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Walls Speak

--Dedicated to Yasmine Dagher & the Beirut Heritage Initiative, for their preservation of Beirut's architectural heritage following the tragedy of August 4, 2020.

Silence roared through the room. Shards of broken glass and debris created chaotic patterns on the floor while the flung aside furniture had lost its purpose. The hot August breeze crept through the skeletons of what once were windows. The barrier between the interior and exterior world shattered. And there she stood, looking but not seeing. Caught in a swell of intense emotions intertwined in a lump of aching numbness. The silence was a contrast to yesterday's deafening cries, guttural shouts, and piercing alarm bells. She scanned the room, struggling to focus so she could take note of the extent of the wreckage. Extensive structural damage. The roof was partially destroyed. The windows, shutters, and doors were all gone. Big cracks ripped through the main façade. And yet she was grateful that the intricately decorated walls mostly retained their baby blue, warm beige, light pistachio, and soft pink hues. Grateful that some of the elaborate skirting and ceilings adorned with floral and leaf motifs were still relatively intact compared to other traditional homes in this neighborhood. I was in pain and covered in scars that will remain deeply carved in all dimensions of my being. I felt incomplete, but I was grateful too. And yet I no longer looked like the home she had fond memories of.

As a child growing up in my world built by her family and passed down the generations for 200 years, Yasmine Dagher long had an interest in me and architectural heritage in general. I have cradled her since she was born and share her fond recollections. Hide and seek and treasure hunts with the cousins made each moment magical. Stories about my history fueled their young imaginations and they were convinced they were going to discover hidden treasures in my expansive garden. Now, as an adult, Yasmine realized the real treasure was right here in my traditional façade with its signature arches and tiled roof. Right above her head and surrounding her. It was me. Many think we houses and buildings don't notice much, but it's true that our walls have ears. We watch and listen. We live through our residents and visitors. And they live through us, leaving their imprints on us with their thoughts, memories, and secrets.

Yasmine cautiously stepped over the rubble and made her way towards my garden. The debris crunched under her feet like fragile bones. My garden was one of the rare green spaces in Beirut. She felt lucky to have this natural haven amidst the concrete cityscape. My fountain cast a shadow across the neatly trimmed grass and plants. But even here, in her special refuge, reality imposed itself. The fragrant aroma of jasmine was barely noticeable because of an indescribable stench that was odorless and yet so pungent. A large fallen tree dominated my garden. It was this very tree that had prevented her from getting through the main gate yesterday. The cries, shouts, and alarm bells.

Such a contrast to 4 pm on 4 August 2020. I was full of life then. Her grandmother and father could still call me home. Back then, less than 24 hours ago, her cousin was over, eagerly listening to Yasmine's passionate overview of a heritage survey and plans to include the old traditional buildings in Basta and Zokak El Blatt. Beirut's architectural treasures mattered to Yasmine. Her master's degree included a study of Beirut's heritage law and building classification. She was wrapping it up while assessing the reviewing process of old surveys and getting ready to roam Beirut to document things.

Such a contrast to 6pm when Yasmine and her boyfriend were stuck in Mar Mikhael traffic and calmly noticed a fire blazing at the port. Nothing was on the news so there was no reason to panic. It was just another day.

Such a contrast to when they entered the pet shop and were greeted by excited barks and meows and the owners' big smiles. Just 2 minutes later, the earth trembled violently followed by the shock of two consecutive explosions which catapulted Yasmine and her boyfriend to the back of the shop as they tried to embrace to protect one another from the flying glass.

This horror was familiar. Having lived through the 2012 bombing in Sassine Square when Wissam Al-Hassan was assassinated, Yasmine quickly steadied her nerves and methodically called each family member one by one to make sure everyone was OK. She felt relieved knowing her father, mother, sister, and cousins were safe. Her hunched shoulders relaxed as some of the tension released from her body. But no matter how many times she let the phone ring, her grandmother wouldn't pick up. Her breathing became rapid and staggered with worry. What followed were the two longest hours of her life. That's what she said as she recounted her ordeal to the rest of the family while I embraced them in what was left of my body, heart, and soul.

She and her boyfriend dashed from Mar Mikhael toward Gemmayzeh. They zig zagged their way down the straight road which had become an obstacle course of debris from buildings and moaning people. The closer they got to Gemmayzeh, the more carnage and damage they witnessed behind the massive dust cloud blanketing the area. Confusion. Cries, shouts, and alarm bells.

They finally reached my entrance. Yasmine desperately tried to open my green metal main gate which leads to my garden, her hands sore from the effort. The concierge's voice suddenly boomed from behind my walls.

"It's useless. A fallen tree is blocking the entrance," his shaky voice said.

It took a moment for Yasmine to process his words.

"What about my grandma?" she shrieked, her voice cracking with emotion.

"She's hurt. She wasn't at home. She was visiting her nephews. Don't worry. She's on her way to the hospital now," he replied, trying to mask his concern.

Yasmine rushed to my garden's side entrance, still in a daze. Her tired legs mechanically propelled her towards me. She didn't notice the damage I had sustained. She still didn't know what happened. Her head was reeling. Everything spinning. The cries, shouts, and alarm bells were deafening.

It was almost 8 pm. The cries, shouts, and alarm bells persisted. She called her father to check on her grandmother and whispered with a heavy heart, "our house is destroyed. It's bad. The exterior. It might collapse. I didn't go inside yet, but I will as soon as I can." This was her biggest heartbreak.

That was yesterday. Today there is silence. The warm daylight. And the weight of the daunting task ahead of her. She knew she had to save every wooden, plaster, and colored glass fragment for my renovation. During the Lebanese Civil War, her father had done exactly the same thing. Shelling had damaged my upper floor and so he painstakingly picked up every wooden piece he could find from my arches and windows, ignoring the splinters in his fingers, and keeping them safe for more than 30 years. In 2005, when renovating me, he brought the pieces out of hiding and assembled them with a carpenter. It was like solving a complex puzzle. Slowly but surely all the pieces came together. To raise awareness, the process was shared on social media with videos of Yasmine's father urging people to save and recycle the broken parts

of their home. Nothing is really broken. And what is broken can create something whole. I know this from first-hand experience. And I know I am part of Yasmine, her father, and the rest of the family.

For the next three days Yasmine and family friends quietly cleaned me from the house to the garden. Salvaging what could be salvaged. Frantically sweeping and dusting away traces of the aftermath. I felt loved and cherished despite the raw and real physical agony I was in. I was making new memories while trying to regain pieces of my identity which had been lost in an instance in the explosion. Her father's face was marked with sadness. He was crumbling like I was crumbling. He had dedicated his life to Lebanon and its heritage. He had rebuilt me after the war, filling the bullet holes and chunks devoured by rockets. All that effort destroyed in seconds. Like everyone who lived through the Civil War, he was no stranger to loss and destruction. But not this kind of destruction. He knew a good 8 months lay ahead before he and his mother could move back in. I knew too. After all, I've been restored and rebuilt time and time again because of Beirut's turbulent past. It was obvious my structural damages would complicate my restoration this time. Some people were fortunate to only have broken windows. A strange measure of luck. But many traditional houses and heritage buildings in the area completely collapsed or had ravaged façades. All because of the explosion. My lost brothers and sisters.

With the clearing out of the debris and salvaging done, Yasmine ventured outside the shelter of my main gate for the first time. Upon her return I experienced what she experienced and glimpsed at her thoughts. We buildings can look inside our residents' minds and souls just as the people moving and breathing inside us can see our bare walls, exposed pillars, and interior world. The more she walked around Gemmayze and Mar Mikhael, the more the explosion's impact tormented her eyes. It was too much to comprehend. The familiar neighborhood was unrecognizable. It was like a scene from post-apocalyptic fiction. Only this was the bitterest reality. She thought to herself "This is loss."

Such a contrast to the former charm. The visual dialogue of houses and buildings from the Ottoman era, French mandate epoch, and modernist period. The architectural narrative from the 1860s to the 1960s. The mesmerizing interplay of positive and negative space. An account of shared consciousness across history. Only remnants remained. A requiem of collapsed columns, fragmented facades, cracked structures, caved in roofs, missing floors, and broken windows. She paused in front of many of the traditional and modern heritage buildings, staring in dismay at their sandstone and concrete carcasses, occasionally closing her eyes so she could recall them in their former glory. They were hollow shells. The life sucked out of them.

I can testify to this. We buildings communicate with one another through our foundations deep in the ground. We send messages and still and moving images using a special code made of subtle vibrations. We call this network "The Foundations". And after the blast many of my siblings fell silent.

Yasmine was seized by the impulse to act. It all became clear to me as I peeked inside her mind one afternoon as she strolled around my ground floor. The real Beirut would be lost if these buildings were not saved. Given her expertise, she already realized during her walk that the pre-1940s heritage buildings, which were mostly built using sandstone, had excessive structural damage in comparison to the concrete post-1940s heritage buildings. She admired traditional sandstone buildings with our iconic architectural features, our triple arches on the main façade, pitched roofs, central hall plan, timber work, and intricately decorated and painted Baghdadi ceilings.

Yasmine's impulse was especially strong since Beirut's architectural heritage was already in danger before the explosion. I know this too. I witnessed the city change over the decades. I even remember when Beirut was all green as if it were yesterday. Time is very different to us buildings. A year seems like a mere month. And yet our collective future is hanging in the balance and our existence is on the brink of extinction. Massacre because of corruption and neglect. The prey of real estate investors, who pounce on abandoned heritage buildings, tearing us down and building soulless apartment blocks and skyscrapers in our place. We heritage buildings fell victim to the cracks in poor city planning and building legislation. The areas of Beirut you could build in the most were the clusters where most of us resided: Gemmayzeh, Mar Mikhael, Zokak El Blatt, Ashrafieh, and other neighborhoods. It was all over The Foundations and popped up in Yasmine's conversations with family. And now, these vultures will try to swoop down on those of us wounded by the explosion. Yasmine frowned at the thought. She had to act. And since the explosion awakened some people to the importance of preserving heritage buildings, now was the time. There was a window for change.

Over the next few days, Yasmine continued to walk around the areas most transformed by the explosion. It was a large graveyard of buildings. Over 1,000 heritage buildings were destroyed or maimed in the explosion and most of us were still full of life, laughter, and special moments until the blast filled us with tears, devastation, and emptiness. She knew the cost of restoration is much higher than contemporary buildings and that craftsmen and artisans with the skills needed to repair certain exterior and interior features were so hard to find. The know-how was a dying tradition and art, fading away as we slowly perished. And it would be a pity to see us heritage buildings lose our authenticity because of the intrusion of modern materials like aluminum. Or worse, be replaced with a tower that looks like so many other towers everywhere else in the world. We take pride in looking unique. Looking like we belong only in Beirut, making our city distinct from other places. This alone is reason enough to save us. And there are many more.

For the past three years many people told Yasmine that her interest in preserving Beirut's heritage was pointless. I overheard those harsh words myself, more than once. Money talked and high rises were inevitable. Instead of discouraging her, those words fueled her with determination. And this made me happy, knowing that some people still cared about us and would fight for our survival.

In the days following the explosion, she was inspired by people's drive to help one another, clean up, and rebuild. She watched with wonder as established NGOs sprung to action while new ones were created. And she acted. This is how Beirut Heritage Initiative (BHI) was born at the end of August 2020 and Yasmine fully devoted herself to the effort to rescue us heritage buildings from a bleak fate. I felt relieved that we would not be totally forsaken.

Yasmine found a new purpose in this independent and inclusive collective that emerged from the ruins. She felt a sense of belonging since BHI brought together architects, heritage experts, and lawyers who had been fighting to preserve the capital's iconic built environment for more than 30 years. I could see the energy in her eyes, even though rescuing and reviving us is such a mammoth undertaking for a small team of 3 full-timers, 4 part-timers, and 6 committee members with day jobs. And yet it was thrilling for Yasmine to be part of this coalition between a crisis unit, Beirut Built Heritage Rescue 2020, and several NGOs, including the National Heritage Foundation, Arab Center for Architecture, UN Blue Shield, Save Beirut Heritage, Live Love Beirut, Together Li Beirut, and others.

Using funds raised from donations, BHI started work and Yasmine immersed herself in her new mission, setting aside her dream of pursuing a PhD. The emergency first phase was launched by the Directorate General of Antiquities and Yasmine dived in the race to cover the roofs of damaged heritage buildings and to secure them structurally. BHI's office building shared every detail about the work being done on The Foundations. Updating daily. I really appreciated that even though that office building cheekily calls me "grandpa". I'm still young at heart! Some donations by international organizations came in but they weren't enough and so Yasmine and the rest of the team hit a brick wall. Several buildings on the brink of collapse couldn't be salvaged because of lack of funds and the struggle to find builders and craftsmen with the right specialized know-how. I knew this made her heart sink. It made my heart sink too. This might seem like defeat, but Yasmine was determined to push forward however she could, despite limitations. The momentum remained.

Doing what could be done with the funds and resources available, BHI moved on to the second phase and Yasmine got caught up in the whirlwind of partial and full renovation of the heritage buildings which looked like shadows of their former selves. Each day, while overwhelmed with the frantic rush and workload, so many thoughts came and went. The office building overheard the team's meetings and phone calls, so I knew the concerns and hurdles. Can we rekindle the warmth by reconstructing roofs and damaged facades? Since elaborated carpentry works and interior decoration renovation including wall paints and decorated Baghdadi ceilings are disappearing crafts, will we be able to turn back time? Will we ever be able to complete this second phase given the shortage of money and on-going economic crisis?

It was challenging despite the surge of interest in traditional craftsmanship as many started to learn the tools of the trade and BHI published a manual detailing restoration, preservation, and conservation methods for Beirut houses. So many walls had to be knocked down from getting recognition as a valuable initiative to convincing homeowners that everything possible was being done with the resources available. Not to mention dealing with delays because of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. Doors opened with some people welcoming the team and appreciating the time and effort dedicated to restoring their homes. But many doors closed with people refusing to allow the team to assess the damage or not trusting the team's expertise and knowledge. There was quite a buzz on The Foundations alongside a collective expression of sadness. You must excuse me for overloading you with info about BHI, but such work is vital to us buildings. We need such initiatives to survive. Especially in an unpredictable country where laws are broken and the government is a façade.

What saddened Yasmine the most was the people who simply didn't want to rebuild. They wanted their house or building to collapse, hoping all the trauma would disintegrate alongside the crumbling walls. Exhausted from renovating each time conflict, unrest, or disaster strikes. Wanting to escape the bad memories of cowering in corridors and the turmoil of the outside world slithering into the sanctuary of their homes. But she couldn't blame or judge them. I can't either. We too have gone through the endless cycles of trauma, breaking down and hoping we will be built up again. We have witnessed and experienced it all alongside our owners. Our people. But we don't want to be lost into obscurity. Vanished from the urban fabric. Identity erased. We want to survive and thrive. Is it too much to hope for?

Yasmine's site visits brought many elderly homeowners joy since visitors rarely crossed their threshold and decades of instability had forced their children and grandchildren to emigrate. These old buildings loved the visits too, truly appreciating the way Yasmine looked at them with admiration and concern. An introvert, socializing was a bit uncomfortable for Yasmine, but she

never missed these visits. These were rare opportunities to glimpse elements that made each home special. A ceiling so beautiful it cannot be described: a medley of blue, red, and white with a decorated cornice. Wall drawings with symmetrical elegance and curved splendor. Marble and decorated cement tiles with a star pattern. Distinct arches woodwork. Capturing these little details were a highlight of site visits. But the real magic was how these heritage buildings, even in a state of ruin, were alive, spoke, and conjured up the past. They told stories of friendly neighbors in the 1890s who enjoyed morning chats from their balconies. The father in the 1930s who was worried about his daughter since she didn't have a suitor yet. The mother in the early 1980s comforting her crying son with a lullaby to conceal the rattat of crossfire. The grandparents who had the entire family over for lunch each Sunday for the past 20 years.

Some of the houses Yasmine visited were surrounded by abandoned heritage buildings. She would sneak into these deserted places, marveling at how brilliant the washed off wall drawings must have been, trying to make out the flooring beneath the thick layer of dust, and picturing what the decaying ceiling and windows originally looked like. Time traveling in her mind, she could hear echoing voices chatting and see the silhouettes of people going about their daily lives. Here in these time ravaged spaces where time stood still. She wished she could afford to buy some of these heritage buildings to keep them safe and return them to their full beauty. To make sure these abandoned buildings are not forgotten. To sketch a new meaning for value. To retain identity and culture. I wished she could do that too. I wished my abandoned siblings could have what I have. After all, we buildings need people, just as people need us. We are pieces of one another. It's a special bond. The loneliness speeds up our decomposition. We yearn for the warmth we feel when someone touches our walls. Our hearts beat when someone steps inside us. We hold in us and exude the changing times, trends, lifestyles, memories, and identities. I am not just a structure.

As the months go by Yasmine and the rest of the Beirut Heritage Initiative team continue to grapple with inadequate funds. They continue to encounter people who own heritage buildings who have given up or are suspicious of help. But each day the work continues. A crack is covered. A beam reinforced. A ceiling repaired. As Yasmine opens my green metal main gate with a smile on her face because she sees I am nearly whole again, I know they will continue to do what they can. And we will continue to do what we can to make Beirut Beirut.

For more true stories about the 4 August 2020 Beirut Port explosion and the aftermath see Beyond Shattered Glass: <https://www.bsgbeirut.com/>



Above are photos of the Dagher residence:
Exterior- after the blast and after the renovation
Interior- after the blast and after the renovation
Below are photos of Medawar 479 and The Gholam Cluster after the blast and after BHI's renovation.



Photos by Yasmine Dagher