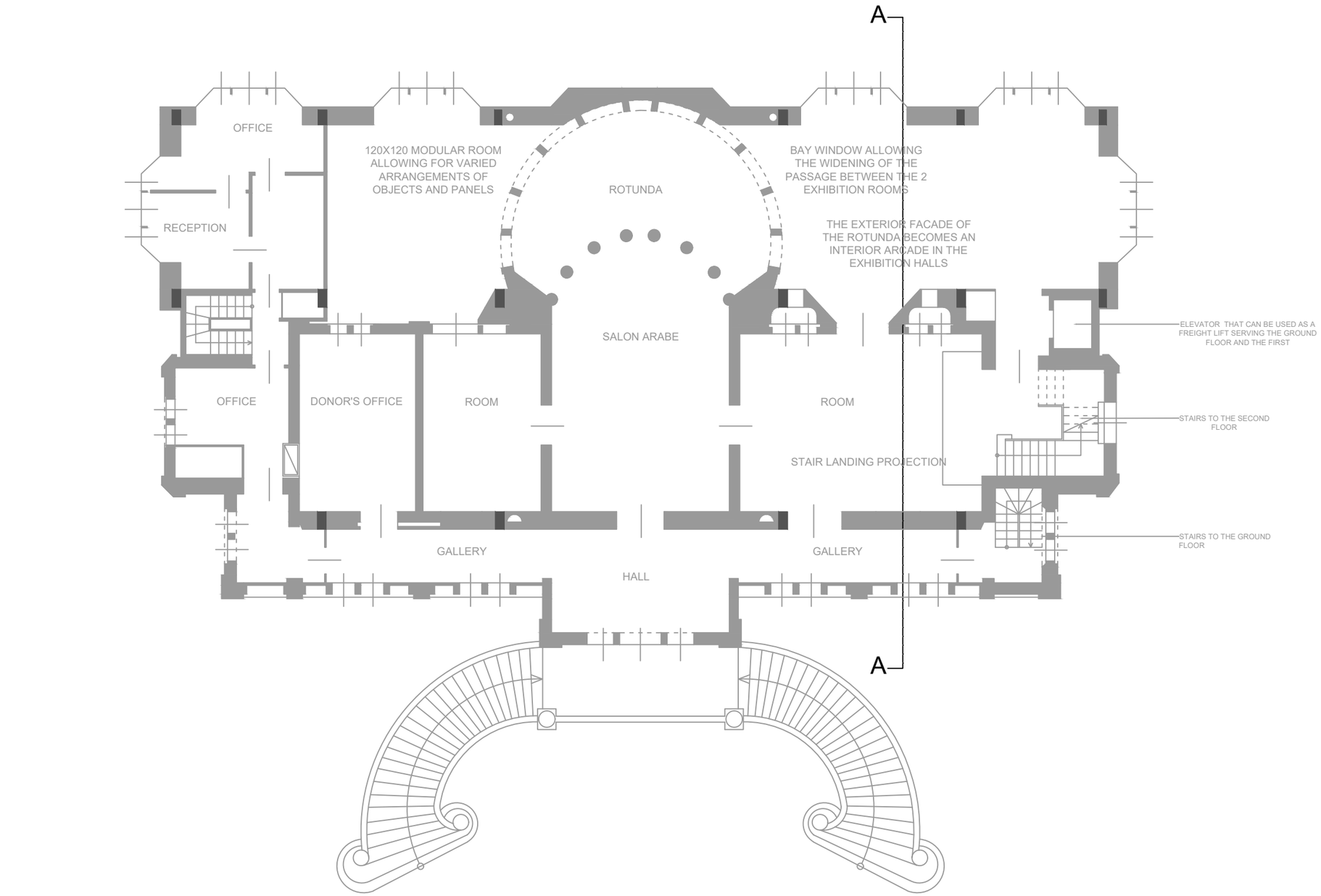



0 1 2 3 4 5 m

SEROF EXTENSION PROJECT - SOUTH ELEVATION

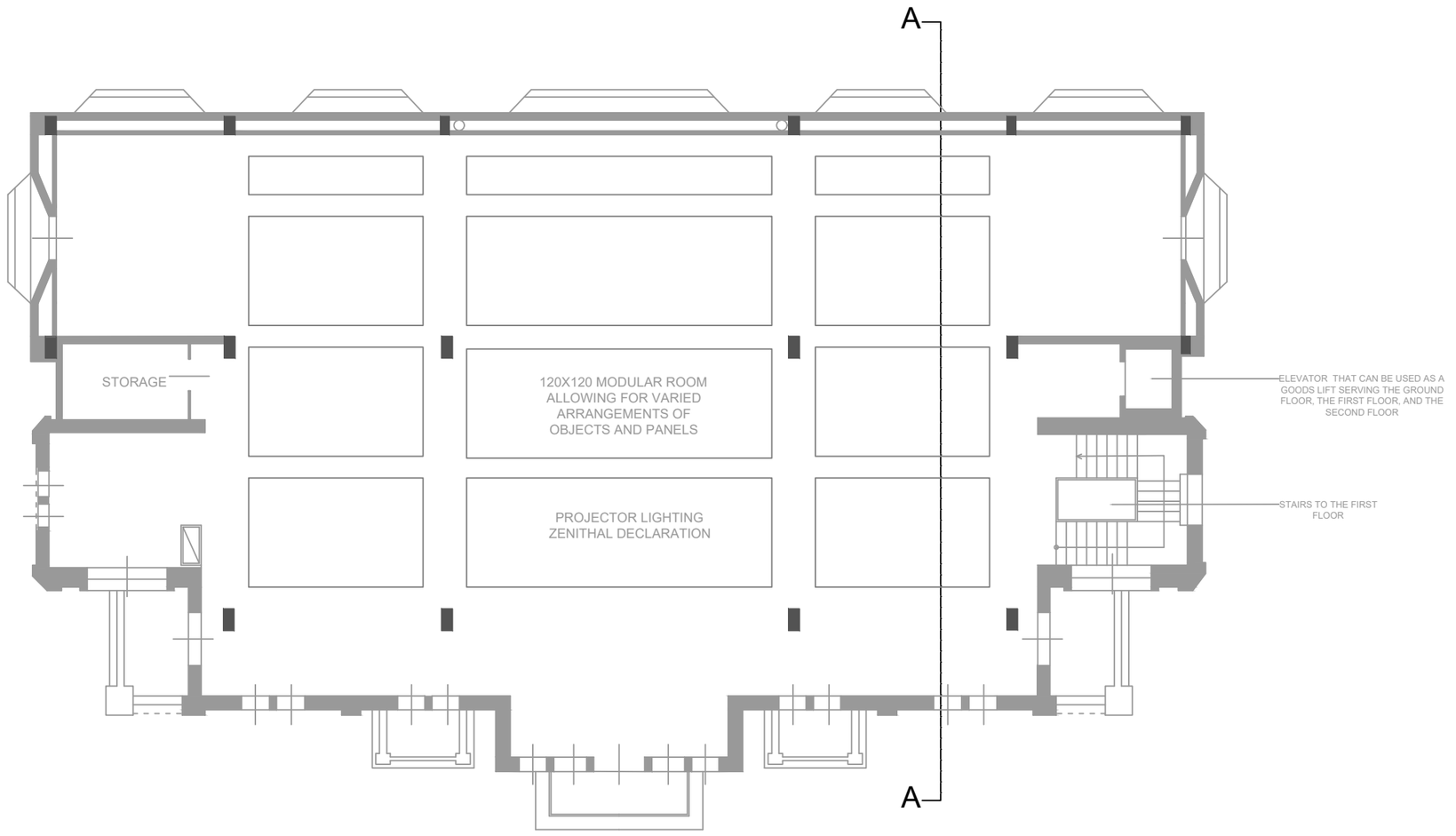



SEROF EXTENSION AS-BUILT - GROUND FLOOR PLAN




SEROF EXTENSION AS-BUILT - FIRST FLOOR PLAN

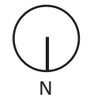
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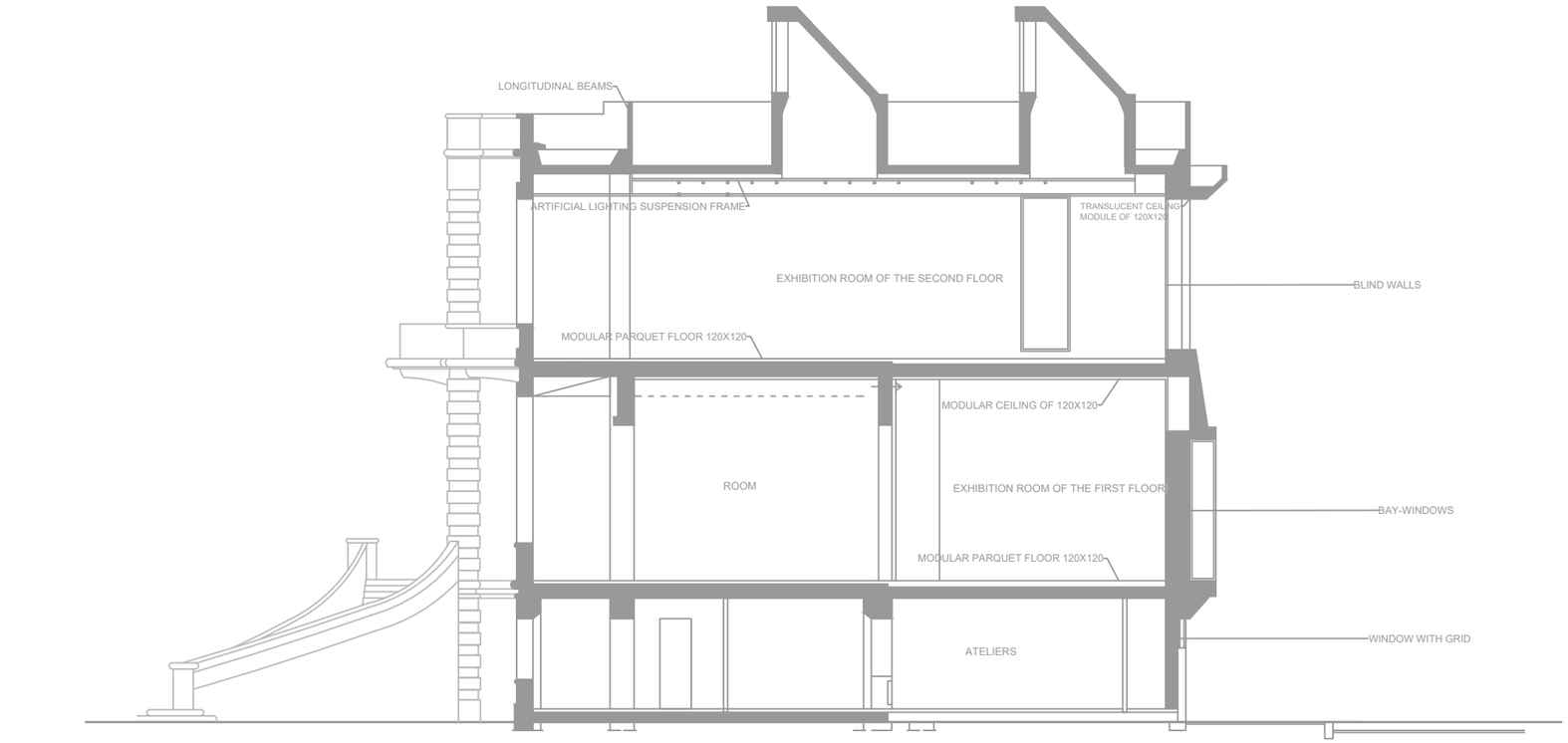




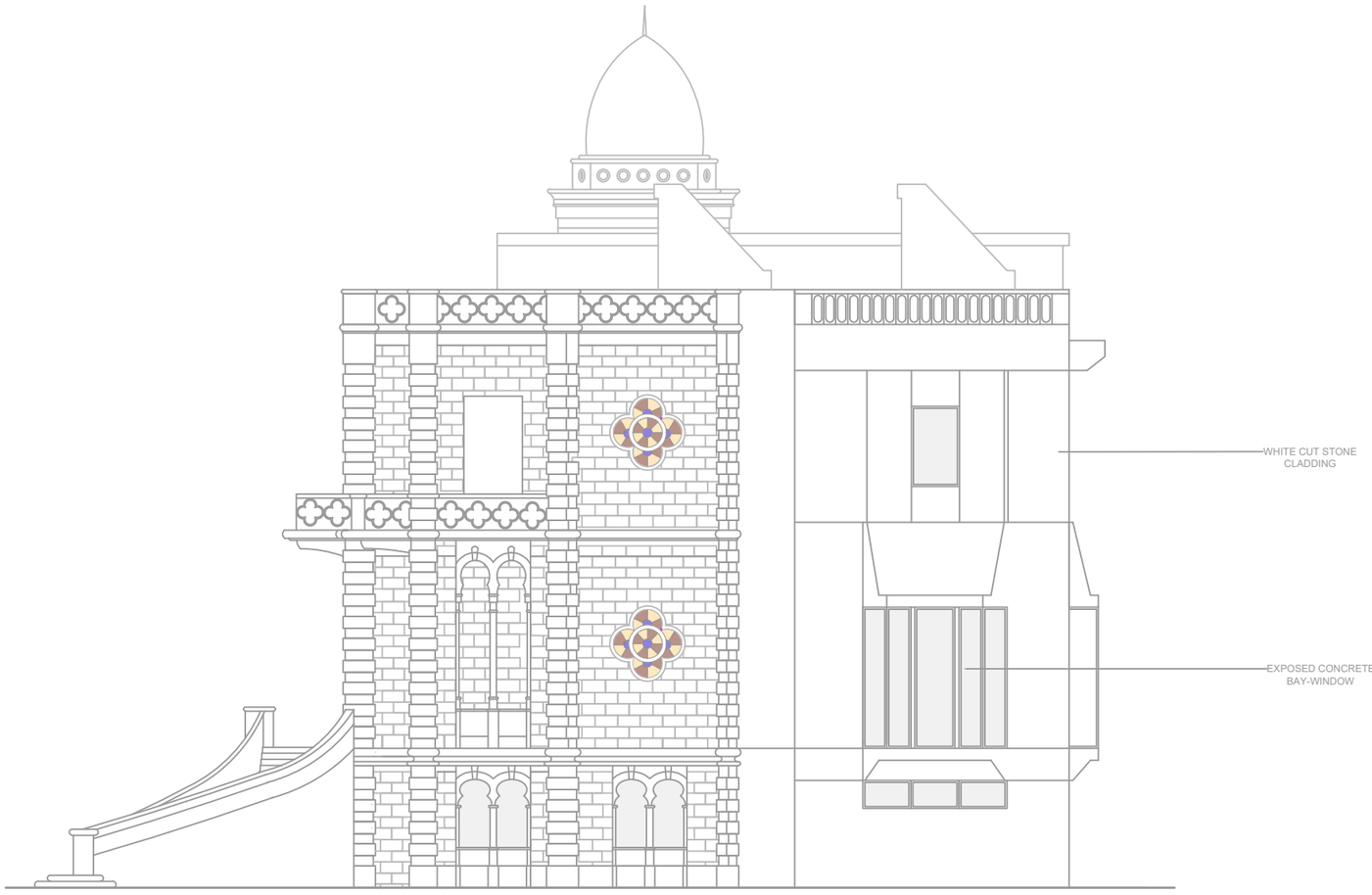


SEROF EXTENSION AS-BUILT - SECOND FLOOR PLAN






SEROF EXTENSION AS-BUILT - SECTION A-A




0 1 2 3 4 5 m

SEROF EXTENSION AS-BUILT - EAST ELEVATION




SEROF EXTENSION AS-BUILT - SOUTH ELEVATION

### 3.3.5 Second Expansion: Underground Extension (2008-2015) by Wilmotte & Associés and JA Designs

The second major transformation was driven by the need to expand the museum's capacity while preserving its historical and urban significance, Jacques Aboukhaled, a Lebanese architect and founder of JA Designs Architects, and Willmotte & Associés, the French architecture and design firm founded by Jean-Michel Wilmotte, collaborated on the renovation and second expansion of the Sursock Museum. Combining Aboukhaled's regional architectural expertise with Wilmotte's contemporary and heritage-sensitive design approach, the project transformed the museum into a modern cultural institution while preserving the historic identity of the original 1912 villa.

#### The Architects: Practice and Design Philosophy

Jean-Michel Wilmotte (b.1948, Soissons, France) founded Wilmotte & Associés in Paris in 1975; the practice has since grown into a multidisciplinary firm of several hundred staff working across architecture, interior architecture, museography, and urban planning with offices in France, the United Kingdom, Italy, and South Korea (Wilmotte & Associés, n.d). Wilmotte's practice is associated with sensitive renovation and extension of major cultural and heritage buildings: his portfolio includes the Pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre Museum in Paris, the refurbishment and extension of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, and the refurbishment of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris (France-Amérique, 2023). Central to Wilmotte's stated design philosophy is the concept of "contemporary grafting" (greffe contemporaine), a principal he has developed for over three decades and formalized through the W Prize, an international competition he founded for the conversion of historic buildings on the basis (Wiener Staatsoper, n.d). This concept describes new construction as a graft onto a living historic organism: an intervention that is deliberately legible as contemporary, rather than imitative of the building's original style, while remaining subordinate to it in visual and spatial hierarchy. This is the logic Aboukhaled described for the Sursock intervention, a minimal visual impact, near total-concealment below ground, and a restrained, sand-colored material palette similar to the historic facade above (Wilmotte & Associés, 2015; Aboukhaled, 2025, Appendix A, part 5, Q3).

Jacques Aboukhaled trained at the École Spéciale d'Architecture in Paris, graduating in the 1980s as Architecte D.E.S.A., after beginning his career in 1974 in the Beirut practice of Pierre El Khoury, one of Lebanon's most prolific architects, designer of the National Museum of Beirut among some 200 other projects. Aboukhaled subsequently worked in Paris and London on international commissions, including a Saudi royal palace project in collaboration with Kenzo Tange, before founding his own practice, JA Designs, in London in 1987 and relocating its principal office to Beirut in 1994. The firm's own account of Aboukhaled's approach emphasizes continuity with an older model of architectural authorship: "though modern in his concepts, Jacques espouses the traditional view of the Architect as Master of the project" (JA Designs, n.d). JA Designs names the Sursock Museum renovation and extension as a notable project of the practice, undertaken "in co-operation with the renowned French architect, Jean-Michel Wilmotte" (JA Designs, n.d). Within the Sursock collaboration, this positions Aboukhaled's contributions as bringing regional architectural authorship, local regulatory and construction expertise, and site-specific control to a project whose overriding conceptual principle, the underground, self-effacing "graft", originates with Wilmotte's broader practice philosophy.

According to Wilmotte & Associés (2015), the intervention was structured around three main components: the development of existing buildings, the construction of new underground spaces, and the redesign of the gardens. This expansion introduced new exhibition galleries, a research library, an auditorium, storage facilities, and technical spaces, thereby redefining the museum's functional capacity (Sursock Museum, n.d.-b). A key architectural ambition of the project was to create what Wilmotte & Associés (2015) describe as a "buried architecture" in which "the challenge was to make visitors believe they were never underground", achieved through circulation paths unfolding across half-levels, allowing gradual spatial transitions and controlled visual sequences. As Aboukhaled explains, "we wanted to keep the house as intact as possible, so all additions were hidden below ground" (Aboukhaled, 2025, Appendix A, Part 5, Q3). This approach aligns with contemporary conservation principles privileging the preservation of heritage structure while accommodating new functions. The underground extension significantly increased the museum's total surface area from approximately 1,500 sqm to 8,500 sqm, transforming it into a major cultural institution (Wilmotte & Associés, 2015; Sursock Museum, n.d.-b). Aboukhaled further adds: "we kept it as it was, but we had to redo the external stairs, which were in a terrible state. The balustrades were a strange mix of bricks and concrete, and the steel was rotten. We repaired everything with a good contractor. We also added new staircases on the sides, with stone cladding, serving as fire exits. The North elevation was designed with glass inclined to avoid direct sunlight" (Aboukhaled, 2025, Appendix A, Part 3, Q2).

On the interior design, he adds: "we preserved 100% of the first floor. The Salon Arabe was Nicolas Sursock's office and study. On the other side, there was originally a dining room, transformed into an exhibition room in the 1960s. We kept the first floor as it was…. the ground floor, which had service spaces like the boiler room and storage, was repurposed for the security office, museum offices, and a new entrance. We extended the mezzanine as well. The basement includes storage and security areas" (Aboukhaled, 2025, appendix A, Part 4, Q1). Materiality plays a crucial role in mediating the relationship between the underground extension and the historic villa. The use of sand-colored stone imported from Egypt establishes a palette ranging from white to beige, reinforcing visual continuity with the original stone façade while subtly differentiating the new intervention (Wilmotte & Associés, 2015). The reconfiguration of the landscape was another essential component of the project. The garden was redesigned and reoriented toward the main entrance, restoring spatial symmetry and incorporating a contemporary pavilion housing public amenities such as a bookshop, café, and car lift (Wilmotte & Associés, 2015; Sursock Museum, n.d.-b). This intervention extends the museum experience beyond the building itself, integrating architecture and landscape into a unified spatial system. The project faced a particular structural challenge because the original villa did not have conventional foundations. As Aboukhaled explains "we had to install micro piles all around the building…and create a big excavation pit…to stabilize both the museum and adjacent buildings" (Aboukhaled, 2025, Appendix A, Part 2, Q2). The excavation made it possible to construct multiple underground levels while maintaining the stability of the existing historic building.




*Fig 3.59,3.60,3.61,3.62,3.63. Selected works by Wilmotte & Associés. Source: https://www.wilmotte.com/en/*



*Fig 3.64,3.65,3.66,3.67,3.68. Selected works by architect Jacques Aboukhaled. Source: https://www.jadesigns-architects.com/portfolio*



*Fig 3.69,3.70,3.71,3.72,3.73,3.74. Photos from the construction site of the Sursock Museum's second expansion. Source: Sursock Museum Archives.*



*Fig 3.75,3.76,3.77,3.78,3.79. Photos from the construction site of the Sursock Museum's second expansion. Source: Sursock Museum Archives.*



*Fig 3.80,3.81. Interior views of the Sursock Museum's underground spaces and theatre. Source: https://www.wilmotte.com*
*Fig 3.82,3.83. Interior views of the Sursock Museum's underground exhibition spaces and the added exterior restaurant. Source: https://sursock.museum*
*Fig 3.84,3.85. Interior views of the Sursock Museum's library and the exhibition spaces on the underground floor levels. Source: Author, 2025.*



*Fig 3.86,3.87,3.88,3.89. Interior views of the ground floor's entrance, reception, and exhibition rooms, 2025. Source: Author.*

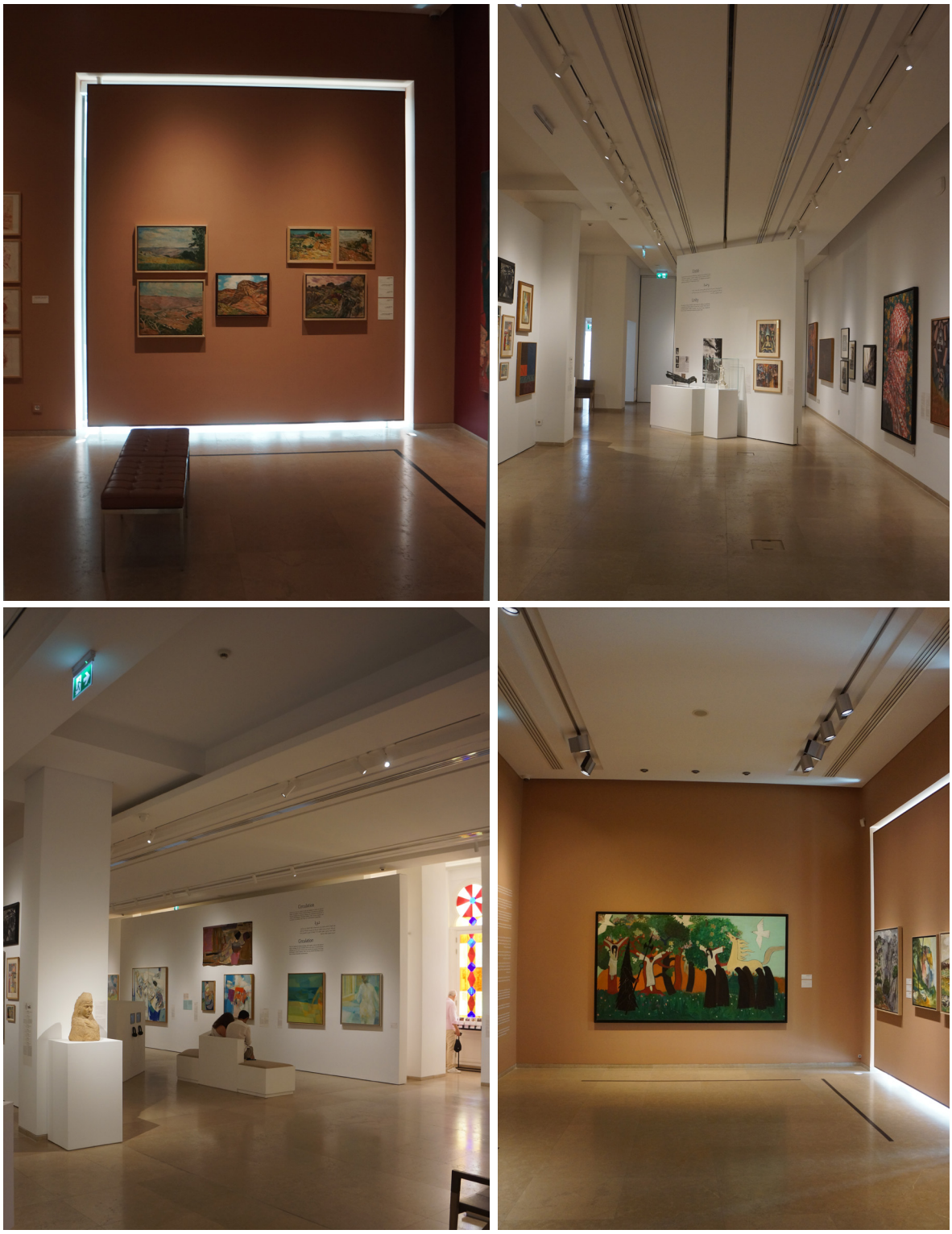
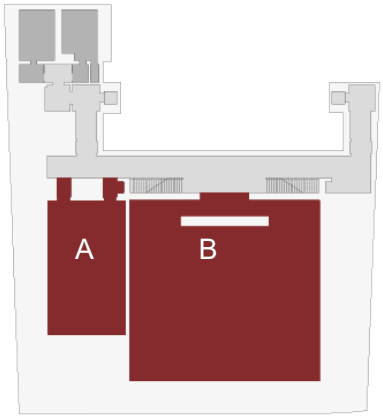
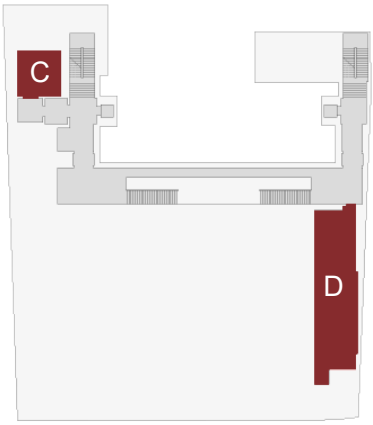


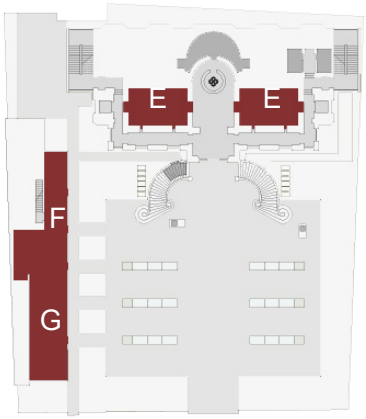
*Fig 3.90,3.91,3.92,3.93. Interior views of the exhibition rooms on the first and second floors, 2025. Source: Author.*



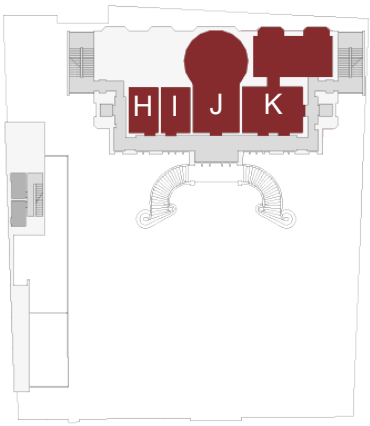

Level -2 Floor Plan



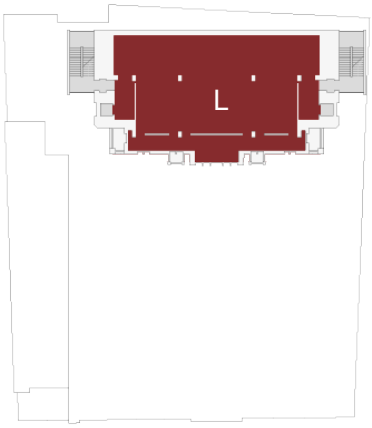

Level -1 Floor Plan




Ground Floor Plan




First Floor Plan




Second Floor Plan

LEGEND:

A. Auditorium (170 sqm)

B. Exhibition hall (860 sqm)

C. Workshop space

D. Library (130 sqm)

E. Twin galleries (80 sqm)

F. Restaurant

G. Store

H. Nicolas Sursock study

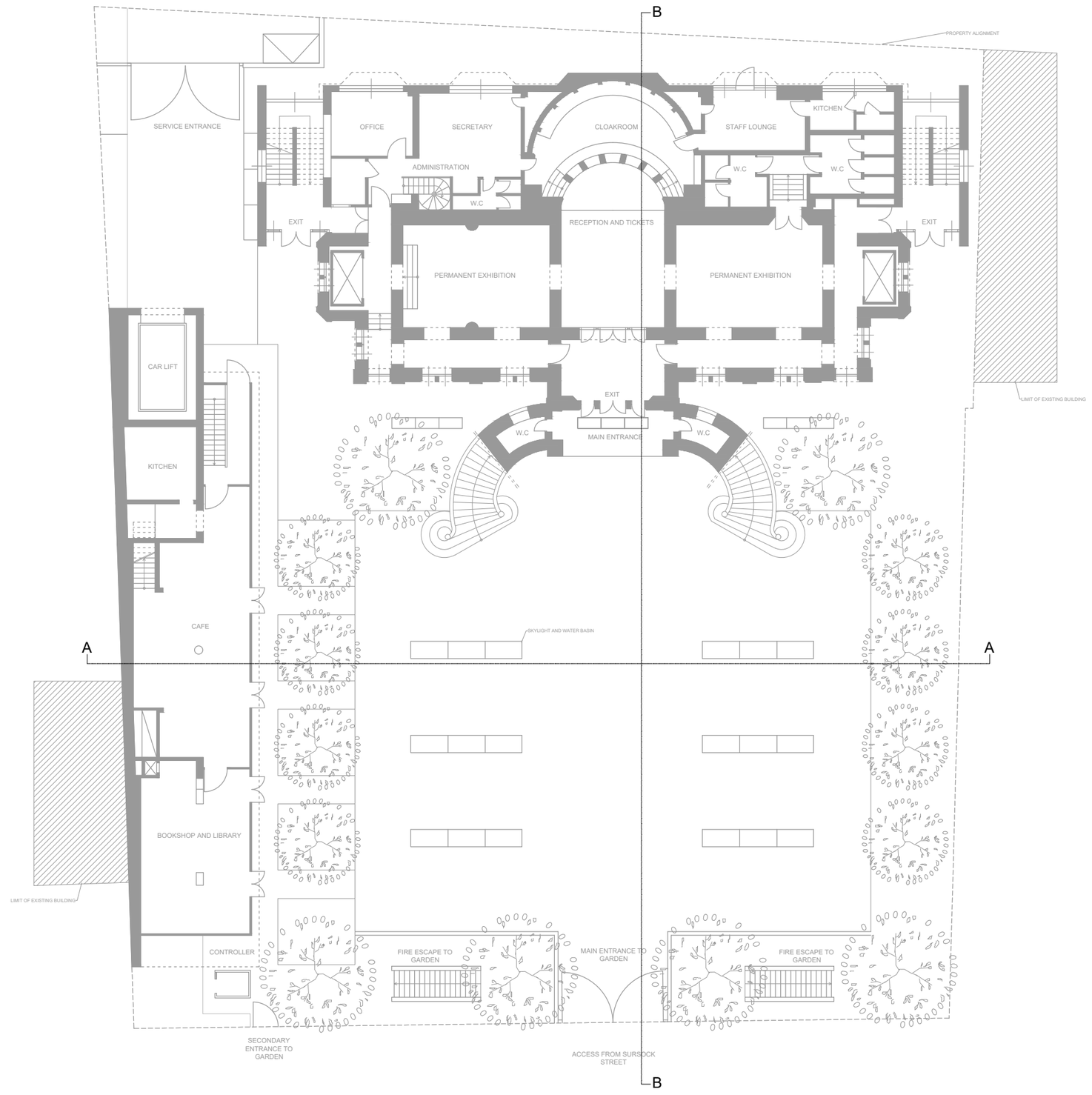
I. The Fouad Debas collection gallery (30 sqm)

J. Salon Arabe (90 sqm)

K. Temporary gallery (230 sqm)

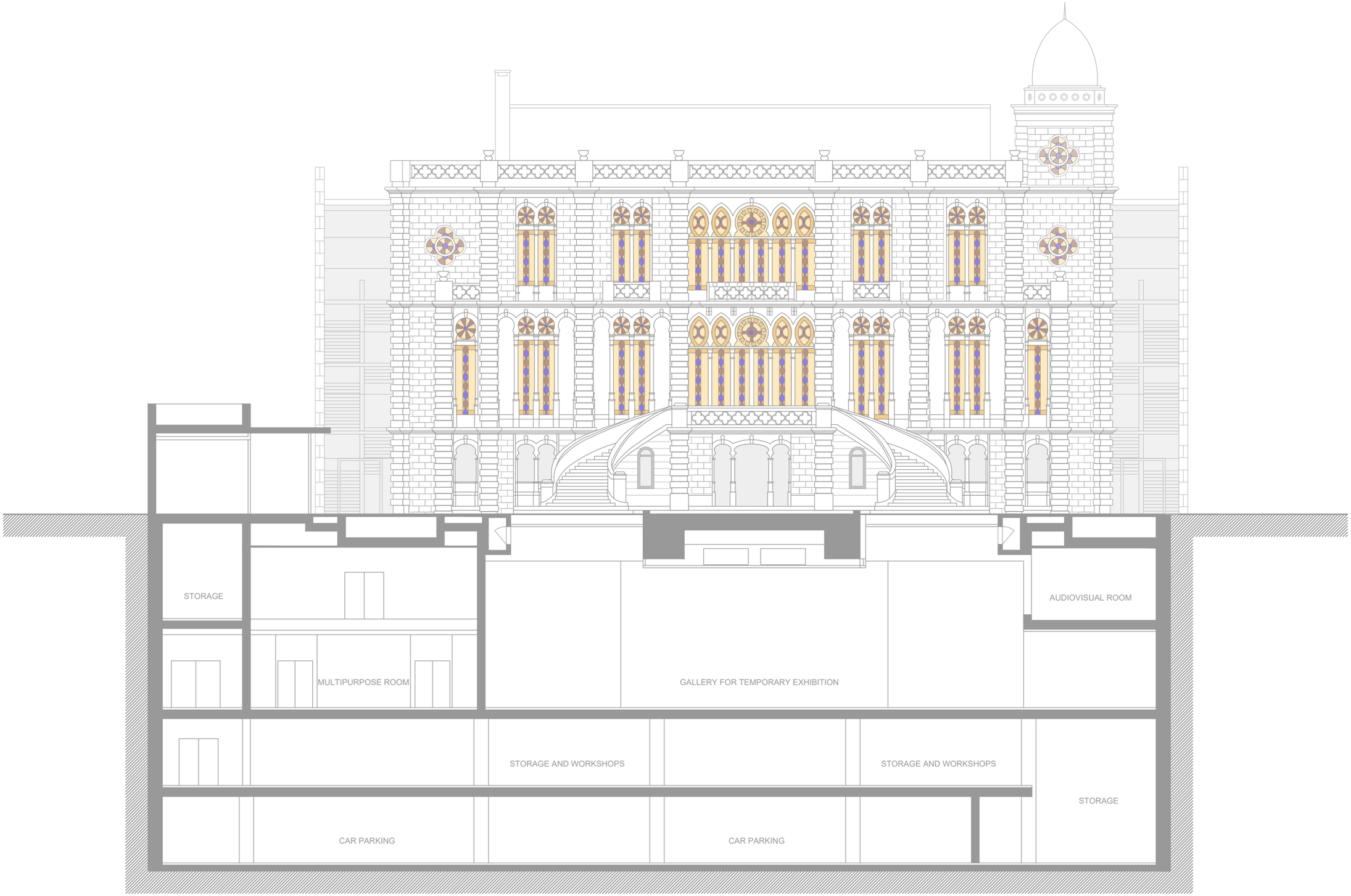
L. Permanent Collection gallery (410 sqm)

*Fig 3.94. Schematic diagram of the floor plans indicating the premises that are open to the public for visit. Graphic adaptation. Source: https://sursock.museum/content/plan-your-visit.*

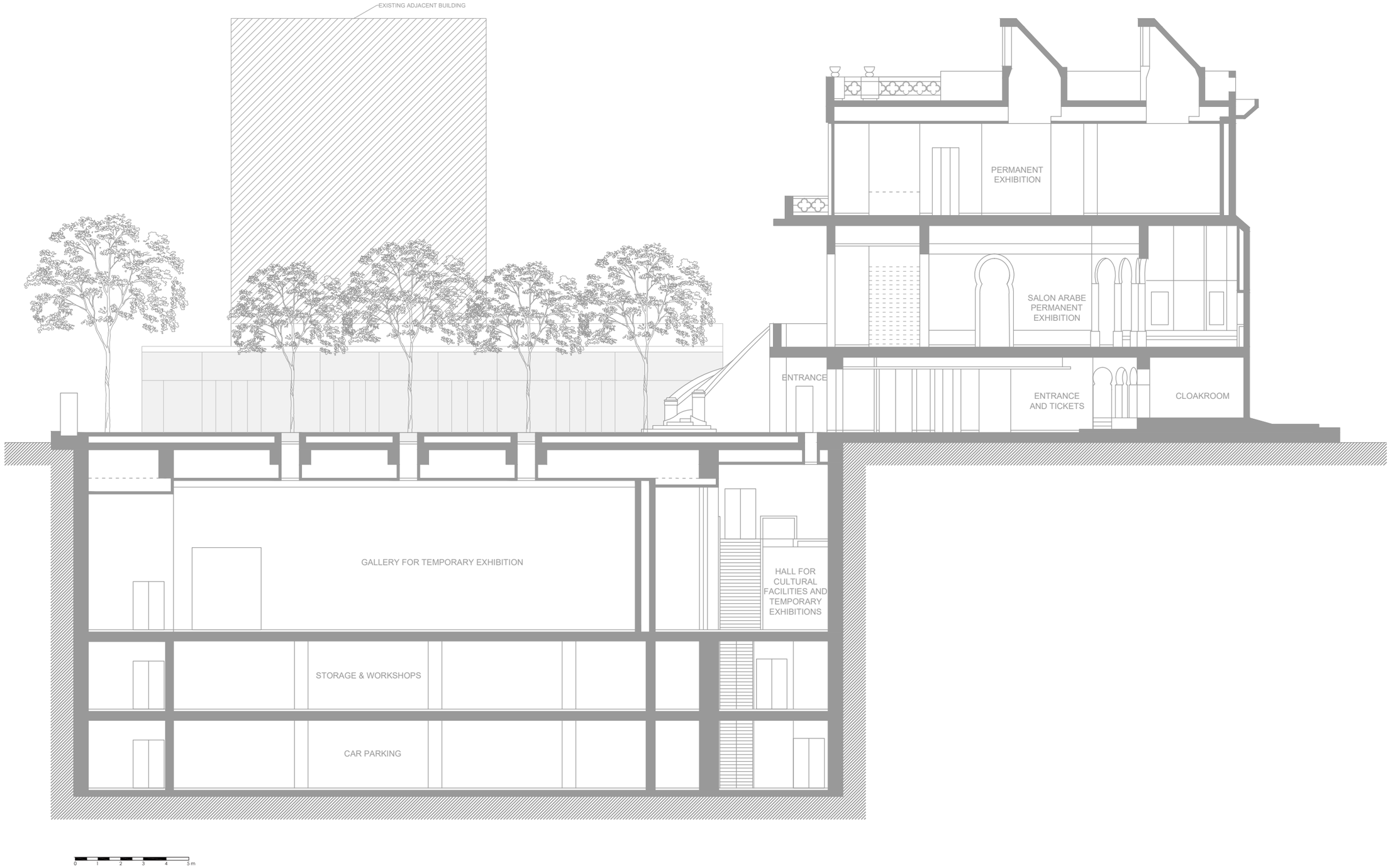



WILMOTTE & ASSOCIÉS / JA DESIGNS EXTENSION (2000) - GROUND FLOOR PLAN

N




WILMOTTE & ASSOCIÉS / JA DESIGNS EXTENSION (2000) - SECTION A-A




WILMOTTE & ASSOCIÉS / JA DESIGNS EXTENSION (2000) - SECTION B-B

## 3.4 Dialogue Between Historic and Modern Features

The architectural evolution of the Nicolas Sursock Museum provides an interpretation for this thesis's central claim that the Museum functions as a palimpsest of Beirut's own layered history, not merely in the loose sense of a building with several construction phases, which is true of most historic buildings, but in the more specific sense that each of its architectural layers legibly encodes a different, and at points, opposed ideological relationship to the layers beneath it. This aligns with Saliba's (1988, p. 29) own account of Beirut architecture as a site where "if architecture is politics in three dimensions", successive interventions each negotiate the relationship between imported style, local structure, and cultural authority. The 1912 villa itself is already such a layer rather than a neutral origin point. Per Saliba's typological account, its facade represents a specific, class-coded strategy, the aristocratic "*kasr*'s superimposition" of imported, eclectic ornament onto a locally rooted central-hall structure (Saliba, 1998; p. 46) through which Beirut's mercantile asserted a cosmopolitan identity legible to both Ottoman and European audiences simultaneously.

Read as the next layer, Serof's facade is not merely different in style from the villa; it is legibly a rejection of the earlier layer's entire representational logic, substituting the *kasr*'s imported historicism with the non-representational vocabulary of Lebanese state-building modernism, at the exact moment the Museum itself was becoming a civic institution under municipal custodianship rather than a private aristocratic residence. The Wilmotte/Aboukhaled extension introduces a third approach to the relationship between old and new. Serof's intervention responded to the existing historic architecture with visible modernist counter-statement. In contrast, Wilmotte's approach of "contemporary grafting", as expressed through his W Prize, places greater emphasis on preserving the visual presence of the historic building. At the Sursock Museum, it is evident in the decision to locate most of the new construction underground, rather than expressing the extension through facade-level contrast. This is a further, and in some respects opposite, answer to the same underlying question Serof faced: How should new architecture relate to an inherited historic facade? Read cumulatively, the Museum's three principle architectural moments, the 1912 villa, the 1970-1974 transformation, and the 2008-2015 expansion, do not simply coexist as separate historical facts to be listed. Each stratum encodes a distinct, historically specific answer to the question of how imported architectural authority should relate to local structure and memory.

# Chapter 4
# Restoration Practices

## 4.1 Restoration Works After the Lebanese Civil War

Documentation concerning the condition of the Sursock Museum during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) remains limited, and no source consulted for this thesis quantifies the damage the building sustained during the conflict. What is documented is that the museum remained open through most of the war, “despite gun battles between rival militias, foreign invasions, and political turmoil”, closing only in 2008 for a major renovation and expansion project led by Wilmotte & Associés and Jacques Aboukhaled, which was completed in 2015 (Atallah, 2023). In October 2014, ahead of that reopening, the museum launched a standing conservation programme, its restoration workshop, aimed at cleaning and, where necessary, restoring works across the collection, from paintings and photographs to ceramics, paper-based work, metalwork, and stone sculpture (Sursock Museum, n.d.-j). This workshop remained part of the museum’s institutional infrastructure into the following decade, and is discussed again in section 4.4 in relation to the post-2020 conservation effort.



*Fig 4.1. Entrance of the Sursock Museum, circa 1990, following the end of the Lebanese Civil War. Source: Sursock Museum Archives.*

## 4.2 Post-2020 Emergency Restoration (2021-2023)

### 4.2.1 Beirut Port Explosion on 4 August, 2020

Two explosions tore through Beirut's port on 4 August 2020, causing catastrophic damage across large parts of the city; the exact proportion affected is reported inconsistently in the press, with figures ranging from roughly forty percent (Harrouk, 2020) to descriptions of "more than half" the city (Agence France-Presse, cited in Euronews, 2020). Neighbourhoods directly facing the port, Medawar, Rmeil, Gemmayzeh, Achrafieh, Mar Mikhael, Karantina, and Geitawi, were particularly affected (Harrouk, 2020). According to early joint assessments by UNESCO and Lebanon's Ministry of Culture, over 640 historic buildings were damaged, of which approximately 60 were at risk of collapse (Mady et al., 2020, as cited in Panayot et al., 2023), figures independently corroborated by contemporaneous reporting from Arab News, TRT World and NBC News. Learning from top-down, expropriation-driven reconstruction of Beirut's city centre after the Lebanese Civil War, local heritage NGOSs and civil-society organizations mobilized to lead community-based emergency repairs rather than wait for state-led reconstruction, with the explicit aim of preventing renewed gentrification, displacement, and property speculation in the blast-affected districts (Dar, 2020). On such effort, The Beirut Built Heritage Rescue (BBHR2020), brought together volunteer architects, and engineers within days of the blast; working under the authority of Lebanon's Directorate General of Antiquities, the group surveyed citywide damage and established an emergency propping and shelter programme for structures at risk of further collapse (Chahine & Dagher, 2021). BBHR2020 was subsequently formalized as the Beirut Heritage Initiative.

The Sursock Museum, on the Achrafieh hill, sits approximately 800 metres from the site of the explosion (Politano, 2023) and was heavily damaged by the blast wave. The explosion blew out the museum's stained-glass windows, tore through ceilings, wooden panelling, and skylights, and damaged mechanical system throughout the building. Museum director Karina El Helou has stated that seventy percent of the building was badly damaged, along with 66 of the 132 artworks on display (Associated Press, cited in The Hill, 2023). Elsa Hokayem, the museum's associate director at the time, recalled that when she and a colleague emerged from the building after the blast, "windows were broken, paintings were on the ground, scratched and scraped and ruined" (UNESCO, 2023b). Despite the scale of the damage, the building's main structure survived. Aboukhaled, the museum's long-time restoration architect, attributes this partly to the explosion's own force; the pressure wave acted like a suction that blew the stained-glass windows out completely, an effect he believes spared the structure more serious harm. As he stated "the windows were blown off completely …which allowed the building to breathe". He adds "the explosion destroyed many windows and doors. The stronger the glass, the worse the damage. The two staircases on the left and right suffered the most because they had reinforced glass. The fragile facade, however, helped save the overall structure by absorbing the shock." Restoration specialists worked to clean and repair damaged artworks and architectural elements using specialized conservation techniques (Alberti, 2023; Aboukhaled, 2025, appendix A, part 7, Q1). The restoration process lasted nearly three years. The museum remained closed throughout this period. As the museum's own account of the closure puts it, the museum "had to undergo a series of reparations and rehabilitations to be functional again" after the explosion (Sursock Museum, 2023). International

organizations played a central role in this recovery: through the LiBeirut initiative, UNESCO, with over €1 million in funding from the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, supported the restoration of the museum's infrastructure systems, including lighting, internal partitions, glass walls, fire doors, and electromechanical installations, along with facade repairs and the installation of solar energy systems (UNESCO, 2023b).



*Fig 4.2.Photo of the Beirut Port following the blast, August 4, 2020. Source: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/08/04/world/middleeast/beirut-explosion-damage.html*

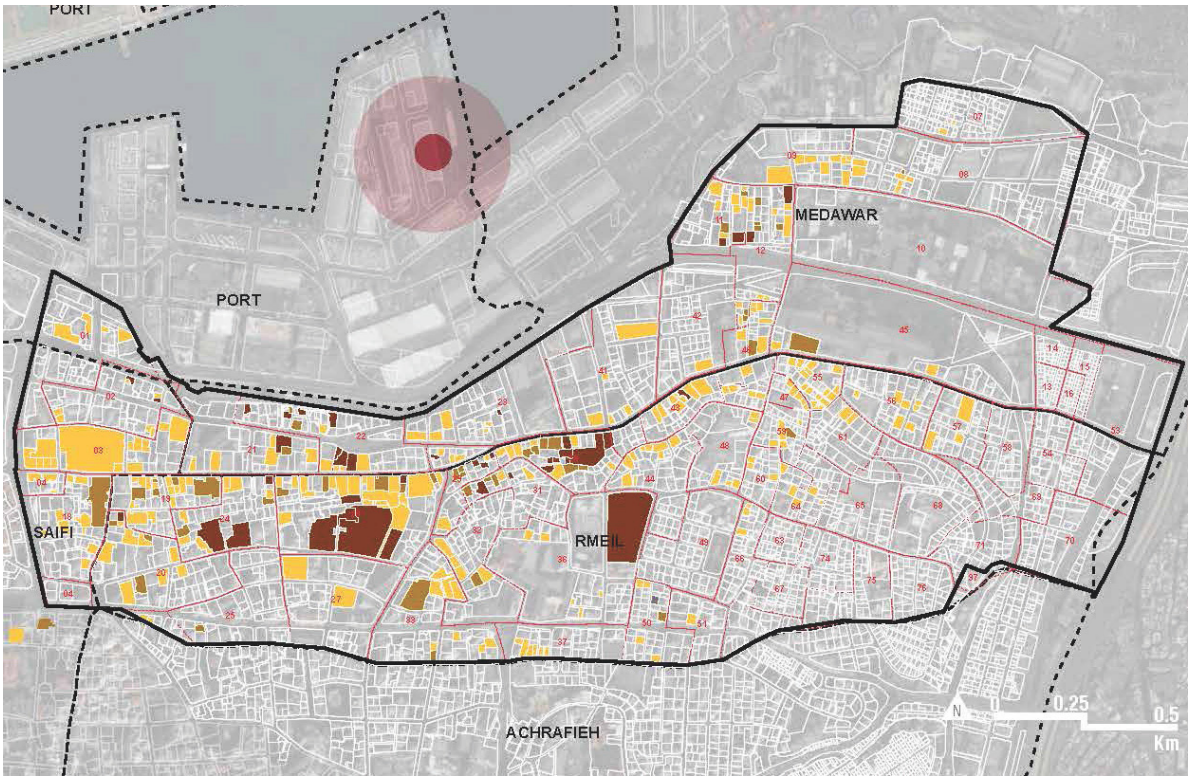



*Fig 4.3. Map showing the damaged historical buildings following the Beirut Port blast.*
*Source: https://dar.com/content/publications/pud/beirut-recovery-article%202-26112020hr.pdf.*



*Fig 4.4. Facade view, 2015. Courtesy of Claire Henry.*



*Fig 4.5. Facade view, 2020. Courtesy of Rowina Bou Harb.*



*Fig 4.6. Hallway view, 2018. Courtesy of Christopher Baaklini.*



*Fig 4.7. Hallway view, 2020. Courtesy of Rowina Bou Harb.*



*Fig 4.8. Salon Arabe, 2015. Source: Nabu Productions.*



*Fig 4.9. Salon Arabe, 2020. Courtesy of Rowina Bou Harb.*



Fig 4.10. Hallway view, 2018. Courtesy of Christopher Baaklini



Fig 4.11. Hallway view, 2020. Courtesy of Rowina Bou Harb.



Fig 4.12. Hallway view, 2018. Courtesy of Christopher Baaklini.



Fig 4.13. Hallway view, 2020. Courtesy of Rowina Bou Harb.

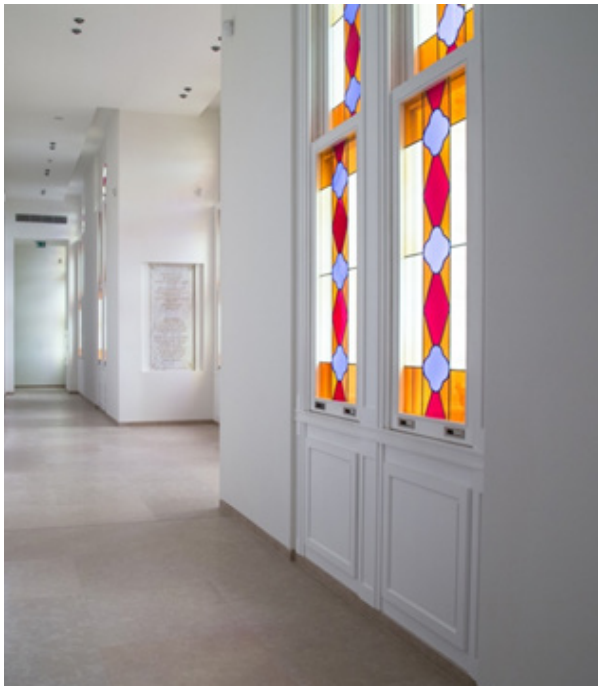


Fig 4.14. Salon Arabe, 2015. Source: Nabu Productions.

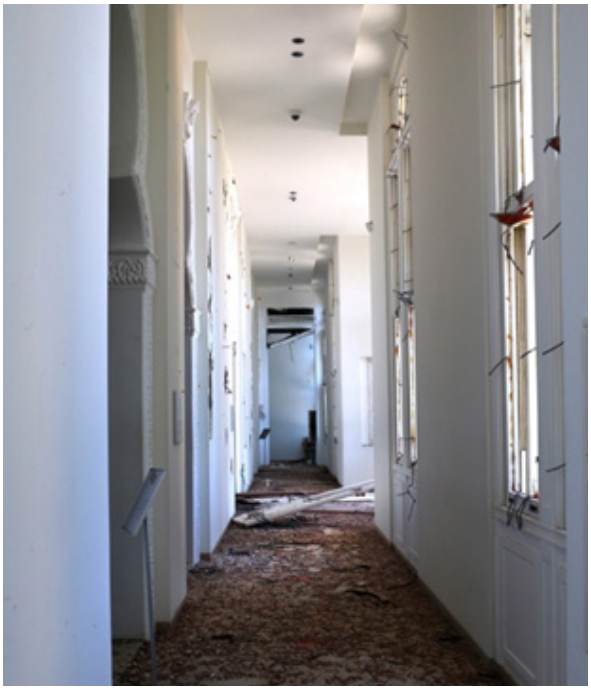


Fig 4.15. Salon Arabe, 2020. Courtesy of Rowina Bou Harb.

### 4.2.2 Beyond the Museum: Sursock Family Properties in the Blast

The Museum was not the only Sursock property damaged in the blast. The nearby Surscok Palace, the 1860 residence built by Moussa/Musa Sursock, referred to in some sources as the Sursock-Cochrane Palace after the family branch that occupies it today, suffered even more structural harm: its North elevation, facing the port directly, sustained deep cracks and out-of-plane deformation, its red-tiled roofs were punctured, and every window and door was shattered (UNESCO, n.d.). A photogrammetric survey of the Palace's North elevation, conducted within days of the blast as part of a wider emergency 3D-documentation mission covering 40 of Beirut's most at-risk heritage buildings, independently confirmed and mapped the extent of this structural deformation (Kallas & Napolitano, 2023). Inside, owner Roderick Sursock Cochrane, whose family had spent twenty years restoring the Palace after the civil war, described stepping over collapsed ceilings and broken marble, past ancestral portraits hanging askew on cracked walls (Associated Press, 2020). The Palace's restoration has proceeded separately from the Museum's funded by the Federal Office of Culture of the Swiss Confederation and the Sursock Palace Association, and including a dedicated capacity-building field school to restore its carved triple-arched-bay woodwork (UNESCO, n.d.).



*Fig 4.16. Roderick Sursock Cochrane, owner of Beirut's Sursock Palace, standing amidst the rubble in one of the damaged rooms, 2020.*
*Source: https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-08-09/blast-destroyed-landmark-19th-century-palace-in-beirut*

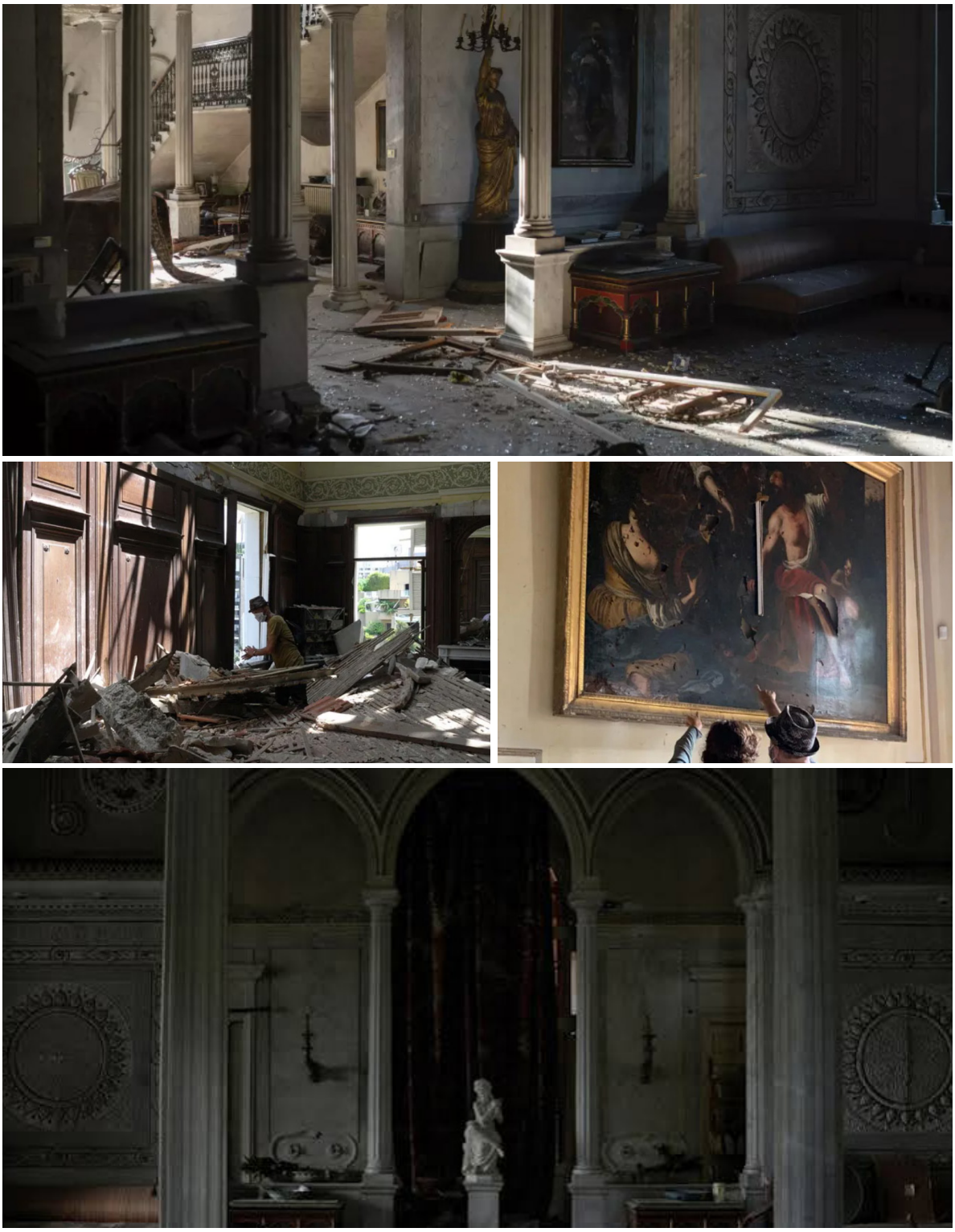


*Fig 4.17,4.18,4.19,4.20. Damage inside the Sursock Palace following the Beirut Port explosion of August 4, 2020. Photo courtesy of Gregory Buchakjian, 2020. Source: https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-08-09/blast-destroyed-landmark-19th-century-palace-in-beirut*

A third Sursock-connected building on the same street, Villa Mokbel, was also badly damaged. Built in 1870 for Alexandre Sursock, the villa passed out of the family's hands after his branch left Lebanon in the 1930s, and was later bought and resolved by the Mokbel family, for whom it is now named. The 2020 blast crumbled its stone walls and caved in its ornate ceilings, with the rooms facing the port worst affected (Ghali, 2024). Unlike the Museum and the Palace, received no state or UNESCO funding for its recovery, since it is privately owned; its restoration has relied instead on informal support from the local NGO Beirut Heritage Initiative and on its owner's own efforts to attract a new tenant willing to fund a full restoration (Ghali, 2024). The Beirut Heritage Initiative was credited with providing informal support to Villa Mokbel's recovery.



*Fig 4.21. Damage to the Villa Mokbel following the Beirut Port explosion of 4 August, 2020. Photo courtesy of Dia Mrad, 2021.*
*Source: https://www.archdaily.com/966166/beirut-one-year-later-people-driven-reconstruction-efforts-midst-devastated-nation?ad_medium=gallery.*



*Fig 4.22. Preview of a selection of the 3D photogrammetric textured models generated in the study of highly at-risk buildings in Beirut.*
*Source: Kallas and Napolitano (2023), "Image based 3D modeling as a damage prioritization tool for historic buildings in post-disaster areas: the case of the 2020 Beirut Blast."*




*Fig 4.23. Study of the north elevation of Sursock Palace. On the right, part of the textured orthophoto of the elevation; on the left, part of the scalar field classification of the elevation's point cloud, showing structural deformation.*
*Source: Kallas and Napolitano (2023), "Image based 3D modeling as a damage prioritization tool for historic buildings in post-disaster areas: the case of the 2020 Beirut Blast."*

## 4.3 Ethics of Restoration and Decision-Making

The explosion also dislodged and severely damaged the historic wooden doors and panelling of the Salon Arabe and Nicolas Sursock's study, shattering elaborate carved motifs. The museum's architectural history records that the Salon Arabe's hand-carved woodwork was imported from Damascus in the 1920s (Sursock, n.d.-b). Maison Tarazi, a Beirut atelier specializing in the restoration of woodwork, copper, and glass, founded in 1862 by Dimitri Tarazi (New Arab, 2022), has long maintained the Salon Arabe's carved panelling and carried out its post-2020 restoration, described as executed "with the precision of an archaeological reconstruction" (Markaz Review, 2025). This corroborated independently: press coverage of the museum's 2023 reopening confirms that the Salon Arabe's traditional wooden panelling required restoration as part of the recovery (Art News, 2023). The restoration also raises questions about authenticity, minimal intervention, and the preservation of historical memory. Where original materials could be repaired, the project prioritised repair over replacement, following the principles of the Venice Charter (ICOMOS, 1964). Aboukhaled similarly recalls that "the restoration strategy focused mainly on repairing while preserving the original features, such as stained glass and wooden doors, whenever possible" (Aboukhaled, Appendix A, part 7, Q2). He further explains that "the day after the explosion, people immediately started cleaning up and fixing windows. A team of international experts also came to check the building's safety" (Aboukhaled, Appendix A, part 7, Q2).

The restoration work of the stained-glass windows of the museum's facade, which were severely damaged by the force of the blast, was guided with a similar respect to authenticity. Artist Maya Husseini, who had recreated the same windows during the museum's 2008-2015 renovation project using patterns drawn from archival photographs, was able to retrieve the patterns from the earlier work. She replicated each window's shape, including the museum's signature rosace motif, in hand-blown glass donated by Saint Gobain and produced at Verrerie Saint-Just, a French atelier that uses traditional glassblowing techniques (Sursock Museum, n.d.-n). At the same time, the restoration incorporated improvements to the building's technical systems. As Aboukhaled explains "we improved certain systems, such as technical and mechanical infrastructure, but always in ways that would not compromise the heritage aesthetic. Flexibility and resilience were important, but preservation was the priority" (Aboukhaled, Appendix A, part 7, Q3). This approach also corresponds with the conservation principles developed by Beirut's heritage community in response to the damage caused by the blast. In a manual addressed specifically to NGOs and professionals repairing the city's late-Ottoman-era "triple-arched mansions", the same broad architectural typology at the Museum's own 1912 villa, the Beirut Heritage initiative likewise prioritizes like-for-like repair with traditional materials and techniques over full replacement, reserving more invasive structural intervention for genuine safety risks rather than routine damage (Chahine & Dagher, 2021). The restoration also deliberately preserved traces of the disaster as an act of memory. Scars from the blast remain visible on the Salon Arabe's wooden entrance, left in place by design. As museum director Karina El Helou put it, "reopening the museum does not mean we can forget what happened" (Atallah, 2023), an approach consistent with conservation theory that treats acknowledging historical trauma, rather than erasing it, as part of responsible post-disaster restoration (Stanley-Price, 2013).



*Fig 4.24,4.25,4.26,4.27,4.28,4.29,4.30,4.31. Photos of the restoration work on architectural elements and art pieces from the Nicolas Sursock Museum Restoration Workshop.*
*Source: https://sursock.museum/content/restoration-workshop*



*Fig 4.32,4.33,4.34,4.35,4.36,4.37,4.38,4.39. Photos of the restoration work on architectural elements and art pieces from the Nicolas Sursock Museum Restoration Workshop.*
*Source: https://sursock.museum/content/restoration-workshop.*

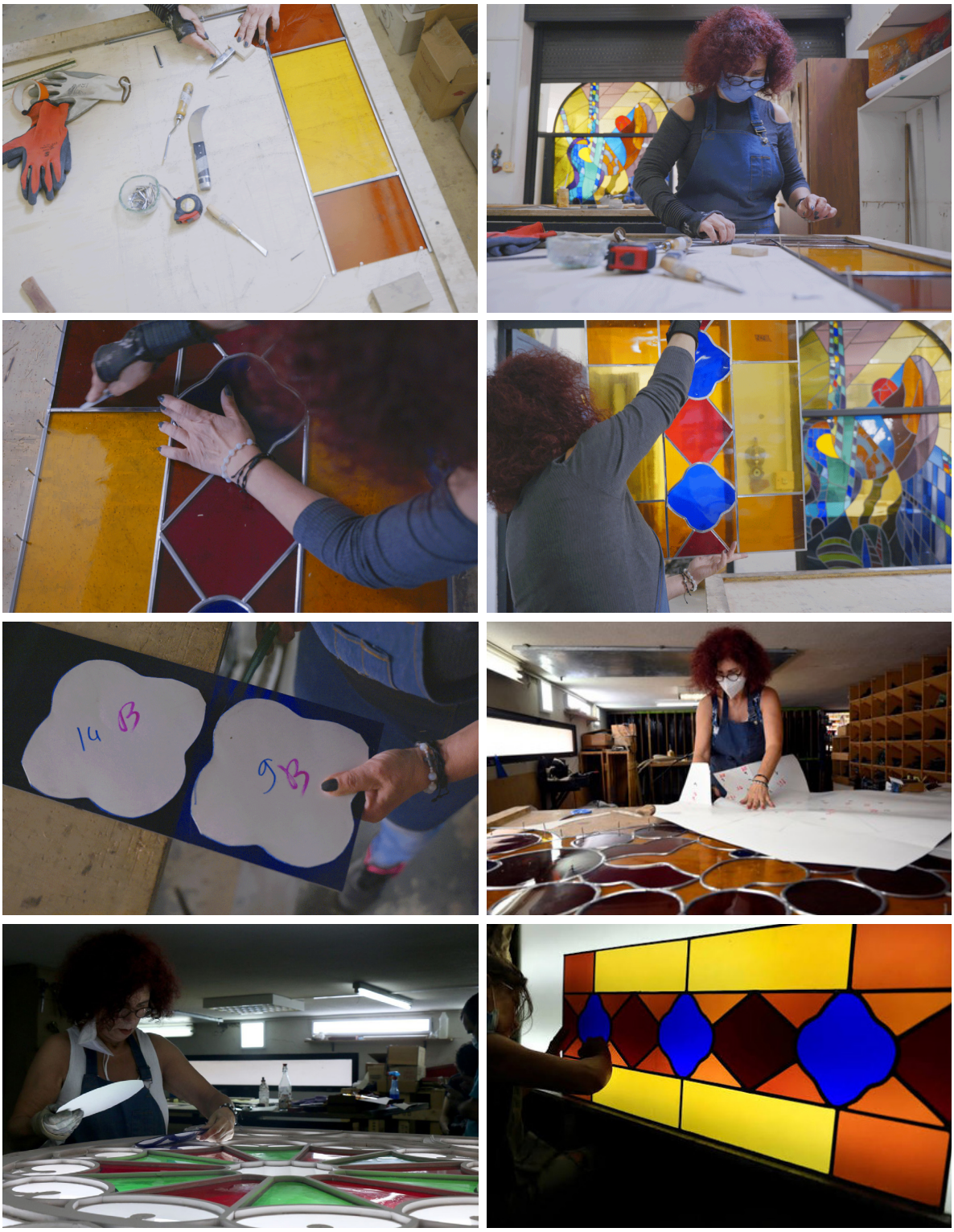



*Fig 4.40.,4.41,4.42,4.43,4.44,4.45,4.46,4.47. Photos of the restoration work on the stained-glass windows by artist Maya Husseini. Source: https://sursock.museum/content/saint-just-beirut-odyssey-recovering-facades-stained-glass-windows*

## 4.4 Institutional Roles

The museum's restoration required coordination across local and international institutions. The museum's own administration led the project and its fundraising, working with conservation experts, architects, and international partners to assess damage and plan the rehabilitation. UNESCO with its LiBeirut initiative, played a crucial role in organising international funding and technical assistance (UNESCO, 2023b). The restoration was funded mainly through three sources. The French Ministry of Culture and the International Alliance for Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH) each contributed $500,000 alongside further in-kind and individual donors (Sursock Museum, 2023a). In total, the museum raised more than $2 million for the restoration, without financial support from the Lebanese state (Atallah, 2023).

Italy's contribution, channelled through the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS, n.d), was the largest single donation to the project: a €1 million grant under UNESCO's LiBeirut initiative, described by UNESCO as the largest single-donor investment in Beirut's post-blast cultural heritage recovery, that funded the restoration of the museum's lighting systems, internal partitions, fire doors, glass walls, facade waterproofing and lighting, and the installation of solar energy panels (UNESCO, 2023a). The funding agreement was signed in Beirut in May 2021 by Italy's then Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Marina Sereni. She presented the project as a sign that "Lebanese population can continue counting on the support and the partnership of the Italian Government and its people" (Arab News, 2021). Following the museum's reopening in 2023, Alessandra Piermattei, director of AICS's Beirut office, described the preservation of cultural heritage as an "engine of sustainable development" in Lebanon. She also identified Lebanon as a long-standing priority for Italian development cooperation (Politano, 2023). In the same account, museum director Karina El Helou described the reopening as a moment of collective healing, seeing the walls, the artworks, and finally the public back in the museum halls again (Politano, 2023). The museum's restoration workshop, established in October 2014, gave the institution a standing base of in-house conservation expertise that it could draw on again for the artwork conservation described in chapter 4.2. Taken together, the reopening of the museum in May 2023 represents both the restoration of a major cultural institution and a case study in international collaboration around heritage recovery after a catastrophic urban disaster, one in which private institutional leadership, rather than state coordination, carried the project from emergency stabilization through to reopening.

# Chapter 5
# Interpretation and Identity

## 5.1 Public Perception and Role in Collective Memory



*Fig 5.1. The limestone sculpture "Al-Bakiyatayn" (The Weeping Women) in front of the Sursock Museum, 2025, attributed to sculptor Youssef Hoyek. It depicts a Christian woman and a Muslim woman with outstretched hands over a funeral urn, read as a gesture of shared grief and unity. Photo: Author.*

The way the Sursock museum has been perceived has changed alongside Beirut's political and urban history. During the second half of the twentieth century, the museum became closely associated with the promotion of Lebanese modern art through exhibitions such as the Salon d'Automne. This contributed to Beirut's growing reputation as a regional centre for artistic production (Osman, 2023). The museum's exhibitions and curatorial activities also strengthened its position within Beirut's cultural scene, while simultaneously reflecting broader social hierarchies within Lebanese society. The Lebanese Civil War further transformed the museum's symbolic standing. Although the war forced a seven-year closure, the institution retained a strong presence in public consciousness and its 1982 re-opening amid a divided, war-torn city represented what (Osman, 2025) calls an act of institutional resilience, even as its programming during this period remained largely formalist and disengaged from the war's immediate realities (Osman, 2025).

This perception acquired renewed public visibility after the museum's 2015 reopening following a major architectural expansion (see Chapter 3, and 3.3.3; Chapter 4 and 4.1). Museum director Zeina Arida described the institution's resonance in explicitly personal and civic terms, noting that the museum "affected me a lot since my childhood" and that its role is "to link your own identity and history to contemporary time" (as cited in Dabbagh, 2015, p. 23). Lebanese curator Christine Tohme, founder of Ashkal Alwan, framed the museum's civic function directly in terms of collective memory, arguing that such institutions "can play a pivotal role in shaping our notions of how to live together collectively and as a community" (as cited in Dabbagh, 2015, p. 23). These statements offer direct evidence of visitor and practitioner-level perception, complementing

the scholarly framing offered by Osman (2023, 2025) and Von Maltzahn (2019). The Beirut port explosion of August 2020 added a further, more urgent layer to this public meaning. The physical damage sustained by the museum, detailed in Chapter 4 and 4.2, transformed the building into a visible marker of Beirut's cultural vulnerability, while its subsequent restoration repositioned it was a symbol of resilience and collective recovery.

Museums are widely understood to play a significant role in shaping collective memory, since they preserve, organise, and interpret cultural narratives on behalf of the societies that house them (Rivera-Orraca, 2008), and the Sursock Museum does so in a doubled sense: given the family's own position in Beirut's nineteenth and early twentieth-century economic and political life (see Chapter 2 and 2.2.), the museum preserves traces of Beirut's aristocratic past while functioning as a contemporary cultural institution. This duality matters most during conflict and reconstruction, when heritage institutions frequently become the spaces through which societies negotiate trauma, continuity, and identity (Fricke, 2005), a dynamic evident throughout Beirut's history of repeated destruction and rebuilding. The Sursock Museum's post-2020 restoration can be read as an act of resistance against urban erasure and collective amnesia: the museum does not merely preserve artworks and architectural fabric, but the continuity of Beirut's cultural narrative within a fragmented urban landscape.



*Fig 5.2. Photo of the sculpture "Al-Bakiyatayn" ("The Weeping Women") at its original location in Martyr's Square, Beirut, circa 1912, before its relocation to the Sursock Museum grounds. Source: https://oldbeirut.com/*



متحف سرسق ينتظر نفض الغبار عن نشاطاته

قصة قصر تحوّل الى «مختبر» للفن الطليعي

كتبت اليانا كرم وتريز عون :

من الباب الاخضر تستقبل الزائر ساحة بوسع ذكريات الماضي حديقة بحاجة الى بعض التنسيق والترتيب وترميم البركة وما حولها.

العمارة في الداخل تذكر التاريخ. اللوحات تمد الوانها الى الحديقة لتحمل المستقبل. والقصر - المتحف في صخب الحضارة لم تسقطه همجية الدمار والحرب.

متحف سرسق، ملكه نقولا، بناه العام ١٩١٢ ووهبه العام ١٩٥٢ الى بلدية بيروت لتحوله متحفا. عانى الحرب لكنه قدم افضل الفنانين اللبنانيين الذين تخرجوا من قاعاته الرحبة.

يوم استعملته بلدية بيروت كان قصرا بقاعات وغرف ويوم تحول الى متحف تحول بطابقيه الى قاعات كبيرة لتقديم العروض. مكتب الواهب نقولا سرسق بقي على حاله باثاثه ولوحة الفنان فان دونغن الذي رسم نقولا سرسق. هذا المكتب هو اليوم مكتب حافظ المتحف الدكتور لطف الله ملكي، وقد تحدث الى الانوار عن تاريخ المتحف ونشاطاته.

## تاريخ المتحف

كان المتحف قصرا يملكه نقولا ابراهيم سرسق، سكنه منذ بداية هذا القرن نحو العام ١٩١٢.

العام ١٩٥٢ وهب نقولا سرسق القصر لمدينة بيروت لتحوله الى متحف على ان يدعى متحف نقولا سرسق. اشترط ايضا ان يكون رئيس بلدية بيروت هو المشرف على هذا المتحف. لكن القصر مر بمرحلة انتقالية وتحول الى قصر للضيافة بين العامين ١٩٥٣ و ١٩٥٧، وذلك بموجب مرسوم



رسم نقولا ابراهيم سرسق

جمهورية تركيا

العام ١٩٥٧ انتهت مهمة قصر الضيافة اذ اصبح متحفا كما اراده الواهب واعطي اسم متحف نقولا ابراهيم سرسق. اول مشرف على المتحف كان رئيس بلدية بيروت امين بك بيهم. المرحوم امين بك بيهم كان لديه ميل كبير للفن وهذا ما كان يتناسب مع طلب نقولا سرسق. الرئيس بيهم عين لجنة من رئيس ونائب رئيس وحافظ متحف واول رئيسة لجنة كانت الليدي ايفون سرسق كوكرن.

تركز هم اللجان في تجهيز القصر ليصبح متحفا. فاتصلت بالاونيسكو وطلبت المساعدة للتجهيز والتغيير في البناء: امن، اضواء، قاعات وغيرها...

وصل دي فارين سوا ووضع التصميمات الضرورية وتم العمل بين العامين ١٩٧٠ و ١٩٧٣، فاصبح متحفا بكل معنى الكلمة: امن، ادارة، طريقة العرض واستحدث قسم في البناء، كما رمم الصالون العربي وغرف النوم تحولت الى صالات عرض.



الدكتور لطف الله ملكي، «حافظ» المتحف

بتوقف المتحف عن مهامه رغم اصابته بقذائف وتهدم قسم منه. بعد المعارك اعيد ترميمه وعوجلت مشكلة الرطوبة والشق. كما ان المتحف اقام معرضا في باريس العام ١٩٨٢ لتعذر اقامته في بيروت.

بهتم معرض الخريف بابراز الفنانين اللبنانيين الناشئين وتختار لجنة افضل اللوحات للعرض.

اصبح هدف المتحف حاليا متعدد، لم يعد متخصصا بنوع معين، اصبح لقاء ليس فقط للفنانين (من رساميين ونحات وكتاب) صرنا نفكر بلقاءات تكريم لبعض الفنانين والمفكرين اللبنانيين مثلا لقاء تكريم للمرحومة ناديا تويني. عرضنا كتبها ومجموعة من اللوحات لفنانين رسموا ناديا تويني.

النشاطات الكثيرة والمتعددة تحدث عنها ايضا حافظ المتحف الدكتور ملكي.

نظمنا معارض تقليدية وهي معارض الخريف لابراز الفنانين اللبنانيين عرض عليه عمل في باريس. الفرق بين مختبر المتحف ومختبرات الترميم الاخرى ان مختبر المتحف مجاني.

كما نصدر منشورات عن المعارض مجانا، واساسا كل عملنا مجاني يضم عادة معرض الخريف بين ثلاثمائة واربعمائة لوحة وشرط الاشتراك ان يكون الفنان مبتدئا وان تكون اللوحات جديدة. مدة العرض هي لشهر او لشهرين، ولا يتم بيع اللوحات الا بعد انتهاء المعرض.

تتالف لجنة الحكم من رؤساء معاهد الفنون الجميلة في لبنان، ومن رئيس جمعية الفنانين ومن ناقدين فنيين.

ويختار المتحف افضل ثلاث لوحات في نهاية كل معرض يضمهم الى مجموعته. والمجموعة اصبحت كبيرة وتضم ليس فقط افضل لوحات من كل معرض خريف بل لوحات قدمها فنانون واصدقاء اجمالا كل الفنانين الكبار مروا في المتحف. حاليا ندرس اقامة معارض لفنانين قدامى وراحلين مثل الجميل الزعني، فروخ، جان خليفة،



مدخل متحف سرسق

الدكتور لطف الله ملكي شرح كيفية تغذية صندوق المتحف: «صدر قانون اعطى للمتحف ٥ ٪ من ضريبة البناء قبل العام ١٩٧٥ كانت واردات بلدية بيروت كافية لتغطية المصاريف. معارض ومنورات رواتب للموظفين وعددهم خمسة، وشراء لوحات لاكمال المجموعة. اليوم لا امكانات خصوصا ان واردات البلدية باللميرة اللبنانية. لذا لجانا الى ممول للمنشورات. لتتقدم شركة او مصرف او مؤسسة تجارية، تاخذ على عاتقها المنشور شرط ان توزع عددا منها الى زبائنها.

طريقة التمويل هذه سيتم توسيعها عن طريق انشاء لجنة اصدقاء المتحف، فاللجنة المسؤولة عن المتحف لا تتعاطى بالماديات. لجنة الاصدقاء قد تدعمنا مثلا لاصلاح البركة والنفيرات. اعضاء اللجنة متطوعون. المتولي الحالي هو رئيس بلدية بيروت الوزير محمد غزيري. رئيس اللجنة الوزير السابق فيكتور قصير نائب الرئيس الاستاذ الداعوق. حافظ المكتبة الدكتور ملكي. اعضاء اللجنة السيدات جومانا مستواي التقاق الفني واشير هنا الى احدب، رقه سلام، ناديا كتانة، صونيا راسي، هند سنو.

والسادة: كميل ابو صوان (سفير سابق) - امين بزري، الشيخ بيار خوري، النقيب جان نفاع، المهندس جورج ريشاني، الاستاذ شفيق السرسوك.

لتحضير المعارض وعدد من المتطوعين مع امينة سر وناطور

المتحف استقبل شخصيات كبيرة من فنانين لبنانيين وعالمين وزاره رؤساء الجمهورية، ادباء وسفراء، مندوبون عن الامم المتحدة والاونيسكو وغيرهم. وفي سجل التشريفات اسماء كبيرة مثل ماكس ارنست، جنفيان باج، كولبت سغبس، سفير البرتغال، سفير البرازيل، بيار بويل، اونو نويووا، حافظ متحف اللوفر...

وفي النهاية كان لا بد من معرفة علاقة الطب بالفن، وعلاقتهما بالايمان، فلماذا حافظ المتحف طبيب، اختصاصه ليس الفن بل صحة جسم الانسان!

## بين الفن والطب

الدكتور لطف لله ملكي ردشارحا هذه العلاقة: «الاطباء لديهم ميل الى الفن والموسيقى. درست في اوروبا واميركا، اتناءها كونت ثقافة في الفن، وزرت متاحف وملتقيات فنية وثقافية ورفعت مستواي التقافي الفني. واشير هنا الى ان حافظ المكتبة السابق كان السفير ابو صوان.

يجب على الطبيب الا يغوص في المرض والام الانسان. نظرة التعاون مع المريض تجعله منفتحا على امور كثيرة. فالانسان مملكة باسكانياته، الانسان غني بما يعبر فيه، أفقر انسان

*Fig 5.3. Newspaper feature on the Sursock Museum's transition and reopening. Source: Sursock Museum Archives.*

## 5.2 Urban Significance

Located in the historic district of Achrafieh, the Sursock Museum occupied a prominent position within Beirut's cultural and architectural landscape, standing as one of the districts few surviving villas from its early twentieth-century era. The mansion's hybrid architectural language reflects Beirut's historical position as a crossroads between East and West. In conflict-affected cities, heritage institutions often acquire additional urban significance because the destruction of such buildings parallels broader social and spatial fragmentation. This dynamic is visible in Beirut's wider post-war urban trajectory. Following the civil war, the reconstruction company Solidere, tasked by then prime minister Rafik Hariri's government with redeveloping Beirut's Central District as a regional business hub, and granted sweeping powers under Law 117 of 1991, pursued a masterplan grounded in market-led urbanism from 1994 onward (Karizat, 2019; Marot and Yazigi, 2012). The project's vision was to revive the economic role and international image that Beirut had held during its pre-war "Golden Age" and to position the Central District as a major centre for commerce and finance in the region. However, this ambition came with significant consequences for the city's architectural heritage. Law 117 effectively removed the legal claims of thousands of residents, shopkeepers, and tenants to their homes and businesses, while Solidere later demolished roughly 80 percent of the historic buildings in the district that had survived the war (Karizat, 2019). The redevelopment of central Beirut shifted the area toward high-value commercial and residential uses, replacing much of its historically mixed, publicly accessible character with spaces that were more exclusive and securitised (Karizat, 2019; Marot and Yazigi, 2012). Karizat (2019) describes this transformation as part of a wider process through which some of Beirut's formerly public spaces became what she calls "prohibited space": areas that remain nominally open but are, in practice, difficult for much of the population to access. The Sursock Museum is located outside the boundaries of the Solidere-administered Beirut Central District. However, it was still affected by the same market-led logic of urban transformation that shaped the wider environment in which the museum had to assert its cultural and institutional continuity. The Beirut port explosion of 2020 intensified debates surrounding heritage protection in Lebanon. Numerous historic buildings in the neighbourhoods facing the port suffered extensive damage, exposing the fragility of Beirut's architectural heritage more broadly. The Sursock Museum became one of the most visible symbols of this destruction; its subsequent restoration, in this light, is not just an act of institutional survival but a deliberate attempt to maintain historical continuity within an urban environment long shaped, as the case of Solidere shows, by the tension between private development interest and public heritage value.

## 5.3 Comparative Perspectives: The Sursock Museum and Beit Beirut

To assess what the Sursock Museum's trajectory reveals about heritage protection in high-conflict Beirut more broadly, it is useful to compare it with Beit Beirut, the city's other major "memory museum", housed in the former Barakat building, also known as the Yellow House, at Sodeco Square. The comparison highlights that institutional continuity, and not architectural preservation alone, determines whether a heritage building goes on to sustain a stable public role in the city's memory landscape. Built in 1924 by architect Youssef Aftimos for the Barakat family and expanded by Fouad Kozah in 1932, the Barakat Building sat directly on Beirut's Civil War Green Line and was occupied by militia snipers because of its commanding sightlines across the demarcation line (El Asmar & Hmeidan, 2019). Where the Sursock Museum's wartime significance lay in its continued, if reduced, operation as a cultural institution (Osman, 2025), The Barakat Building's wartime significance lay in the opposite: its transformation into an instrument of violence itself. After the war, architect and heritage activist Mona Hallak led a public campaign to save the building from demolition. In 2003, the Municipality of Beirut expropriated and, after a long partnership with the City of Paris, restored it as Beit Beirut, a museum and urban cultural centre explicitly dedicated to the memory of the city and its civil war (Brones, 2012; El Asmar & Hmeidan, 2019).

The two institutions diverge sharply, however, in what their restorations were understood to preserve. The Sursock Museum's restoration, both after the 2015 renovation and the 2020 explosion, worked to conserve a collection and a curatorial programme, restoring the building as a functioning museum with a continuous institutional identity stretching back to 1961. Beit Beirut's adaptive reuse project, by contrast, was built around preserving the building's damage itself as evidence: bullet holes, sniper installations, and shell-damaged plaster were deliberately retained on its first floor, in the architect's own description, "the main permanent collection of the museum" (El Asmar & Hmeidan, 2019, p. 84). This marks a materially different model of memory-work: The Sursock Museum reconstructs continuity by restoring what was damaged, while Beit Beirut memorialises rupture by conserving the damage.



*Fig 5.5,5.6,5.7. Street view and interior views of the Beit Beirut showing the extent of damage still visible today. Source: https://www.admiddleeast.com/story/tracing-the-war-in-lebanon-through-beit-beiruts-architecture*

# Chapter 6
# Conclusion

## 6.1 Summary of Findings

This thesis set out to ask how the architectural evolution and restoration of the Sursock Museum reflects Beirut's historical, cultural, and political transformations. Read across its five chapters, the case of the museum offers a layered answer. The city's condition of successive overwriting, established in Chapter 1 through the palimpsest framework, is not merely a metaphor applied retrospectively to a convenient building. It structures the museum's own history at every scale. Chapter 2 showed that the museum's institutional history did not begin with an architectural intervention, but Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock's 1952 bequest. This decision transformed a private aristocratic residence into a public cultural institution. Chapter 3 then traced architectural consequences of this transformation. The 1912 villa combined imported architectural references with a locally rooted spatial organisation. Serof's intervention in the 1970s introduced a contrasting modernist language, while the later Wilmotte/Aboukhaled underground expansion of 2008-2015, which resolved the same underlying tension, how new architecture should relate to an inherited historic facade, through concealment rather than contrast. None of these three moments simply added square metres. Each encoded a distinct, historically specific position on the relationship between imported authority and local memory, which is precisely what allows the building to be read as a palimpsest.

Chapter 4 tested that continuity against sudden violence. The 2020 port explosion did not introduce a new architectural layer in the way Serof or Wilmotte had; it inflicted damage that the museum then had to interpret, and the choices made in that interpretation are themselves revealing. The decision to restore rather than to replace, and in the case of the Salon Arabe's blast-scarred woodwork, to leave visible traces of the explosion by design, extended the villa's original logic of layered meaning into an act of conscious memory-work. The fact that the recovery was carried out largely through private fundraising and international partnership, UNESCO, Italy's AICS, ALIPH, and the French Ministry of Culture, rather than through coordinated support from the Lebanese state, is significant. It reflects a pattern that has been visible since the Civil War and became more evident after the country's institutional crisis following 2019, when responsibility of preserving Beirut's heritage has shifted decisively from public authority to private and international actors. The comparison with Beit Beirut in Chapter 5 further highlights what the museum's case demonstrates. Architectural preservation alone does not explain why some heritage buildings retain a stable place in a city's collective memory while others do not. Beit Beirut preserves rupture, conserving bullet holes and shell damage as part of its central exhibition. The Sursock Museum, by contrast, has repeatedly restored continuity, returning, after civil war, after a change of function, after an explosion, to its role as a working cultural institution. It is this continuity of institutional purpose, sustained across radically different political and material conditions, that has allowed the museum to remain legible as a site of memory rather than becoming, like so much of Beirut's built heritage, either a ruin or a replacement.

## 6.2 Reflections on Layered Heritage

Taken together, these findings suggest that layered heritage, in a city like Beirut, is not something a building simply accumulates by surviving long enough. It is also shaped by the decisions of architects, patrons, restorers, and institutions, about what to preserve, what to alter, and what to leave visibly damaged. The Sursock Museum's palimpsest remains legible today only because successive actors chose, at several critical

points in its history, to build onto rather than erase what came before it. This outcome was not inevitable. The same city that produced the museum's careful layering also witnessed Solidere's extensive redevelopment of the historic downtown, representing a markedly different response to the same underlying challenge of a war-damaged, historically dense urban fabric. This distinction matters beyond the single case examined here. It suggests that heritage protection n conflict-affected cities cannot rely on architectural or material preservation alone; it depends equally on sustaining the institutions, and the will, capable of interpreting damage as something to be integrated into a building's history rather than erased or exploited. As Lebanon's cultural sites face renewed threat under conditions the thesis's own introduction described as an active regional war, and as UNESCO's "enhanced protection" designation extend to an increasing number of properties, the Sursock Museum's history offers a case study in how architecture can absorb violence without losing continuity. However, this depends on the choices made by actors responsible for preserving and interpreting heritage.

## 6.3 Limitations and Future Research

The interpretive limits acknowledged in Chapter 1, the absence of original 1912 drawings, reliance on a single architect's testimony for the 2008-2015 expansion, and sparse documentation of the Lebanese Civil War period, mean that parts of this account remain necessarily provisional rather than definitive. Future research could extend this study by comparing the Sursock Museum's post-disaster restoration model against other ALIPH or UNESCO-funded recoveries in the region, or by tracing in more detail how private *waqf*-based heritage governance, of this kind established by Nicolas Sursock's will, compare with state-administered heritage protection elsewhere in Lebanon. As the country's heritage sites continue to face active threat, such comparative work would help clarify which institutional models are best equipped to sustain historic buildings not merely as surviving structures, but as living sites of memory. Finally, this work aimed to raise awareness on heritage preservation in Lebanon and to invite future proposals to communicate heritage importance to the public.

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# Appendices

# Appendix A:
## Interview Transcript with Architect Jacques Aboukhaled

**Interviewee:** Jacques Aboukhaled, Founder and Principal Architect, JA Designs

**Interviewer:** Margerita Assi, Master's Student, Architecture for Heritage, Politecnico di Torino

**Date & Time:** July 8, 2025

**Duration:** 1 hour 30 minutes

**Location:** At the Sursock Museum, Beirut, Lebanon

**Format:** Semi-structured interview and museum tour

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This appendix contains the transcript of an interview with architect Jacques Aboukhaled about the Sursock Museum in Beirut and his involvement in its extension and restoration. The interview was semi-structured, with a set of questions prepared in advance. Due to time constraints, not all questions were addressed, while some topics were discussed in greater detail during the conversation. Part of the interview also took place while touring the museum, allowing some of the topics discussed to be considered in relation to the building and its spaces.

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## Clean Transcript

Lightly corrected for grammar and punctuation, formatted for readability. Questions in bold, answers in quoted italics, skipped ones marked as Not Asked/ Not Answered.

## Part One: Historical Context and Family Archives

**Q1. Could you tell me about the origins of the Sursock Palace? Who was the original architect and what was their vision for the building?**

**A1.** *"We are not 100% sure who the original architect was. I don't want to say anything because I don't have real archives on this. We tried to retrieve the original plans, but when we were asked to extend the museum in the 2000s, the only archives we found dated back to the 1960s change of use. Unfortunately, I cannot say much on this matter."*

**Q2. Do you know if any original architectural drawings or documentation still exist from the 19th century?**

**A2.** *[Not Asked / Not Answered]*

**Q3. Have you or your team accessed the Sursock family archives? What kind of materials or information were most helpful?**

**A3.** *[Not Asked / Not Answered]*

**Q4. Were there any significant events in the building's history that altered its structure or use before your involvement?**

**A4.** *"In the 1960s, when they did the first extension, they transformed the top floors and added a small extension at the back. They also reinforced parts of the facade and interior. The top floors were originally bedrooms, and the ground floor was the hosting floor, with the reception and the Salon Arabe. The house originally had a rotunda and a garden at the back, which was later altered."*

*"Nicolas Sursock donated the house to promote art, making it free of charge, and left his personal belongings on display. For a while, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs used it to host diplomats, until the 1960s when it officially became a museum. The rest of the house hasn't changed much."*

## Part Two: Structural and Material Understanding

**Q1. What is the structural system of the palace? What materials were used?**

**A1.** *"The building was constructed at the beginning of the use of reinforced concrete. When we surveyed it, I was surprised to find that many of the window surrounds and some walls were made of concrete, while the rest of the walls and the ground floor were built in sandstone, like most houses in Beirut."*

**Q2. Can you describe the foundation and how the structure responds to stress or shock?**

**A2.** *"These houses had no foundation. They were built on what in Arabic is called rake: ditches filled with stones, compacted, and then built upon."*

*"That is why the beginning of the building is in sandstone (in Arabic Hajar Ramleh). When we excavated around it, we had to install micropiles all around the building to stabilize it and allow us to go down. There were buildings on both sides and the street at the front, which made the process even more complex."*

*"We created a big excavation pit. Around it, we built retaining walls and foundations to stabilize both the museum and the adjacent buildings, so we could extend the structure underground. Most of the new extension is underground to preserve the historic facade and street view."*

**Q3. What building materials were used in the original construction, and how were they sourced or replicated during restoration?**

**A3.** *"The extension from the 1960s had aluminium windows. When we renovated it, we wanted to bring back the original sash windows and stained glass. But because of the budget, we couldn't replicate the stained glass exactly. In the Salon Arabe, however, the original stained glass was preserved. After the 2020 explosion, many windows were destroyed. Interestingly, the fragile facade actually helped protect the building, because it allowed the blast pressure to pass through and 'breathe' rather than collapse."*

**Q4. Were there any rare or artisanal materials or techniques used in the building or its restoration?**

**A4.** *[Partially covered above. Not directly answered.]*

**Q5. What architectural or environmental controls were implemented in the archive and library spaces?**

**A5.** [*Not Asked / Not Answered]*

## Part Three: Stylistic Influences and Facade Language

**Q1. How would you describe the stylistic influences of the palace, especially from Venetian and Ottoman traditions?**

**A1.** *"The stylistic influences are Ottoman and Venetian. It was typical of the time it was built, reflecting both Italian and Turkish influences. There were many influences present, and it's not one specific style, but rather the style of many houses on the same street."*

**2. Are there facade or structural elements that distinctly reflect these styles?**

**A2.** *"We kept it as it was, but we had to redo the stairs, which were in a terrible state. The balustrades were a strange mix of bricks and concrete, and the steel was rotten. We repaired everything with a good contractor. We also added new staircases on the sides, with stone cladding, serving as fire exits. The north elevation was designed with glass inclined to avoid direct sun."*

**Q3. Was this stylistic blend intentional from the beginning, or did it evolve through the expansions?**

**A3.** *[Not Asked / Not Answered]*

**Q4. Could you detail the process of recreating the coloured stained-glass façade after 2020? What archival records and artisans were involved?**

**A4.** *[Partially addressed in Part 2, about stained-glass restoration.]*

## Part Four: Interior Architecture and Style

**Q1. Could you describe the interior design of the palace? What are the most important features to preserve or highlight?**

**A1.** *"We preserved 100% of the first floor. The Salon Arabe was Nicolas Sursock's office and study. On the other side, there was originally a dining room, transformed into an exhibition room in the 1960s. We kept the first floor as it was."*

*"The ground floor, which had service spaces such as the boiler room and storage areas. These were repurposed for the security office, museum offices, and a new entrance. We also extended the mezzanine. The basement includes storage and security areas."*

*"The top floor was a large space used for temporary exhibitions. We removed some walls to make it more flexible. The basement levels include exhibition halls with partitions, skylights that allow for natural light when needed, and technical systems for emergencies. A car lift allows large artworks to be transported into the lower exhibition rooms. We also created a multipurpose auditorium."*

**Q2. What kinds of finishes, colours, or spatial arrangements define the interior?**

**A2.** *[Covered within previous answer.]*

**Q3. How were the decorative elements, like ceilings, woodwork, or stained glass, restored or cleaned?**

**A3.** *"In the Salon Arabe, the wooden doors and marble columns were repaired after the 2020 explosion. The stained glass was kept and restored. When removing parquet floors, we discovered original tiles underneath, which we polished and preserved."*

**Q4. What was the original function of the interior spaces, and how have they evolved over time, particularly after the building was transformed into a museum?**

**A4.** *"The ground floor was originally a service area but it was later adapted for museum use. The first floor*

*was kept intact. The top floor and basement levels were adapted for exhibitions and storage, which gave the museum more flexibility."*

**Q5. How has the layout changed throughout the building's history, and how did these changes affect circulation, natural light, or the experience of the visitors?**

**A5.** *"We created double-height spaces with staircases, and skylights were planned but not fully realized due to risks. The new layout allows better circulation between exhibition areas."*

**Q6. How do exhibition themes shape spatial design, especially for multi-media or installation-based shows?**

**A6**. *"The partitions and sliding panels allow the exhibition halls to adapt to different types of shows, including multimedia installations."*

**Q7. How do architectural elements, such as the auditorium or multipurpose spaces, support flexible programming like talks or workshops?**

**A7.** *"The auditorium was designed to function as a multipurpose space: cinema, concert hall, conference room. It includes soundproofing materials and technical galleries for lighting and acoustics."*

**Q8. Was the Salon Arabe conserved or restored in any special way given its historical and artistic value?**

**A8.** *"Yes. The Salon Arabe was carefully preserved. The woodwork from Damascus was restored, the stained glass repaired, and the doors were fixed rather than replaced. The original tiles were rediscovered under parquet floors and polished for reuse."*

## Part Five: Architectural Evolution and Comparative Context

**Q1. Can you describe the first major expansion of the palace? When did it take place and what changed architecturally?**

**A1.** *"The first expansion in the 1960s was designed by architect Grégoire Serof. The architectural language of the facade was completely different. We kept it as it was. Our later extension was entirely underground."*

**Q2. The facade of the first expansion appears different from the original, could you explain why this change was made, and what materials or techniques were used?**

**A2.** *"It reflected the 1960s design approach, which we respected and did not alter. We focused instead on underground expansion."*

**Q3. What about the second expansion? How did it differ from the first, and what were the motivations behind it?**

**A3.** *"Our second extension added about 7,000 sqm underground. The museum originally had 1,500 sqm; today it has 8,500 sqm. We wanted to keep the house as intact as possible, so all additions were hidden below ground."*

**Q4. Can you explain the design strategy and structural challenges behind the four underground floors added during the 2008-2015 expansion?**

*"We worked with French architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte. The idea was to hide the extension underground, so as not to affect the facade. Micropiles and retaining walls were used to stabilize the site. Skylights were added to bring light into the underground levels."*

**Q5. Are there any other buildings in Beirut or Lebanon with similar architectural or cultural value that you think are worth comparing to the Sursock Palace?**

**A5.** *"Yes, there were similar buildings, like the Beirut House used for cultural purposes, and extensions for the national library. Unfortunately, many were demolished during the reconstruction of Beirut's Downtown. Today, Mar Mikhael is one of the last areas where old houses remain."*

## Part Six: Damage and Protection Over time

**Q1. Was the palace affected during the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990)? Were there any structural damages or transformations during that period?**

**A1.** *"During the civil war, there were some damages, but not very significant. Exhibitions still took place in Beirut for a few years. Our extension works began about eight years later."*

**Q2. How is the Sursock Museum protected as a cultural heritage site, both locally and globally? Which institutions are responsible for its conservation?**

**A2.** *"The Italians played a major role in the restoration after the 2020 blast. They contributed significant funding, and the French also supported the work. Without them, the museum would not have been renovated. I don't know all the detailed information about institutions, but there is international interest and the museum has a strong reputation."*

*"The museum is famous for the Salon d'Automne, similar to the one in Paris. Since the 1960s, the Salon d'Automne has taken place every year, showcasing young artists. A commission selects participants, and prizes are awarded. Many Lebanese artists started their careers here. In 2019, we hosted a major Picasso exhibition, which closed few days before the explosion. The artworks had been shipped out only one day earlier."*

**Q3. What was Italy's role in the protection and restoration of the museum, particularly after the 2020 Beirut Port explosion? Which institutions or individuals were involved?**

**A3.** *"Italy's involvement was crucial. They financed a large part of the post-blast restoration, and experts were sent to assess the stability and safety of the building. Without Italy and France, the restoration would not have been possible."*

**Q4. Were there collaborations with other international bodies (like UNESCO, ICCROM, or ICOMOS) in restoring the building?**

**A4.** *[Not Asked / Not Answered]*

**Q5. How are heritage considerations negotiated between the museum director, the mutawali, Italian/ UNESCO bodies, and your architectural team?**

**A5.** *[Not Asked / Not Answered]*

## Part Seven: Beirut Port Explosion, August 4, 2020: Damage and Restoration

**Q1. Can you describe the extent of the damage after the August 4 explosion? Which parts of the building were most affected?**

**A1.** *"The explosion destroyed many windows and doors. The stronger the glass, the worse the damage. The two staircases on the left and right suffered the most because they had reinforced glass. The fragile facade, however, helped save the overall structure by absorbing the shock."*

**Q2. What were your first actions after assessing the damage? What guided the restoration strategy?**

**A2.** *"The day after the explosion, people immediately started cleaning up and fixing windows. A team of international experts also came to check the building's safety. The restoration strategy focused on repairing while preserving the original features, such as stained glass and wooden doors, whenever possible."*

**Q3. Were there any decisions made to modernize systems or improve resilience, while still preserving the building's character?**

**A3.** *"Yes, we improved certain systems, such as technical and mechanical infrastructure, but always in ways that would not compromise the heritage aesthetic. Flexibility and resilience were important, but preservation was the priority."*

**Q4. Can you discuss the challenge of adding technologies (solar panels, upgraded mechanical systems) while preserving the heritage aesthetic?**

**A4.** *[Not Asked / Not Answered]*

## Part Eight: Documentation, Stakeholders, and Future Research

**Q1. Do updated architectural drawings exist for the building today (plans, elevations, sections)? Are they accessible for academic research?**

**A1.** *"Yes, updated drawings exist, but access may be restricted. Some sections and photographs document changes over time."*

**Q2. Were there undocumented areas or surprising discoveries during the restoration?**

**A2.** *"Yes, for example, when we removed parquet flooring in the Salon Arabe, we discovered original tiles underneath. We polished and preserved them. We also kept demarcation lines on walls as visible traces of changes."*

**Q3. What do you believe is most important for architects and heritage professionals to understand about this building?**

**A3.** *"That restoration requires much more work than new projects. It takes three times the effort. It is important to respect the building's layered history, keeping visible traces of changes."*

**Q4. Are there any resources, archives, or people you'd recommend I speak with or consult for further research?**

**A4.** *[Not Asked / Not Answered]*

**Q5. Who are the main stakeholders and managers of the museum today, and what role do they play in restoration or architectural decisions?**

**A5.** *"The museum is privately managed with some public funding. Governance plays a role in balancing accessibility with preservation. International partners, such as the Italians and French, were crucial for restoration after the blast."*

**Q6. How does the museum's governance model, with private management with some public funding), influence architectural planning or public accessibility?**

**A6.** *"The governance model gives us some flexibility, but it also means we have to balance cultural goals, financial constraints, and heritage considerations."*

**Q7. How have you addressed inclusivity, such as ramps, elevators, lighting, or signage improvements for public accessibility?**

**A7.** *"Yes, inclusivity was addressed by adding ramps, elevators, and improved lighting and signage, ensuring the museum is accessible to the public."*