

## Maha Yehia: Academic, Urbanist

*(Born in 1968, in Beirut; at the time of the recording she was living in Beirut; recorded in her Beirut office at the American University. Language: English with some Arabic.)*

**M**aha: What do you want me to say? (Laughs) I'm not that good at talking about myself. I can tell you that I was born here, I lived part of my life between Lebanon and Africa. At six years old I was put in a boarding school. I studied at the Evangelical School in Saida. Then, we moved to England and then came back to Lebanon. When I graduated from school, I went first to Belgium then to France. I did my undergraduate degree in Parsons University where I majored in architecture, the mother school is actually in New York. Then I moved to Architectural Association in London, where I did my masters and PhD in housing and urban planning. When I graduated, I came back here and worked for seven months. I taught part-time at the American University of Beirut and worked with Ghassan Taher. We worked on the southern suburb project which is now known as Elissar. When I came here I was still working on my PhD. At the end of that period I went to the United States, to MIT, to do my second PhD there in the history, theory and criticism program in the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning. I stayed in Boston for five years. The first two years in the United States, I was working on the dissertation of London, so there was an overlap of two years. My first dissertation topic was housing problems and conflict of property rights in Lebanon, and changes in the architectural and urban environment during and after the war. As case studies I compared the Elissar and Solidère projects. It was kind of a critique of the policy of reconstruction in Lebanon. I started my field work in 1991. At MIT I focused more on the history of Beirut, I worked on the transition from the Ottoman period to the French Mandate. This period extends from 1889, when Beirut became the capital of a *wilaya*, until Independence in 1943. My idea is to study how this political transformation affected city life, especially that many historians believe that there was a kind of break between the Ottoman period and the French mandate. My idea is to prove that there was also a continuity in many things and that has lasted until today, for example in many laws, and that this continuity has been disregarded. (pause) What else do you want to know?

Dania: Tell me about things other than education, tell me more about your life.

Maha: (Laughs) Let me talk about education, it's better. To tell you about my life - education played a very important role in my life, partly because I'm still studying, partly because, due to education, I had to move to different places. This has its negative as well as positive aspects. Among its positive aspects is the fact that it opened my eyes to many things, many different people, I moved and lived in many countries. Only for my university education, I moved between France, England and the United States. At the same time, my parents lived, and still live in, Belgium and some of my relatives live here. This moving from one place to another opened my eyes, early in my life, to different people and different modes of thinking. This was the major thing that affected me and made me who I am today. Among its negative aspects, moving from one place to another makes your relations with people more difficult, you have to make a double effort to maintain your friendships and



other relationships. It is easy to lose your friends because you don't see them as much as before. Because I used to come back to Lebanon once a year, it was easier for me keep up with my Lebanese and Arab friends than with others I met during my undergraduate years. This was the major disadvantage. That's everything I can tell you about my life.

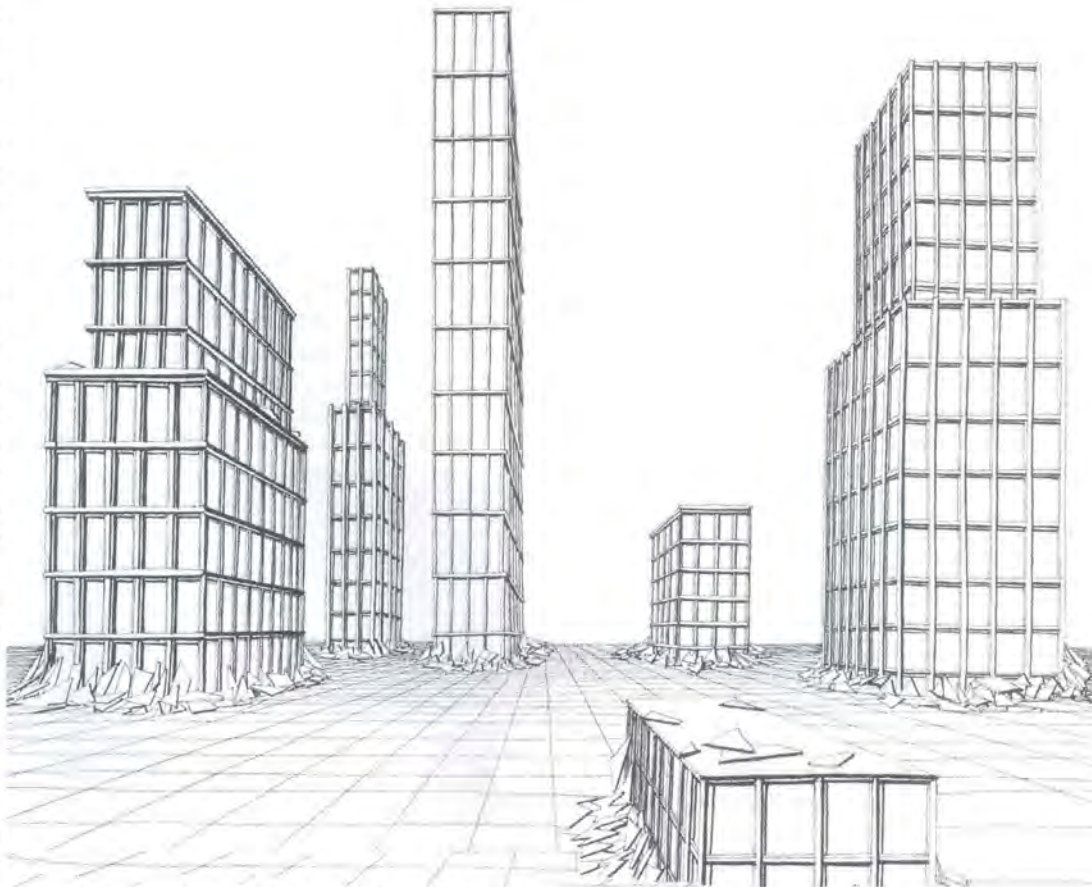
I love my grandmother a lot, I lived with her for a certain period of time, she is very important to me. My relationship with my parents is very strong. They encourage me a

lot, without their encouragement I wouldn't have done what I did, they gave me the freedom to do whatever I wanted, as well as the confidence in myself to continue whatever I started doing. My father raised us to believe that education is the most important thing in life. My mother taught us that nothing is impossible. Now I'm becoming very romantic and idealistic, Dania, I don't know how to talk about myself!

Dania: Tell me about the important episodes in your life.  
Maha: If I were to think back about the major episodes in my life moving from one country to another affected me a lot. Now I'm more aware of its consequences than before, especially that now I'm going back to New York for eight months. I thought a lot before taking this step, although the offer is good one and

I'm very excited about living in New York, I've never lived there. The job offer is a good one, I wanted it badly, it will allow me to finish my dissertation. I hesitated a lot because I want to settle down here now that the situation is calm and one can do a lot. In work, for example one can do a lot here. I think Lebanon is a bit more difficult than other countries because you have to create your own work opportunities. There are no facilities as in other countries. But there are a lot of cultural activities, this is very important for me. There are a lot of activities, there is more life than when I came back here in 1991. In 1991 I wasn't happy at all. I remember people were rioting for bread. When I came back I didn't know anybody, everyone I knew was still abroad and I couldn't find my school friends. I wasn't happy at all, I found the move back

here very hard. I immersed myself in my work and did nothing else. This year was different, I found that there is a lot one can do here in things that are important. For example, I can see myself getting involved in the children's rights movement. This is very interesting and important to me. This year I didn't get involved in such activities, but when I was in the United States and France I was very involved in all kinds of activities. In France, for two years, I used to publish a poetry magazine; I and a friend of mine used to organize poetry readings, and we started an international fair at the university. We used to do a lot of things, at least on the cultural level. In London, for some reason, I was not as active. In the United States, I became active with the Arab students at MIT, mainly in my last two years there. I was also part of a larger group of people involved in cultural activities, so I became much more involved at the political level. We tried to do different things in terms of representing or questioning Arab identity and Arab politics within a society which usually rejects these things. But that was as part of a larger group of people; there's a very active Arab community in Boston. (pause) I started to be interested in politics, some poetry readings used to be organized around politics and what was going on here, whether the civil war - and I insist it was a civil war - even though there were many uncivil elements in it - in addition to other wars, whether Israeli



Picture Credit: Hans-Georg Rauch. *En Masse*, Collier Books, 1974

aggression, Israeli invasion, and Israeli occupation of parts of Lebanon, not to mention Palestine. In the United States, I think the environment allowed me, or helped me, articulate the war differently with a community of people. Do you want more details about the activities we used to organize?

Dania: Yes, why not?

Maha: I don't think anybody will be interested to read this. (laughs) Do you have anything in particular you want me to talk about?

Dania: Whatever you find worth mentioning regarding your life history, about your experience here in Lebanon.

Maha: When I said there is a lot one can do here, I mean both at the professional as well as the personal level. Like other places, living in Lebanon has its pros and cons. The cons I don't need to go into. At the professional level, when I came back in 1991, it was very hard to deal with the environment, and the fact that I'm a woman, my colleagues weren't very happy that I was a woman working with them. Now this has changed. Then again the work environment has also changed. I am working on my own rather than as part of a larger group now, I'm not working in a company, where I think the politics are different. There, being a woman would definitely be more of a

problem in different ways. Here I'm involved in an academic environment which has been quite a cocoon for me in many ways. Being at the Center for Behavioral Research has helped a lot, and made the transition to Lebanon easier. Being at the American University of Beirut made my life here much richer, I was part of a much larger academic intellectual environment, I didn't feel so alienated. And most of the people I've been working with are expatriates like myself, or professors and academics and students. That helped a lot. It's a much richer environment as far as I am concerned. I think that professional women still have problems here. For example, if I were to become active as a woman architect, there are certain problems that I would face. There are laws in the syndicate that stipulate that neither women nor men are allowed to work from their homes, they have to have an office. It makes sense because there are a lot of people who are graduating from lower level universities, they come here and begin to practise without having an office. As long as there is no exam that guarantees a certain level of competence among architects and engineers, we will always face problems in terms of architecture. They imposed that law in order to hold the office of any engineer or architect responsible for any wrongdoing. But it makes it much more difficult for the woman architect who has children, but who would like to practise her profession. She either has to have a registered office or be affiliated with a company - if not, she can't work. This practise counters what happens abroad. Abroad many people work from home, and this helps things for women especially. It helps women who take care of children or elderly people at home. Whether man or woman, it becomes easier for them to work at home. I know many women who were doing very well in their jobs, but were obliged to quit because they couldn't manage, both job and family responsibilities. Maybe they have children and don't want to leave them to a nurse. These are some of the laws that make it hard for women to work. At the same time, the Syndicate isn't seeing the changes that are taking place in family structure. There have been a lot of changes during and after the war. We hear a lot about family disorganization, divorce and so on. Regulations should take these changes into account according to the environment we live in, and this isn't happening here at all. I am talking about other people's experience. I haven't experienced this, but I've seen it happening.

I can imagine myself living back here. As I said earlier, every place has advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages here, we have the family, there are friends, there is a society which we are part of, the situation here is good. It is time for us to give now, maybe there are certain things which we don't take notice of, talking to other people makes us aware of them. There are a lot of things that need change, especially after seventeen years of war. I lived part of the war here like other people, and it's not because I traveled a lot that I'm noticing these things. I think we have lost a bit of our humanity. You hear many stories - for example someone wasn't able to enter Emergency because he couldn't pay the deposit. We are in a frightening economic situation, people are suffering a lot, but if one has the will, one can get involved in small associations and

help people. For example, we don't have a side walk, there is no country where they don't have a sidewalk. There is no life on our streets, we only have Hamra street where one can walk, or the Corniche. In Damascus or Turkey there are crowded streets, full of life; here after seven o'clock all the streets are empty. We can make awareness campaigns, hold discussion groups on certain debatable issues. I think it is very important to have relations even among different associations. Syndicates can play a very important role. I was really shocked here with the elections of the engineers' syndicate, to what extent war politics played a role. The 'war logic' has affected the younger generation, they elected people not on the basis of their personal qualifications, but rather on their sectarian identities. After several years of reconstruction - and I say 'reconstruction' in inverted commas - I think that sectarianism has become much more intense than before. There should be reconstruction of a whole country, not just of sectors. Even in Beirut, each sector has its own plan of reconstruction, without taking into consideration the whole city or country. What else do you want to know about me?

Dania: Let us return to our first topic, your recollections of your past. Do you think your life would have been different had you lived in a different place?

Maha: Yes, I think that in a very paradoxical and perverse manner the war contributed a lot to who I am today. If it were not for the war I would never have left, my parents would never have thought of sending me to Paris, London or the United States - certainly not at the undergraduate level - and then they sent me back here because I was forgetting my Arabic. My parents played an important role in making us, me and my sisters, not forget Arabic. Had I stayed here I'm sure I would have gone to AUB and my experience in life would have been different. What the environment expects from women here is completely different from abroad. Here we are raised to believe that we should study, get married, have children - this is our life. If the woman works it is good, some approve of women's work, others don't, each according to his own beliefs. These expectations are very low and that doesn't encourage women. I think women need to expect much more of themselves, much more than society expects of them. Living abroad partly taught me that, partly again my parents. Since we were young, my mother used to tell us that nothing is impossible, when you set your mind on something you can do it. Neither she nor my father ever stopped us doing anything - "If you try you may succeed or fail; if you fail the first time, you should try again until you reach your goal." At home, I never felt that I'm a woman and what is expected of me is only to procreate. When you go to college - also college is very crucial at the undergraduate level - there you experience a lot of new things, new people, and a new environment. You learn how other students live their lives and you learn to appreciate yours. I am trying to think of episodes in my life that might be interesting to you.

Dania: To you, not to me.

Maha: A turning point in my life? One episode that was a

crucial turning point - not really a turning point but I still remember it - is from the time of the poetry reading sessions. A friend stood up and read a poem, and halfway through the poem we realized that she was telling us how she was abused by her father. I will never forget, I don't think any of us who were there will ever forget. For me it was the first time I was exposed to something like that, it made me realize that we take a lot of things for granted. I grew up in an environment where my parents are what we call here a 'normal family', what is normally expected of a family, a father, a mother, children. I've never heard of, nor can I understand, how a father could attack his child, it's something beyond my imagination. I do not think anyone who was there would ever forget. First, because she chose to come out and talk about it publicly, after never having talked about it before, not even to her friends. Second, the courage it needed to stand and talk. Probably she needed to talk about it, to say that this has happened to me. It was one of my first wake-up calls. There are a lot of things that we take for granted.

Another episode was less than a wake-up call, but it made me believe that one can certainly do something at the personal level. After the Israeli invasion, when the situation in Lebanon was very bad, we all went through many frustrations, those of us who lived abroad endured the same frustrations as those who stayed, though in different ways - for example, not being able to get messages across. Your parents, your family and friends are being bombed left, right and center, and you are in a place where, first of all, the news about Lebanon is presented differently, and, two, people don't understand or read the news. The injustice of it is really horrendous, I don't think I'll ever be this angry again. Again three years ago, when the South was being heavily bombarded, I became very upset. You know what is going on, but outside things were presented differently, as if we were the ones who were doing this - this was the European and American media presentation of the situation. And then in the middle of all this frustration, you realize that at the individual level, a little poem may make people start thinking, they may not believe what you are saying, they may not accept it, but at least they start questioning what they believe and thinking that maybe what they aren't getting it right. These little episodes are very important for me because they really give me a certain strength, I feel that I can do something. Even if I can get one person to question what they believe about events in Lebanon, then I think that is already an achievement. To achieve something I really believe we can begin with one person. It takes time but we may end by reaching somewhere.

Poetry has always played an important part in my life. Right now I've stopped writing, it's temporary, I always write and stop for no particular reason. I started writing at the age of ten

or eleven, I write all sort of things, writing has always been crucial to me. If I couldn't write I don't know what I would do. No matter what kind of writing I'm doing, it has always been important to me, as a way to express myself but also as a way to think. I think a lot through my writing, I pick up my pen and don't know what I'm going to write until I start writing.

There something stuck in my memory which I don't think will ever go away, it was when one of my best friends died in a car accident. It was a tragedy, she was very young. I think this is an experience everybody has gone through, everyone has lost a person they care about, may be more so in Lebanon than in other countries. It teaches you the value of life, how short life is, and how it shouldn't be wasted on trivialities.

My niece and nephew are the love of my life, this is something more cheerful than the things I mentioned earlier. I have a niece and a nephew, I love them a lot. What do you want me to tell you? Let me tell you about a happy incident, when someone asked me to sign one of my poems for him. Of course I was surprised, and I remember I wrote him something very stupid. I was embarrassed. (laughs) Tell me when we can stop.

Dania: Whenever you want.

Maha: One more thing along the same line, our taking a lot for granted about the family, and the family environment. Back in 1991 I did a lot of interviews with people living in the Ouzai area. The things I saw were unbelievable, sometimes I used to go back home and cry. You see the real price of the war. There was a mother living in a small room full of rats, she had a handicapped child and her husband was dead. You are placed face-to-face with the horrors of the war. Sometimes I think we didn't learn anything from the war. This frightens me a lot, especially when I think of what we're leaving for our children.

Now I'm thinking, back when I was talking about the issue of being a woman and working, one of the differences between here and abroad is that even though I respect women's choice to work or not to work, to have children or not, I respect the choice other people make, it's their life. But sometimes people do not respect my choice, the amount of time I have devoted to my work and my professional life. Somehow the expectations here from a woman are that work is only a transitional period until I find a husband. For me, it is not a transitional period, work is part of me. Just as I have two legs and two arms, so I work, and the work I'm doing is part of me, part of how I express myself, how I think and live my life. Even when I get married that's not going to change. Of course my priorities will change, I will rearrange my priorities, one has to be flexible. But work is part of me, I love it.

Recorded and transcribed by Dania Sinno

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