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Friends of Fondren Graduate Research Award  
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Application Essay  

As part of my graduate coursework in art history, I took Professor Shirine Hamadeh's seminar “Middle Eastern Cities-- Space, Modernity, and Memory (1840-1945).” The class examined the modernization of urban areas across the Middle East at the end of the Ottoman Empire. One of my goals in my first year as a PhD student was to explore topics and time periods of art history that I had not had the opportunity to delve into before. Professor Hamadeh's seminar gave me a chance to do just that, and thanks to the extensive collection and helpful librarians at Fondren Library, I was able to undertake a research project that I would have never been able to realize without the resources available at Rice University.

My interest in architectural history and proficiency in French led me to concentrate my research on domestic architecture in Beirut. Ultimately, I focused my study on central-hall houses that were built in the last thirty years of Ottoman rule over the city (1890-1920). I began my research by gathering books in Fondren's considerable collection on Lebanese architecture, which contains everything from an early work Architecture in Lebanon: the Lebanese house during the 18th and 19th centuries by Friedrich Ragette to books from a recent series on Beirut's history, Beiruter Texte und Studien. From there, I used the collection of the Arab Image Foundation to cull photographs of central-hall houses by browsing images of Beirut at http://www.fai.org.lb/Home.aspx.

Using Zotero to keep track of my citations, I followed Jet Prendeville's research guide for art history available through the Fondren website to conduct a comprehensive search for articles and dissertations that pertained to my study. WorldCat allowed me to order books in French including three texts that were crucial to determining the direction of my paper: La maison beyrouthine aux trois arcs : une architecture bourgeoise du Levant; Beyrouth, notre mémoire: promenade guidée à travers la collection de cartes postales de Fouad Debbas; and Des photographes à Beyrouth, 1840-1918. The ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database allowed me to access recent dissertations by Toufoul Abou-Hodeib and Christine Beth Lindner. Their research on women in late-Ottoman Beirut helped me understand that the development of domestic architecture at that time was intimately tied to the women who lived in the homes, a realization that profoundly influenced my thesis. Art Full Text and JStor also proved to be useful databases for finding articles, and thanks to Zotero, I was easily able to format all of my citations according to the Chicago Manual of Style to create my bibliography.

The research tools available through Fondren allowed me to assemble a thorough historiography of the central-hall house. In juxtaposing what scholars have written about the houses with the photographs taken of their interiors, I realized that the images ask us to reconsider the design and function of the signature elements of central-hall houses, namely the triple arched window, plan of the central hall, and red tile roof. Based on photographic evidence, I saw that upper-class women were a touch point for changes and conversations taking place in the last thirty years of Ottoman rule in Beirut. New urban homes, educational opportunities, access to infrastructure, and conspicuous consumerism were a part of the lived reality of these women's day-to-day existence. By taking these socio-cultural factors into account, I took another look at iconic features of the central-hall house in light of considerations of space, place, and gender in the early stages of modernization in Beirut. I hope that my research and paper will tell a new story about this special form of Beiruti homes and the people who lived there.