Research Notes:

Researching Domestic Life in Late Ottoman Beirut

By Toufoul Abou-Hodeib

The late Ottoman period was a golden age of domestic life, when the home acquired significance for the general polity and intellectual thought as the smallest unit in the social form, or al-hay'ah al-ijtima`iyya. In the absence of an organized national archive, one can resort to periodicals to place domestic life in intellectual thought or to the imperial archives in Turkey to investigate the larger legal changes that impacted the home. Complementing intellectual discourse and “governmentality” with the material changes of the home itself, however, remains a challenge, particularly when attempting to broaden the scope beyond the histories of the elite. Though my research centers on Beirut, the vicissitudes of archival research remain the rule in much of Bilad al-Sham and the lack of import ledgers, commercial records, surveys, and comprehensive court records pose impediments to such endeavors. Nevertheless, it is possible to present a fairly coherent picture of how the home was materially transformed and what role it came to play in the late Ottoman period.

One obvious place to begin is the domestic structures themselves, approached as archaeological sites holding layered stories about the stages in a home’s life. The spatial development of the space and the public infrastructure that transformed it left marks that tell much about how people inhabited it. An opportunity to scrape its painted surfaces would reveal the layers of colors and decorations – and therefore the tastes and imports – that once adorned its walls. Given the contemporary pace of urban redevelopment in Beirut and the lack of a comprehensive preservation program, the task of documenting these houses for research can only be carried out with a sense of urgency. While some care has been taken to preserve the mansions of the rich, the homes of the less well-off and the stories they tell are particularly susceptible to irrevocable loss.

Another source that has long been used by researchers on the region are court records. Their relevance for historical research is being increasingly recognized by the Lebanese authorities themselves. In recent years, the Center for National Archives has made microfilm copies of Hanafi court records available for public access. Though the pitfalls of using shari’a court records as an archival resource have been well documented, their function as a public registry for people of all confessions and as a place for resolving marital conflicts primarily between Muslims contributes to understanding the materiality of the home in two ways. First of all, they contain detailed descriptions of residential spaces and their surroundings, making it possible to trace long-term changes in the urban fabric. In addition, probate inventories as well as inheritance and marital disputes include lists of possessions whose descriptions become increasingly rich towards the end of the nineteenth century. Though they cannot be assumed to constitute complete lists of possessions or to reflect accurate monetary value, they remain invaluable for revealing which objects became widespread when and how they were integrated into legal adjudication processes.
The appearance of bed sets (taqm takht), Singer sewing machines, crystal glassware (cut-glass), and “Chinese porcelain” in trousseaus, for example, helps link the seemingly insular context of the Hanafi court to changing patterns of consumption, local production, and international trade networks.

One final source for researching domesticity is perhaps the most typical institution of the late Ottoman period: the municipality. The minutes of the Beirut municipal council reveal how ordinances and regulations at the imperial level (e.g. the building code) often became cause for conflict between the municipality and homeowners when implemented in the fabric of the city. The relevance of this goes beyond the home proper since it is also instrumental to the related project of understanding the shifting boundaries of the “public sphere” and the transformations in the concept of “public benefit” (al-maslaha al-`amma).

Independently, none of these archival sources are completely new to the academic corpus on Bilad al-Sham. Collectively, however, they form a fund of information that can shape a multi-dimensional understanding of the home and its centrality to changing concepts of society, gender, public, and private. Such sources are, of course, not without their biases. They shed more light on domestic life in towns and cities than in the countryside and they offer little on the lower classes, who enjoyed very limited access to the emerging culture of consumption. Due to the fragmented nature of the archives, the results will more often than not end up with large and enticing gaps. Nevertheless, a closer look at the domestic life of the middle classes can contribute to the production of a broader and more nuanced view of the experience of modernity in Ottoman Bilad al-Sham.

Toufoul Abou-Hodeib is a PhD candidate in History of Culture at the University of Chicago. She is currently living in Norway, writing her dissertation on domesticity in late Ottoman Beirut. She can be reached at: toufoul@uchicago.edu