

ICOMOS Heritage Alert: Beirut Grain Silos

Calling for the reversal of the demolition decision and for the preservation of the Beirut Grain Silos

Press release

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On 4 August 2020, one of the biggest non-nuclear explosions in history took place in Beirut harbour, generating a blast wave which ripped through the capital. The explosion killed more than 220 persons, leaving a further 6000 injured and 300 000 homeless. In the news coverage, the crumbling grain silos that had absorbed the blast were to become the emblematic image of an event that shook not only Lebanon but the entire world.

An example of brutalist architecture, the monolithic structure and minimalist construction of the Beirut Grain Silos showcases the bare building materials and structural elements. The Beirut Grain Silos were the largest in the Middle East and a prominent architectural landmark on the waterfront. A symbol of modernist architecture in the city, which at the time of the silo's construction was spreading throughout the Arab world and the region.

The Grain Silos have presided over Beirut's port for 50 years and held much of Lebanon's grain. The building also bore witness to the atrocities of the civil war when clashes took place in areas adjacent to the harbour. Today, nearly 90% of the buildings that existed at the time of the Lebanese war have been erased. Located less than 85 meters from the epicentre of the 2020 blast, the silos acted as a shield for the western part of the city and saved thousands of lives and buildings.

18 months after the explosion, on 18 March 2022, the Lebanese Ministry of Culture, issued decree No. 49/2022 to include the Beirut Grain Silos in the general inventory of heritage buildings, thus preventing any action that would alter their current condition. However, on 14 April 2022, the Lebanese Government Cabinet decided to demolish the silos and instead to erect a new monument to commemorate the blast victims. This intensified the anger of the families of the victims and the Lebanese people who wished to preserve the silos as a memorial to the 4 August tragedy. All media outlets (newspapers, TV stations) carried the news, yet no information on the decree was released in the Official Journal of the State to date.

Today, their possible demolition reveals a society torn between amnesia and the need to preserve this landmark, as a symbol of this tragedy which has left an indelible mark in the nation's psyche. The silos, and all the heritage buildings that were affected by the blast, are the visual representatives of this collective memory, that is now a part of the Lebanese nation's history. Demolishing the silos, removing this landmark, and creating a physical void, will give the impression of an absence of space and only serve to enhance psychological amnesia. The significance of this structure lies in what it symbolizes through its history.

ICOMOS fully supports the position expressed by ICOMOS Lebanon, among others, considering the local, national and international significance of the Beirut Grain Silos, and their value as a monument of Modern architecture and engineering ingenuity, and most importantly as a place of memory linked to the 2020 explosion. Preserving the building in its current condition, represents a rare opportunity to create new shared heritage values in the future urban development of the Beirut port area. ICOMOS therefore joins the calls for the preservation, consolidation and maintenance of the Beirut Grain Silos, and strongly recommends that the Lebanese government reverses its current decisions and officially legally registers them as a protected national historic building, including the designation of a surrounding buffer zone.

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