From Violence to the Unconscious: War as the Invisible Heritage of the Present

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In the dictionary, heritage refers to the collection of tangible and cultural legacies passed down from previous generations: buildings, values, customs. According to UNESCO, heritage is "the cultural and natural legacy shared by humanity, of exceptional value, to be preserved, protected, and passed on to future generations." A definition tied to what is precious, symbolic, and honorable. But what if war itself were among these inheritances?

In Lebanon, war—and especially the Civil War—cannot be reduced to a past historical event. It has not truly ended. It has transformed into a temporal marker, invoked as a permanent chapter of the Lebanese story. Just as one might say "in winter" or "in summer," one says "during the war." It has become a unit of time, a term everyone recognizes—even those who never lived through it.

War has succeeded in rooting itself within collective memory, not as a tragedy overcome, but as a living component of identity. It seeps into daily details, into reflexes, into social relations, public discourse, even architecture and art. In this sense, war—with all its devastation—has become part of Lebanon's living heritage: an intangible legacy carried not as a historical anecdote we retell, but as an invisible behavior, as an engraved memory.

Invisible Violence: When "Heritage" Shapes the Self

I only realized the depth of invisible violence I carried within me after leaving Lebanon. Distance—geographic and cultural—was necessary to see what was hidden yet familiar. In my new surroundings, in everyday interactions with people from different cultures, certain

behaviors began to surface: reactions I had always considered normal, yet which revealed themselves as exaggerated responses in moments of tension. They took the form of an instinctive tendency toward caution or confrontation in the face of difference, or an approach to disagreement as though it were a battle to be won or lost.

Even language betrayed traces of this inherited violence. I used terms naturally in my work as an architect such as “front lines,” “our areas and theirs,” truce,” and “hostages,” as if they were part of ordinary technical and planning vocabulary, without noticing their weight or symbolism. It was the reactions of my colleagues to these expressions that forced me to reconsider the cultural baggage they carried.

This invisible violence is profoundly collective. It reflects unprocessed traumas and experiences, layered over by silence, transformed into an inner stratum of the collective personality. One does not need to have lived through the war to bear its mark; the cultural and social legacy it produced is enough to transmit it unconsciously from one generation to the next. It emerges most clearly when we step outside our familiar context and are forced to see ourselves from the outside.

Living Heritage: A Memory Suspended

Every 13 April, the Civil War’s outbreak resurfaces on its anniversary. Repeated annually, commemorations are held and articles written. And yet, rarely is the date of the war’s end ever mentioned. No one says “the war ended in….” Instead, there is only reference to the Taif Agreement, as though it were merely a political settlement frozen in text. This temporal gap—between a well-known beginning and an unresolved ending—is not incidental. It reveals a war that never truly concluded, but rather settled as a permanent mental state, like a ceasefire.

This temporal stretching of war is clearly reflected in cultural and artistic production. Lebanese theater, cinema, and music continue to invoke the war, proof that memory has not yet been laid to rest.

Even in architecture—a discipline meant to build rather than recall destruction—some architects have drawn upon war as a design language. In Bernard Khoury’s work, metallic cannons appear on rooftops. In Lina Ghotmeh’s Stone Garden in central Beirut, the façade is punctuated with randomly scattered openings, echoing the bullet holes of the

capital's buildings. She has described the design as a way to transform scars into openings for life. And yet, even this aesthetic gesture remains bound to the memory of devastation—turning suffering into a permanent image. It is an attempt to tame the wound, not erase it.

If we recall UNESCO's definition of heritage, such designs perpetuate the past and reproduce it. But events as traumatic as civil war should not be preserved and transmitted in this way. Consider the Beirut Port silos: preserving them as witnesses to a catastrophic event is necessary. But replicating their destroyed form in new designs would risk immortalizing destruction itself. The difference lies between transcending the past and enshrining it in the present.

A similar ambiguity surrounds Beit Beirut, the Ottoman-era building restored as a museum. Its tours ostensibly highlight its historical and architectural value, yet most of the narrative centers on its role during the war as a sniper's nest along the front lines. Stories are often exaggerated or inaccurate. The building's identity is thus reduced to a single chapter of its history—precisely the part that perhaps ought to have been left to oblivion, rather than magnified in collective memory.

Memorials in Lebanon further illustrate this symbolic conflict over memory. Instead of unifying markers, they have become politicized symbols, each tied to partisan narratives. What one community erects as a monument to a "heroic martyr" is seen by another as a tribute to a "war criminal." Every party has its own memorials: Hezbollah's "Martyrs' Garden" in the southern suburbs; Lebanese Forces' monuments in Zahle; Amal Movement's recognition of fighters in Zahrani and Nabatieh. Yet there exists no single national memorial to honor all victims of the war across all communities.

These monuments have not served reconciliation. They are mirrors of division, reinforcing

sectarian identities and keeping the heritage of war alive.

Children of War: A Stereotype and a Complex Identity

Outside Lebanon, we are often perceived as "children of war." Our identities are not defined by our diverse culture, intellectual legacy, or individual achievements, but by the shadow of war cast upon us. The first glance is often loaded with assumptions: that we carry within us, perhaps even in our genes, a legacy of violence, of division, of conflict.

What makes this harder is that such perceptions are not always unfounded. Even those of us who did not live the war directly carry its echoes unconsciously. Our collective memory is heavy with loss: homes destroyed, loved ones vanished, landmarks erased or replaced, photographs still hanging on walls. Memory still beats with grief. This is a violence unseen, but deeply rooted. It does not always surface as anger or aggression, but in subtler forms—in body language, in cautiousness toward others, in the fear of full belonging.

Thus, the heritage of war continues to function as a lens through which we are seen, reducing identity to a fragment of itself, defining us by what we endured rather than what we aspire to. It is as though we are not only victims of a historical moment, but its carriers, perpetuators, bound to its cycle. Which raises a painful question: will we ever be able to tell our story apart from war?

A Heritage to Be Dismantled

"There is nothing more sordid than war. We must not present it as heroic, but as horrifying. We must make people fear it, not admire it," so wrote the Russian novelist Viktor Astafyev in his novel «The Cursed and Killed."

In Lebanon, more than three decades after the Taif Agreement, war endures as untouched heritage. No one was held accountable; on the contrary, all warlords were pardoned by an amnesty law. Society itself was never treated—left instead to adapt to its scars as though they were destiny. Even initiatives with sincere intentions—like We Remember So We Don't Repeat—while meant to warn, ended up reinforcing the specter of war as a ghost ever-present, always feared, never overcome.

In this sense, Lebanon has not turned the page. War persists as heritage, though it is not the kind to

be preserved or passed on. It is not something to commemorate, but a burden to shoulder responsibly—an ethical duty to dismantle. Such an inheritance demands double courage: the courage to speak truth, the courage to question, and the courage to build a new narrative—one that begins not from fear but from peace, not from division but from plurality, and from the hope of a healthy tomorrow.