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An American “Garden” in an Oriental “Desert”: The Modernity of Timber at the Syrian Protestant College of Beirut

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of timber in articulating a modern American project in nineteenth-century Lebanon. It focuses on the architecture of the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut, an educational institution founded by American missionaries of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1866. The paper examines the evolving role of timber within this foreign missionary project—deployed in multiple forms and scales—and traces the shifting values ascribed to its use. I argue that the missionaries used timber to elaborate specific relationships towards students and the city, reflecting cultural, racial, and religious notions of superiority, carving out an American “garden” in the “wilderness” of Ras Beirut. I analyze these theological aims and their practical application through the conceptual lens of Edward Said’s “modern Orientalism”. The deployment of timber as a claim-making and space-making device frames the construction of the Syrian Protestant College as a modern, imperial project.

KEYWORDS

Timber; industrialism; Gothic revival; Orientalism; American missionaries; transnational architecture

Introduction

In his landmark study, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought*, Church historian George H. Williams begins with the following anecdote:

A certain Presbyterian minister, who had come recently into Illinois, later recalled the following incident. Making his way over the lonely prairies, interspersed here and there with patches of timber, he was arrested by the sound of an ax. Upon observing a woodman near by, he called to him, “What are you doing here, stranger?” “I am building a theological seminary,” was the reply. “What, in these barrens?” “Yes,” responded the woodman, “I am planting the seed.” The planter in the wilderness was [the Baptist missionary] John M. Peck. A seminary is a seedbed or garden for the nurture of the clergy.¹

For Williams, this anecdote illustrated the centrality of the “wilderness motif,” or the “impulse to plant a seminary in the barrens, a garden in the wilderness,” in

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Christian history, exceeding the significance of the “frontier” in both American history and Church history in general.² For the purposes of this paper, the episode suggests this and much more: the role of missionaries in the advancement of the American “frontier”; the expansionist impulse in Protestant theology and thought; but also the complex role of timber, acting simultaneously as the natural setting within which the garden is built, and the material with which the missionary-turned-woodman fashions its structure. Thus, the garden is constructed out of the very wilderness it aims to tame, which it ultimately destroys. This paper explores these themes in a setting deeply entangled with the history of Christianity and of America, although geographically far removed.³

The site of this exploration is the Syrian Protestant College (SPC), an educational institution founded by American missionaries of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in 1866, in a growing periphery of the Ottoman Empire, the city of Beirut. However, unlike the case of John Peck, the tools with which the missionaries developed the forty-five acres of the campus were more complex. They harnessed overlapping religious, industrial, commercial, and imperial networks to raise funds, source materials, and ship them across the ocean to the port of Beirut.

In this paper, I examine the significant and evolving role of timber—deployed in multiple forms and scales—within this foreign missionary project, and trace the shifting values and meanings ascribed to its use. Relying on primary documents sourced in the archives of the ABCFM at Harvard University and of the SPC at the American University of Beirut, and especially on a set of unstudied private letters exchanged between the two founders of the College, I uncover the complex considerations and imaginings that guided the missionaries in the construction of the SPC, and which extended far beyond their outwardly benevolent educational aims.⁴ I argue that the missionaries used timber to elaborate specific relationships toward the students, the locals, and the city, reflecting cultural, racial, and religious notions of superiority, thus carving out an American “garden” in the “wilderness” of Ras Beirut (fig. 1).

I analyze these theological aims, and their practical application, through the conceptual lens of “modern Orientalism,” defined by Edward Said as the moment in which “orientalism had transformed from discourse to imperial institution.”⁵ During this nineteenth-century transitional period, the Orient ceased to be solely a Romantic “domain of study,” but became a site of conquest, to be “managed and administered by institutions” and through scientific techniques. In other words, it was reconstructed as the site for a “scientific, modern project.”⁶

Although the missionaries of the SPC relied heavily on the scientific infrastructures of modern imperialism to construct their project, they did not fit comfortably within histories of empire, nor of colonial architecture. Unlike Anglican missions in British colonies or the French Church in Algeria, in Syria the American missionaries “proselytized without a colonial apparatus,” and thus held little authority.⁷ Predating the establishment of American diplomatic relationships with the Ottoman Empire, their task was to convert the mixed local population in the midst of strong opposition, from both the Jesuit-backed local Maronite Christian Church that controlled Mount Lebanon, and the Ottoman government ruling the wider region, with the limited



Figure 1. Main Building and site of the Syrian Protestant College. Courtesy of the American University of Beirut Libraries & Special Collection, Blatchford Photograph Collection.

diplomatic support of the British.⁸ Moreover, in contrast to older, more established European imperial powers active in the Levant, the nascent American nation had neither a defined national or religious architectural style, nor definite meanings associated with it.⁹ While the question of “assimilation” versus “imposition” of architectural models and styles was an issue that concerned all missions to varying degrees, it was thus additionally complicated for the Americans, whose various revival and collegiate styles had been derived from Europe.¹⁰ Instead, as I show, the missionaries relied on their scientific knowledge and industrial expertise to elaborate claims of cultural and moral superiority. These claims were reflected in their use of timber, articulated through structure, interior detailing, and, finally, in a monumental architectural expression.

Timber, Between Divine Destiny and Material Resource

Timber holds an ambiguous position within Lebanon’s history and architectural culture. The cedars of Mount Lebanon, as mentioned in the Bible, had once been a highly prized resource in Phoenicia, and central to most of the ancient sea-faring civilizations that had inhabited the broad crescent stretching from North Africa to the Black Sea.¹¹ Yet, by the eleventh century, the substantial reliance on Mount Lebanon’s tall conifers—cedar, fir, and pine—had led to wide deforestation. In part due to the wide availability of limestone and sandstone deposits in Mount Lebanon, but also as a natural extension of Phoenician, Roman, and Byzantine building traditions, during the Ottoman period this region developed a hybrid architectural type specific to its mountainous agricultural landscape. Here, houses were constructed of loadbearing stone

walls, with flat roofs of earth and lime held by a sub-structure of “wood from a cultivated tree.”¹² This hybrid architecture would evolve into more sophisticated urban types once transposed into the rapidly urbanizing Beirut in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹³ Still, unlike other parts of the Ottoman Empire which had access to the forests surrounding the Black Sea, Beirut and Mount Lebanon never elaborated a timber-based architectural culture.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the cedars of Mount Lebanon remained central to orientalist and eschatological depictions of the Holy Land.¹⁵ For the American missionaries, this was not an unknown, mysterious Orient, but the original birthplace of Christianity. Now inhabited by “nominal Christians” and Muslims, “darkness” and moral stagnation had transformed Mount Lebanon’s sacred wilderness into a “desert.”¹⁶ As Williams notes, “the young seminarians of New England felt especially drawn to the (Muslim) desert of Lebanon, which Isaiah 35:1ff. had promised would one day be given (to Christ) and blossom as a rose.”¹⁷ It was perhaps natural, then, that these emissaries of God would choose to revive and repopulate this “desert” with their own timber, to recover the wilderness out of which the eternal garden would be created. However, timber held additional practical, economic, and cultural values for the American missionaries.

As noted by Fiske Kimball, timber was significant for North American architectural culture more generally, as it had been instrumental in the settlement of the early Puritan colonies.¹⁸ In the colonial architecture of New England, timber had been used not only for its availability, but also as the extension of English traditions, even when stone was available.¹⁹ On a theological level, the forests of North America had represented a providential wilderness, which the Puritans had successfully passed through during their exile and from which they had grown their new settlements.²⁰ Paradoxically, this role of timber in the growth of New England led to the slow depletion of its forests, resulting in a constant need for southern and western expansion.²¹

Although iron would supersede timber’s structural importance from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, timber remained an important industry as well as a prime material export.²² In New England especially, timber underpinned both industrial prosperity and the settler population’s high standards of living. Importantly, technical and economic advancements were not perceived as distinct from religious and cultural claims; rather, they acquired an additional value within the American missionaries’ view of their civilization and faith. The industrial wealth of the nation was used by ABCFM leaders and proponents of missions to “reinforce the theme of special obligation and to underline the connection between godliness and a happy, successful civilization.”²³ By the early nineteenth century, millennial Protestant thought had consolidated the notion that “America (read: New England) was providentially favored to carry the gospel overseas,” because “no nation [had] ever experienced the blessings of the Christian religion more evidently and uniformly.”²⁴ For the leaders of this “New Divinity,” timber was thus simultaneously infused with industrial, economic, and cultural dimensions; it signified the environmental character of the territory as well as its religious destiny and corporate trajectory. More importantly, these perceived notions of industrial and religious superiority had fused together to constitute the basis for both “home” and overseas missionary expansion. As scholars of American history and

missions have shown, these endeavors would highlight the limits of Christian universalism, and eventually consolidate Anglo-American ideas of racial difference.²⁵

Timber as Economic and Structural Material

The American missionaries had been present in Beirut and its vicinity since 1823, but their first half-century of work had borne little fruit.²⁶ In contrast to older European missions, such as those of the Jesuits or the Moravians, which had elaborated complex settlement types by the nineteenth century, the ABCFM's strategy advocated minimal spatial and financial investment.²⁷ This was the result of a policy which viewed the ultimate goal of the mission as that of raising "native churches," after which it would have to retreat.²⁸ The Syria Mission voted in 1862 to establish a "Protestant collegiate institute" that would focus less on proselytism and more on the provision of education.²⁹ This decision was therefore a dual departure. It was conceived as much as a civilizational endeavor as a permanent settlement project, and necessitated a formal separation from the ABCFM. In this new project, the missionaries were no longer operating simply as a religious mission; their new organizational structure reflected the social reality of an increasingly industrialized America and its growing corporations.³⁰

The Syrian Protestant College was incorporated in New York through the help of a wealthy and important member of the ABCFM, William E. Dodge, a partner at Phelps, Dodge & Co. (PDCo), one of America's largest import-export firms in that period.³¹ In addition to its extensive manufacturing, mining, and railroad operations, PDCo had invested in large tracts of lumber in Pennsylvania from the early 1830s, later acquiring forests in Canada's Georgian Bay region as well as in parts of Georgia.³² William Dodge and his son, Rev. David Stuart Dodge, became important patrons of the College, with the father sitting on the new Board of Trustees and the son acting as Treasurer of the Executive Board. Stuart Dodge (henceforth Dodge) became a close partner of the SPC's President, Rev. Daniel Bliss, corresponding regularly on all aspects related to the construction and running of the College.³³

As evidenced by the construction process of the first buildings, Dodge found it opportune to use the material and industrial assets of his family. Dodge harnessed both the American side of the business and its sister company in Liverpool, Phelps, James & Co., to ship material for the SPC. Iron and timber beams, window frames, furniture, and other necessities were thus sourced, manufactured, and shipped through PDCo's existing trade infrastructure.³⁴ This generated economic advantages for both the SPC and the corporation. While the College, as a charitable foundation, was exempt from import taxation, PDCo profited from this expanded field of operations.³⁵ The financing of materials and construction work was through the SPC's endowment and donations, secured from charitable Protestant circles in the United States and England, suggesting that Dodge and his family's philanthropic and business activities ultimately fed into each other.³⁶ Nevertheless, the cost of importing timber and other materials, coupled with the wide availability of stone in the region, resulted in hybrid constructions.

In the first Main Building, completed in 1873, the primary aim was to construct a structurally sound and durable building in order to establish a secure foundation in the city.³⁷ In this early period, the founders' views on architecture echoed the nascent state

of American architecture, still transitioning as it was from a technical craft into a more elaborate disciplinary culture.³⁸ The missionaries viewed the early buildings as experiments in efficiency and propriety, rather than as coherent architectural projects. Still, Dodge believed that the building needed to reflect in some way the “native” architecture, as this “would be more popular and pleasing to the scholars” whom they hoped to attract to the College.³⁹ Despite this utilitarian and conciliatory outlook, the final building betrayed the assumed superiority of the missionaries and their unwillingness to comprehend local building traditions.

Plans for the Main Building were drafted by George B. Post, a New York architect who had initially trained as an engineer, and the cousin of one of the missionaries teaching in the SPC.⁴⁰ Post proposed a large tripartite structure, organized as a shallow U-shape, whose western and central volumes included a library, recitation, and sleeping rooms, while the eastern volume housed the chapel. The structure consisted of external sandstone walls combined with an imported framework of iron beams and timber planks that formed the slabs of each story. Large oak beams and pine rafters comprised the sub-structure of the red-tiled hipped roof. In contrast to the coherent internal structure of the building, the exterior displayed a more eclectic approach. It followed primarily a restrained Italianate style, with a campanile-like tower at the north façade articulating the junction of the central volume with the chapel. But this north façade also incorporated two arcaded walkways on the ground and first levels, constructed as a series of traditional Levantine stone arches resting on thin marble columns in a repetitive triple-arch motif (fig. 2).

Far from reflecting a collaboration between the missionaries and the local builders—as understood by some historians—the arches were a deliberate addition made by the two founders, in an attempt to render the building outwardly “native.”⁴¹ As the letters reveal, Post’s plans, donated free of charge, had been freely adapted and modified on site by Dodge and Bliss.⁴² Yet this hybridity was not reflective of a true understanding of local building culture; rather, it was simply a device meant to pacify the suspicions of both local parents and the Ottoman government. Ralph Ghoche has argued that, in the case of the Christianization of the Ketchaoua Mosque of Algiers, the French Church’s seemingly conciliatory gestures of stylistic assimilation and hybridity were in fact “a clandestine measure to destroy Algerian religious identity.” In the context of Beirut, the process of assimilating and re-constructing local architectural elements reflected a similar expression of “mastery and control over the [local] culture.”⁴³ Here, the pointed arch, the primary basis of structure in stone architecture, and a central marker of local types, was reduced to an ornamental addition on the exterior of the building. The arches were intentional, but they were “not absolutely necessary.”⁴⁴ Meanwhile, the imported technology of the Americans became the structural basis of the building. The appropriation of the arch and its re-construction as an ornament was thus a double operation. Firstly, it implied that the missionaries had understood local architectural culture; secondly, it degraded it by positioning it as structurally inferior to their own. This double operation constituted the first step in the reconstruction of the campus as an American environment.

While they recognized that their completed building was “unshapely,” Dodge believed that “to think of spending another cent in such a country as Syria just for the



Figure 2. Main Building of 1873. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Matson Photograph Collection, LC-DIG-matpc-02836.

sake of appearances would be downright folly.”⁴⁵ The primary goal had been to achieve sound structures with minimal means. Despite their reductive views on architecture, the missionaries still perceived their imported materials and construction knowledge as superior to local building traditions. Thus, although timber did not hold an expressive function in this first building, its structural and economic value—together with iron—constituted the scientific basis on which claims of superiority were articulated.

Timber as Racial and Cultural Marker

The next two buildings constructed on campus, in 1878–79 and 1889–91, reflected better-defined architectural aspirations, and a clearer reliance on timber in articulating reconsidered social, esthetic, and cultural aims. The secure establishment of the SPC in its site and projected growth of the campus raised questions regarding its internal organization, echoing what Ann Laura Stoler has called “the racialized politics of classification” in colonial settings. As Stoler has argued, the careful delineation of “domains of the intimate” was crucial to the making of “distinctions between ruler and ruled.”⁴⁶ Here, such distinctions between American professors and local students were exemplified in the construction of a house for the president, again through the deliberate use of timber. Built to allow Daniel Bliss’s wife and children to return to Syria and join the president, the house also disclosed other central questions within the missionary



Figure 3. Marquand House, 1879. Courtesy of the American University of Beirut Libraries & Special Collection, Blatchford Photograph Collection.

project. Derek Chang has shown how, in evangelical “home” missions, the work of women was crucial in shaping ideas of domestic respectability, and in delineating the evangelical Christian home both as a “the moral center of society” and as distinct to other, “foreign” cultures of domesticity.⁴⁷ The importance of the president’s home within the overall campus and its design process evidenced a similar application of these discursive distinctions in overseas missions.

Named Marquand House after its main patron, Frederick Marquand—a wealthy New York merchant—the president’s house was designed through a series of informal consultations between Dodge and Bliss’ wife, Abby, before being drawn more precisely by an acquaintance of the missionaries, the architect J. Cleveland Cady.⁴⁸ In its exterior, the house adapted local sandstone to a plain Colonial Revival style, incorporating an arcaded porch constructed out of five stone arches and wooden shutters adorning rectangular sash windows, achieving an ambiguous result (fig. 3).

By contrast, the interior reflected a completely American domestic setting. Stretching over two connected floors, its internal organization followed neither the centrality of local types, nor the typical distribution of public and private areas. The lower floor included public areas to be used by faculty, as well as the president’s family, including a dining hall, study, parlor, kitchen and services, as well as a guest bedroom. The second floor was dedicated to the private needs of the family and included five “family bedrooms” and two for the servants.⁴⁹ Besides these differences in spatial organization, the house was also clearly differentiated from local types in its heavy use of timber in the articulation of the interior. The main internal staircase—itsself a novel



Figure 4. Interior of the Study. Courtesy of American University of Beirut Libraries & Special Collection, Moore Photograph Collection.

addition—was built of “hard pine and black walnut newel,” with rails and balusters of the same wood.⁵⁰ The floor, both in structure and finish, was made of beams and boards in pitch pine.⁵¹ Although Dodge initially thought skirting boards would be unnecessary, they were eventually included in the design, as “in a private house [they] may require such finish.” This American interior was complete with “wooden shelving, pantries, outside blinds, sashes and doors, window frames and jambs,” all shipped from the United States in thirty boxes, for a total cost of around US\$2,000. Dodge had considered the construction of the “simple Porch in front” in timber, questioning whether “[their] carpenters in Syria [could] do such work.” It would “cost \$75 here and be bulky even in pieces.”⁵² Eventually, this element was constructed in stone, indicating that the missionaries were neither convinced of the quality of local craftsmanship nor too concerned with the exterior coherence of the building.

It is clear that the decision to furnish and finish the interior in such luxurious materials, primarily in solid wood, and to take on the expense of substantial amounts of shipment for specific elements, was perceived as necessary for the moral integrity of the president’s family and its stature (fig. 4). Additionally, the house was enclosed on three of its sides, turning away from the rest of the campus, with its only open façade turned to the sea. The space of the home was thus conceived to be clearly separate, distinct, and removed from both the campus and the city. Although the missionaries had again participated in large part in the design of the house’s details and finishing, the house departed from earlier campus buildings in its elaborate and coherent interiors,

and the consistency with which the missionaries chose their materials—timber inside, and stone outside—to denote separation and difference.

Timber as Monumental Architectural Expression

The conceptual bases and design process of Marquand House were pushed further in the next building, the College chapel, built through a significant donation from Marquand's son-in-law, Elbert Monroe. Having consolidated its position in Beirut, and gained increasing recognition within its American milieu, by 1890 the SPC had integrated the parallel evolution of American philanthropic, collegiate, and architectural culture.⁵³ The chapel's design synthesized two decades of architectural experimentation with imported timber and local stone, and reflected the growth of scientific technologies of specification and construction knowledge in the United States.⁵⁴ Timber was now put to use on a grander and more public scale than in all the previous buildings of the SPC, shaping a dual moral and industrial enterprise.

The chapel, known as the Assembly Hall, was again designed by Post, who this time provided a full set of detailed drawings and manufacturing specifications.⁵⁵ Post proposed a hybrid design that combined a clear Gothic Revival stone exterior with a plainly ornamented Carpenter Gothic interior, achieving a more harmonious overall result than in the first buildings (fig. 5). Although the missionaries had been tempted



Figure 5. Assembly Hall, 1890. SPC Catalogue of 1896. Courtesy of Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School. ABCFM, Near East Records 1820–1965, bMS 1136.

to approach this project haphazardly, as they had with earlier constructions, the consolidation of the College's situation and its established donors demanded a different strategy. Monroe wanted the chapel to be "worthy of the Institution and the cause, as well as of the giver."⁵⁶ In this project, the stakes had changed from attracting locals. The institution, its aims, as well as its funding were now firmly turned toward American sources.

Despite this agenda, the chapel's local context still had to be considered, once again bringing up the racial and cultural distinctions expressed in earlier buildings. Dodge was wary of fitting out the Assembly Hall "with the elegance of a first-class concert room or opera house," recalling his earlier thoughts on what a country "such as Syria" was worthy of.⁵⁷ This question was further complicated by the realization that the chapel would constitute the primary space of communal assembly, for both teachers and students. How was this building to simultaneously project the donor's stature, and maintain hierarchical distinctions within the same structure and space? These concerns were illustrated in a series of letters that highlighted the racialized perspective of the missionaries and the political nature of their architectural decisions. Dodge shared his thoughts with Bliss:

Why should such students have better seats than the Anglo-American congregation in Beirut? It is a question whether they should have as good. I think the influence upon the students themselves would be injurious, and I am confident what sensible travellers would say. I ask the same question in relation to colored glass & leaded frame windows. ... Mr Monroe had a large chapel built at Hampton colored & Indian Institute (while he was in Syria) & the architect put in fine seats & fixtures that have provoked the very criticisms I have mentioned—He dreads any repetition of such a mistake.⁵⁸

The necessary compromise was manifested in the internal composition and finishing of the Assembly Hall. The chapel's completed interior exhibited a plain Carpenter Gothic character, with an arch-braced exposed structure composed of six cast-iron arched trusses resting on stone corbels, holding up a three-sided paneled timber ceiling (fig. 6). The purlins and planks lining the interior of the ceiling were sourced in the lumber mills of PDCo, in a reddish southern yellow pine that lent the chapel a dark, warm atmosphere.⁵⁹ This timber interior was complemented by intricate woodwork for the doors and windows in yellow pine, designed and manufactured in America according to detailed working drawings.⁶⁰ All the lumber pieces, along with one thousand square meters of floor boards, sent by PDCo, "were marked with stencil-plate and brush" in order to ensure their correct placement within the chapel.⁶¹ For the students, 350 plain, high-backed chairs were reluctantly sent by Dodge, and were complemented by benches from the old chapel, which were repaired and stained to correspond in color.⁶² In addition, eighteen special chairs were selected for the faculty, with one arm-chair for the president, and were to be placed on the podium, thus clearly delineating the intended hierarchies. Finally, Monroe commissioned and paid for a large organ, which was shipped from England in 1892.

Once the chapel was finally completed, Dodge remarked that "the trouble and expense of shipping the material and wood from here [had] been a painful experience," but he had gladly "sent all [he] could well spare from [their] American forests just now."⁶³ Clearly timber, and more specifically, American timber, had held a special significance for the project. Despite the considerable effort and cost of completing the

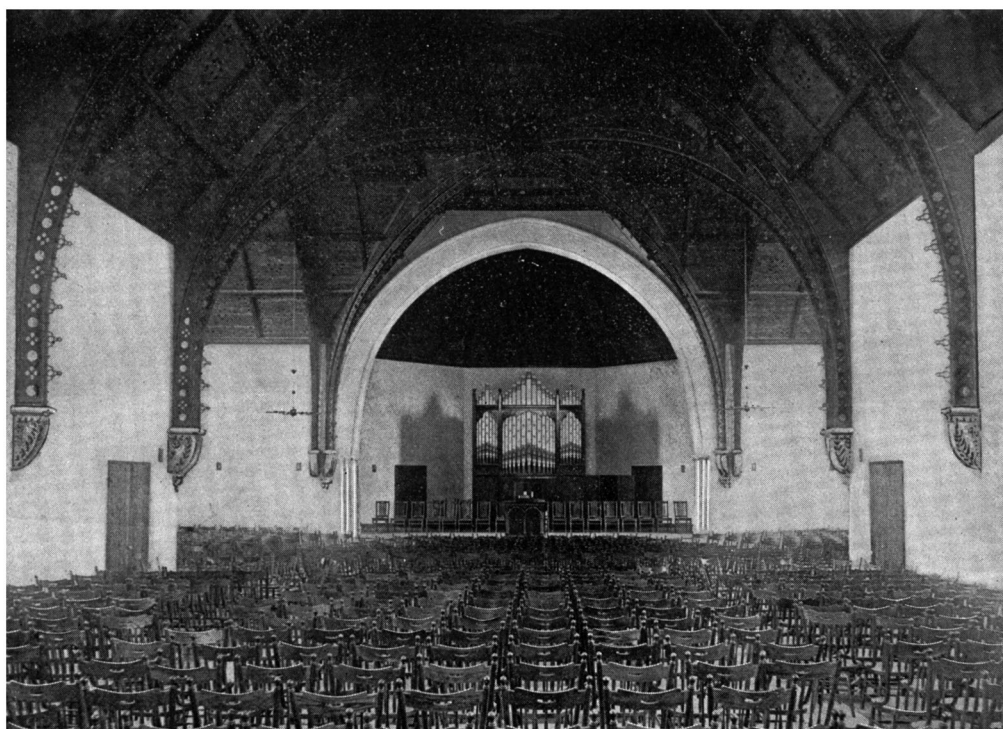


Figure 6. Assembly Hall Interior, SPC Catalogue 1896. Courtesy of Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School. ABCFM, Near East Records 1820–1965, bMS 1136.

chapel, the missionaries were pleased with their new building. The faculty sent letters to Dodge and Monroe expressing “admiration at the architectural effect, the symmetrical proportions ... and other beauties of this structure.”⁶⁴

The completion of the Assembly Hall provided a new central space for the College, in which preaching, ceremonies, speeches, commencement exercises, and student assemblies now took place. But the striking timber interior of the chapel, its monumental exterior, and Carpenter Gothic proportions certainly appeared as radically different to the students and local population, who regarded stone as the common material for all scales of buildings, from the domestic to the public. The chapel’s dark and “otherworldly” atmosphere, combined with the hierarchical distribution and arrangement of seats around the podium would have contributed greatly to the sense of discipline and piety among the students.⁶⁵

The chapel was also distinct from the religious and institutional architecture of Ottoman Syria. It markedly departed, both in its interior and exterior expression, from the Catholic Romanesque, Neo-Gothic, and Byzantine stone churches that abounded in the region. It became the centerpiece of the SPC, recognized both within the campus and beyond its bounds. High-ranking officials and College visitors were invited to visit it upon entering the campus, illustrating its emblematic and symbolic importance.⁶⁶ The chapel thus constituted an assertive and representative architectural object, clearly affirming the anti-Catholic, evangelical character of the institution, and projecting proudly the “commanding position” of the College to the city.⁶⁷

With regards to the evolution of the campus and timber's role within it, the project demonstrated the material's versatility in combining economic advantages, advanced structural and scientific technologies, and a new esthetic sensibility, alongside clearly defined cultural and political aims. The chapel thus marked a clean break with earlier rudimentary conceptions of architecture on the part of the institution, and with the initial muddled attempts at attraction through pretenses of integration. From here on, architecture would gain a clearer, deliberate, and more representational role within the missionaries' vision, and begin to project more clearly and unapologetically an American—and evangelical—environment.

Conclusion

As these short episodes have shown, the cultural or political value of timber is closely tied to the specific historic context of its use. Shifting between structural, economic, cultural and symbolic imperatives, the deployment of timber at the Syrian Protestant College was neither inherently traditional nor modern. Nevertheless, within the particular context of this evangelical missionary college, “planting” its culture and knowledge in an Orient perceived to be in need of moral recovery, the use of timber held a double connotation. It constituted, at the same time, the discursive basis on which claims of scientific and cultural superiority were articulated, as well as the physical material with which this American “garden” was constructed. While its combined theological, cultural, and industrial associations, for the missionaries, rendered this project “American,” its multi-scalar deployment as a claim- and space-making technology made it modern. Seen through this lens, the discursive deconstruction of local culture within the campus, and its material and spatial reconstruction as an American environment, allows us to understand the construction of the Syrian Protestant College as a modern imperial project.

Beyond the common architectural histories of missionary and colonial knowledge transfer, adaptation, or exchange, the specificities of timber in this particular study have illustrated the complexity of both the material potential of timber and of these very transnational histories. Here, timber and architecture did not play static roles. Rather, as the missionaries grew more confident of their project, and in parallel with the evolution of architecture as a discipline in the United States, timber fulfilled a specific agenda within the missionaries' political and spatial ambitions. Reflecting, in turn, claims of structural efficiency, moral integrity, and combined cultural, religious, and industrial superiority, timber was articulated first as structure, then as an interior, and finally as a monumental architectural object and space. As I have argued, the specificity and contingencies of the material were embedded in the multi-faceted associations it held for the missionaries, at once theological, industrial, economic, and cultural. Timber's complex role within these histories underpinned its multi-layered character in Beirut. Such a project might not have materialized in this way elsewhere; timber thus inscribed the SPC into a distinctly American history, and reflected a particular moment in the elaboration of both the nation and its architectural culture. By delineating what constituted an American architectural project in this period, the use of timber at the College shows that America's relationship with the Middle East was deeply

entangled with its dual religious and industrial history. Within this history, Beirut's Syrian Protestant College represented a first frontier.

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Notes

1. George H. Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 3–4.
2. Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought*, 3–4.
3. I use America here in the sense used by the missionaries, referring to the United States' original thirteen colonies and their expanded territories in the nineteenth century. Syria refers to Greater Syria, which Beirut and Mount Lebanon were a part of in the nineteenth century, prior to the limits of modern-day Lebanon.
4. The SPC (today, American University of Beirut) has been principally analyzed as a benevolent project of transnational exchange and local adaptation. See, for instance, Alexandra Kobiljski, "Learning to be Modern: American Missionary Colleges in Beirut and Kyoto 1860–1920," (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2010); Maria B. Abunnasr, "The Making of Ras Beirut: A Landscape of Memory for Narratives of Exceptionalism, 1870–1975" (PhD diss., University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2013); and Maria B. Abunnasr, "Impressions of New England on the Ras Beirut Landscape, 1870–1920," in *Entangled Education: Foreign and Local Schools in Ottoman Syria and Mandate Lebanon*, eds., Julia Hauser, Christine B. Linder and Esther Möller (Beirut: Orient-Institut; Würzburg: Ergon Verlag in Kommission, 2016), 31–48.
5. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 95.
6. Said, *Orientalism*, 114–119, 197.
7. Ussama Makdisi, "Reclaiming the Land of the Bible: Missionaries, Secularism, and Evangelical Modernity," *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 3 (1997), 682.
8. For an overview of these conditions see Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University

- Press, 2011); and Abdul-Latif Tibawi, *American Interests in Syria, 1800–1901: A Study of Educational, Literary and Religious Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966).
9. Mark Crinson has argued that in Victorian Britain style held clear meanings, even when it was contested. See Mark Crinson, *Empire Building: Orientalism and Victorian Architecture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996), 6–11. See also Preeti Chopra, *A Joint Enterprise: Indian Elites and the Making of British Bombay* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
 10. See, for instance, W. Barksdale Maynard, “‘Best, Lowliest Style!’ The Early-Nineteenth Century Rediscovery of American Colonial Architecture,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 59, no. 3 (2000): 338–57; and Paul V. Turner, *Campus: An American Planning Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987). For British and European missions see, for instance, G. A. Bremner, “The Architecture of the Universities’ Mission to Central Africa,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 68, no. 4 (2009): 514–39; G. A. Bremner, *Imperial Gothic: Religious Architecture and High Anglican Culture in the British Empire, 1840–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Sara H. Ebrahimi, “‘Ploughing Before Sowing’: Trust and the Architecture of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Medical Missions,” *Architecture and Culture* 7, no. 2 (2019): 197–217; Ralph Ghoche, “Erasing the Ketchaoua Mosque: Catholicism, Assimilation, and Civic Identity in France and Algeria,” in *Neocolonialism and Built Heritage: Echoes of Empire in Africa, Asia, and Europe*, ed. Daniel E. Coslett (London, New York: Routledge, 2019), 87–105; Emily Turner, “The Church Missionary Society and Architecture in the Mission Field: Evangelical Anglican Perspectives on Church Building Abroad, c. 1850–1900,” *Architectural History* 58 (2015): 197–228.
 11. Marvin W. Mikesell, “The Deforestation of Mount Lebanon,” *Geographical Review* 59, no. 1 (1969): 12–18. See also Maurice Lombard, “Un problème cartographié: le bois dans la Méditerranée musulmane (VIIe-XIe Siècles),” *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 14, no. 2 (1959): 234–54.
 12. Mikesell, “The Deforestation of Mount Lebanon,” 26. See also Friedrich Ragette, *Architecture in Lebanon* (New York: Caravan Books, 1974).
 13. See Michael F. Davie, ed., *La maison beyrouthine aux trois arcs: une architecture bourgeoise du Levant* (Beirut: Editions ALBA, 2003).
 14. See, for instance, Nimet Öztank, “An Investigation of Traditional Turkish Wooden Houses,” *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering* 9, no. 2 (2010): 267–74; and Neriman Ş. Güçhan, “History and Characteristics of Construction Techniques Used in Traditional Timber Ottoman Houses,” *International Journal of Architectural Heritage* 12, no. 1 (2018): 1–20.
 15. See, for instance, John L. Burckhardt, *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land* (London: John Murray, 1822); J. D. Hooker, “On the Cedar of Lebanon, Taurus, Algeria, and India,” *Natural History Review* 2 (1862): 11–18; and Alphonse de Lamartine, *Travels in the East: Including a Journey in the Holy Land* (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1850).
 16. Makdisi, “Reclaiming the Land of the Bible,” 686–90.
 17. Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought*, 128.
 18. Fiske Kimball, *Domestic Architecture of the American Colonies and of the Early Republic* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922), 6–10. See also Terry G. Jordan, “Alpine, Alemannic, and American Log Architecture,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70, no. 2 (1980): 154–80.
 19. Kimball, *Domestic Architecture of the American Colonies*, 10.
 20. Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought*, 108–24. See also William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996): 8–12.
 21. Richard W. Judd, *Second Nature: An Environmental History of New England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 96–102.
 22. Carl W. Condit, *American Building Art: The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 10–24. See also Jeffrey W. Cody, *Exporting American Architecture 1870–2000* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003).

23. William R. Hutchison, *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 57–58.
24. David W. Kling, “The New Divinity and the Origins of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions,” *Church History* 72, no. 4 (2003): 801–802.
25. See, for instance, Derek Chang, *Citizens of a Christian Nation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Matthew F. Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876–1917* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2000); Terrence Keel, *Divine Variations: How Christian Thought Became Racial Science* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).
26. Makdisi, “Reclaiming the Land of the Bible”; and Tibawi, *American Interests in Syria*.
27. See, for instance, Thomas M. Lucas, S.J., *Landmarking: City, Church, & Jesuit Urban Strategy* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1997); and Jasper Ludewig, “Mapoon Mission Station and the Privatization of Public Violence,” *ABE Journal: Architecture Beyond Europe* 17 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.4000/abe.8032>.
28. Hutchison, *Errand to the World*, 62–77.
29. On the decision to establish the College see pers. corr. Henry Jessup to Rufus Anderson, October 2, 1862, ABC 16.8.1, vol. 7, A467: Reel 546, ABC 16.8.1, Syria Mission, ABCFM Archives, Harvard Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. For an overview of the early mission’s history, see note 26.
30. See Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).
31. David S. Dodge, ed., *Memorials of William E. Dodge* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph & Co., 1887), 195–206; and Robert G. Cleland, *A History of Phelps Dodge, 1834–1950* (New York: Knopf, 1952), 30.
32. Cleland, *A History of Phelps Dodge*, 48–52.
33. These weekly letters are kept at the archives of the American University of Beirut, Daniel Bliss Collection, AA 2.3.1, Jafet Library, Beirut (henceforth AA 2.3.1 followed by box and file number).
34. Pers. corr. David Stuart Dodge to Daniel Bliss, August 11, 1875; and August 28, 1876, AA 2.3.1.3.3; October 6, 1878, AA 2.3.1.3.4.
35. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, May 11, 1876, AA 2.3.1.3.3; and June 6, 1889, AA 2.3.1.5.6.
36. Daniel Bliss, *Annual Reports of the Syrian Protestant College* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1902).
37. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, April 2, 1866, AA 2.3.1.2.1.
38. On the growth of American architectural culture, see Mary N. Woods, *From Craft to Profession* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
39. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, December 27, 1864, AA 2.3.1.3.1.
40. Condit, *American Building Art*, 43–44; For more on Post see Diana Balmori, “George B. Post: The Process of Design and the New American Architectural Office,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 46, no. 4 (1987): 351–55.
41. See Kobiljski, “Learning to be Modern,” 103; and Abunnasr, “The Making of Ras Beirut,” 59.
42. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, July 29, 1873, AA 2.3.1.3.2.
43. Ghoche, “Erasing the Ketchaoua Mosque,” 98–99.
44. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, July 29, 1873, AA 2.3.1.3.2.
45. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, August 5, 1874, AA 2.3.1.3.2.
46. Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 7–9.
47. Chang, *Citizens of a Christian Nation*, 91–92. On the role of women in American missions see also Barbara Reeves-Ellington, Kathryn Kish Sklar, and Connie A. Shemo, eds., *Competing Kingdoms: Women, Mission, Nation, and the American Protestant Empire, 1812–1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
48. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, May 11, 1876, and May 23, 1876, AA 2.3.1.3.3.
49. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, August 11, 1875, AA 2.3.1.3.2.

50. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, August 11, 1875.
51. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, May 11, 1876, AA 2.3.1.3.3.
52. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, May 11, 1876.
53. See Robert A.M. Stern, Thomas Mellins and David Fishman, *New York 1880: Architecture and Urbanism in the Gilded Age* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1999); Turner, *Campus*; and Woods, *From Craft to Profession*.
54. See Michael Osman, "Specifying: The Generality of Clerical Labor," in *Design Technics: Archaeologies of Architectural Practice*, ed. Zeynep Çelik Alexander and John May (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 129–46.
55. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, July 6, 1888; October 9, 1888, AA 2.3.1.5.4; and August 19, 1889, AA 2.3.1.5.6.
56. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, March 29, 1889, AA 2.3.1.5.6.
57. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, October 11, 1889, AA 2.3.1.5.6.
58. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, October 11, 1889.
59. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, July 22, 1888, AA 2.3.1.5.4.
60. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, November 22, 1888, AA 2.3.1.5.4.
61. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, March 29, 1889, AA 2.3.1.5.4.
62. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, June 16, 1890, AA 2.3.1.5.7.
63. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, June 6, 1889; and June 20, 1889, AA 2.3.1.5.6.
64. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, October 28, 1890, AA 2.3.1.5.7.
65. Abunnasr, "The Making of Ras Beirut," 79.
66. Mahmood Haddad, "Syrian Muslims Attitudes Toward Foreign Missionaries in the Late Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in *Altruism and Imperialism: Western Cultural and Religious Missions in the Middle East*, ed. Eleanor H. Tejirian and Reeva S. Simon (New York: Columbia University Middle East Institute, 2002), 265.
67. Pers. corr. Dodge to Bliss, August 8, 1880, AA 2.3.1.4.1.