

## Giving voice to near-forgotten Beirutis

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BEIRUT: It is not unusual to hear long-time residents of Beirut complain about how the city is not the same, about how much life here has changed for the worse in recent decades.

Some of the whinging about how life used to be much simpler, and better, may be attributed to the weight of popular nostalgia for the olden days – accentuated in the Beirut experience thanks to the destruction wrought by the Civil War. Yet, as the bulldozers of unfettered urban development have accelerated their work in recent years, it's easy to see that such sentiments don't necessarily spring from fantasies about the city's pre-Civil War golden age.

While many express great regret at the razing of traditional houses and other buildings, it isn't hard to forget that Beirut's heritage is comprised of people even more than it is tasteful architecture. As old Beirut is devoured by new capital, it can be easy to forget that some Beirutis do perpetuate their traditions in the

shadow of all the developers.

Architecture student Diane Mehanna, 21, businesswoman Marielle Khayat, 22, and photographer Paul Gorra, 23, have teamed up to shine some light on the life stories of Beirut's small-time traders and craftsmen – who never left Beirut and still struggle to continue their work.

Written in English and French, “Losing Touch: Beyrouth des Petits Metiers” provides a platform upon which Beirut craftsmen share their experiences and fears of being forgotten.

Tania Mehanna, the general manager of Tamyras publishers, told The Daily Star her team chose to publish the work in two languages in order to “represent Lebanon’s multiple identities.”

Gorra said he and his colleagues wanted to “establish a dialogue between the generations.” At a recent book-signing event, the three young collaborators explained how they were eager to trigger greater interest in the forgotten Beirutis they document.

“Losing Touch” combines the authors’ depictions of their encounters with their subjects with photos of the craftsmen and maps that locate their businesses around the city. The object is to demonstrate that these Beirutis still have a voice and are still active members of the city’s boisterous cultural landscape.

Emotion strained their voices as Khayat and Mehanna explained how they were touched with the artisans’ humility, and how some craftsmen were moved to tears that the three young Lebanese were interested in their experiences. “For them,” said Khayat, “Beirut is paradise.”

Common points emerge among all the book’s informants. All their work, they say, springs from passion. Though their jobs are no longer necessarily self-sustaining, financially speaking, they refuse to give up their businesses because they want to carry on the heritage bestowed upon them by previous generations.

In addition to portraying these craftsmen in their own environment, the authors would like the “Losing Touch” project to shake things up for their subjects.

All the profits from the book will be donated to the Lebanese NGO AEP (“Association d’Entraide Professionnelle”). Founded in 1984, this organization helps provide microcredit for small enterprises, enabling them to develop their businesses. AEP’s motto is “human solidarity,” something apparently shared by the authors.

Among the stories “Losing Touch” relates is that of “Ammo Gerge” (aka George Haddad), a barber whose shop is located on Gemmayzeh’s Sainte Famille Street. Haddad explained to the authors how his hairdressing career began when

he was only 10 at the Hotel Normandy in the quarter of Zeitouneh (both now extinct). Like a grandfather sharing tales of his past with his children's children, Haddad "proudly recounts the years of work that allowed him in 1965 to open his present 'salon.'"

Talking about old Beirut means that – at some point – the craftsmen will inevitably criticize aspects of contemporary society. For Ammo Gerge, the authors say, the hairstyles of today's youngsters make them look like they have "artichokes on their heads."

Oyster vendor Kamel Khalifeh demanded to know "Why don't people eat oysters as much as before?" When he started his business, he tells the authors, "people were less busy and more generous."

"Losing Touch: Beyrouth des Petits Metiers" is published by Tamyras Publishing House. For more information visit their website: [www.tamyras.com](http://www.tamyras.com).

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