

## TERRITORIES

# Gabriele Basilico. Beirut

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FRANCESCO BONAMI

*"Because Beirut was never just a city. It was an idea –an idea that meant something not only to the Lebanese but to the entire Arab World. While, today just the word "Beirut" evokes images of*

*hell on earth, for years Beirut represented –maybe dishonestly– something quite different, something almost gentle: the idea of coexistence and the spirit of tolerance, the idea that*

*diverse religious communities –Shiites, Sunnis, Christians, and Druse– could live together, and even thrive, in one city and one country without having to abandon altogether their individual*





*identities.*” [Thomas L. Friedman. *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, 1989]

In 1991, one year after the end of a war that lasted fifteen years, the Italian photographer Gabriele Basilico was invited by the writer Dominique Edde’ to take part in a project aiming at documenting the central part of Beirut, recording with the camera what was left over along the infamous and symbolic

“Green Line”. The result, while maintaining an objective and analytical edge, has an ambivalent and disconcerting feeling, it is at the same time a document of an horrendous past and the blue print for an unpredictable future. Basilico’s photographs are much more of a question than a statement. Basilico looks at Beirut as he was looking at any other city transformed, in a more subtle way, by different diseases

than war, maybe social degrade, maybe wild and unconsidered real estate speculation.

Beirut photographs are not a judgment on war but more a reflection on what a city is left with once war is eventually finish and life resumes the course of the events. Still the idea of the city remains intact even if its political and social systems have been attacked, and Basilico looks at this system as a





doctor would observe a patient who survived a terminal sickness. He takes care of the damages while celebrating the incredible possibilities and perspectives that any kind of survival can produce. Beirut survived not a war but hundreds of wars, and each building, each dark window in it, represents one of the thousands' symptoms that made this city a desperate case, an incurable patient.

Yet it got to the end and survived. Now it is up to us to decide if what we are witnessing are ruins as the temple of Bacchus at Baalbeck, or brutal scars left by human madness. In fact we always assumed that the archeological sites we are visiting are the remains of great cultures and civilizations and not the result of ignorance and barbaric devastation. But even the Parthenon was apparently blown up by the Turks

during the seventeenth century, so its present state is not due to the erosion of time and history but again to the order of some hasty commander. In the archeological museum of Florence, herds of tourists stand in line to admire the many cracks of a beautiful Greek vase. The fantastic object was pasted together not because it was found in the pieces under the ground, but because a distracted guardian smashed against it

at the beginning of the century. It's a matter of creating a sufficient diagram that allows us to judge devastation as history and not simply as human folly. Looking at those photos of Beirut, where the buildings stand with no less dignity than the Colosseum in Rome's traffic jam, we have to consider how those images will be handled and how they will affect the future history of the city both in terms of architectural development and as a point of reference

of a time that risks to be forgotten only because new building methodologies allow to reconstruct both the urbanistic structure than the conceptual dimension of any city in the world in a matter of few years, erasing devastation but at the same time canceling deep cultural experiences that belong to those empty monuments. After the hissing of the shelling and the roars of car-bombs Beirut is again deafened by squeaking cranes and the vibrations of jack-

hammers. Gabriele Basilico's photographs not only are astounding documents of a pivotal moment of this city, the end of the war, but mostly are symbolic visions into the silence behind the blind windows of those building and palaces.

Because, as Thomas L. Friedman would continue, " (...) the real story is often found not in the noise but in the silence -and that is why is so often missed."

