Hedonistic Urbanism: The Beirut Post-War Experience

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INTRODUCTION

The culture of Beirut has evolved under the influence of many different civilizations, such as the Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Ottoman Turks, and French. The ruins of downtown Beirut have been found to contain seven civilizations [1]. Much of the urban planning is super-imposed on top of each other; whereas, other cultures (cities), while advancing from one civilization to another, either builds upon, or erases and replaces its urban fabric by physically taking over the past. Here in Beirut, memories of each civilization co-exist attempting to find an intrinsic value (good) in the melting-pot of cultures that have inhabited its land.

Throughout history, Beirut was often called the *Paris of the Middle East*. If not for the strong military presence, the ubiquitous religious iconography, and the occasional outbreak of civil war, the analogy would still hold true, especially since the cultural vibe is still very strong. On the surface, Beirut is the "*party capital of the of the Arab world*," but taking a longer, more thoughtful look, the city has multicultural depth (literally and figuratively/experientially) surviving ethnic migration and unfortunate cleansing, with a strong desire for peace and assimilation (or acceptance).

Building upon its rich culture, the conglomeration of Beirut is experiencing a building boom today that has been going on for five decades, with dramatic acceleration in the last twenty years. It is a boom that has no precedent and knows little pause. Terrorist attacks, religious differences, genocide, border challenges, political instability, financial crisis: all events that in the first decade of the 21st century were (normally) held responsible for provoking global crisis in the rest of the world have not as yet affected the Beirut building carnage. This makes Beirut a unique case study: accept and move on to create a civil and cultured society. Not even civil war managed to stop this desire for civility and the need for a pleasurable life.

After traveling throughout Lebanon last May, I was struck by the fast-paced building construction Beirut is now facing and how it's affecting the city's urban fabric. To me, hedonism as an ethical philosophy can and should be

used to analyze Beirut's situation because aspects of its philosophical questions and human values are evident in the city's laws, social conventions, urban, and public policies. This research brings together modern and historical buildings and public spaces as case studies; it also builds upon theoretical threads that have been studied by others, such as Esther Charlesworth (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology), Hashim Sarkis (Harvard), Saskia Sassen (Columbia), Torbjorn Tannsjo (Stockholm), Stephen Kite (Cardiff), and Wendy Pullman (Cambridge).

Here the new motto of civility is captured as: "*Beirut: Ancient city of the Future*".[2] This motto is based on a conceptual model that perceives hedonistic urbanism as an object to be historicized and therein transformed in an endless temporal continuum. In hedonist urbanism, for example, driving is fun. Hedonist urbanism has no problem with a conglomeration of more than two million cars with no traffic lights, like Beirut's heavily populated central business district[3], resulting in a hodge-podge of acceptance.

There have been several experimental projects since 1993 as part of the recuperation of (war-damaged) post–civil war Beirut that recognizes its layered multi-ethnic past and caters to a holistic hedonistic lifestyle. Whereas after fifteen years of civil war the populace has a built-in need for escapism and indulgence: a need not only to create beautiful public spaces and cultural buildings to enjoy during the daylight, but also at night, a lifestyle highlighted by extravagant dining, decadent drinking, and all-night partying.

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CASE STUDIES
Solidère is widely credited as the most important force behind Beirut's reemergence, in recent years, as a bustling urban destination with a chance to earn back its ancient title of *Paris of the Middle East*. Solidère›s main functions are the supervision of the government-authorized reconstruction plan, financing and developing the infrastructure, new construction and rehabilitation of war-torn structures, urban landscaping, and the management of property.[4] Its thirty-year Master Plan (1994–2024) focuses on reconstructing Beirut as a global tourist commercial center, replete with beautifully restored churches and mosques, gardens, and Roman ruins.

Many of the Solidère's projects are controversial for being insensitive to Beirut's multicultural past by not only bringing in a branded, or generic global architectural aesthetic, but also benefiting from it financially. "It's rare to have a public space since everything is private in this country," said Bassam Lahoud an architect and professor at Lebanese American University. "There's a concept here that land means money and investment. We don't think about the public".[5]

CS_01: ZAITUNAY BAY
One project that does allow for public space by creating an urban promenade is Zaitunay Bay design by New York–based Steven Holl Architects. Located in the heart of Downtown Beirut, the site for the new Beirut Marina extends the existing Corniche along the seashore into a series of overlapping platforms. The Corniche is inflated to create an 'urban beach,' with

Figure 1: Traffic in Beirut's Central Business District

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levels subtly articulated to provide outdoor spaces with public areas for art-work. The concept takes its shape from strata and layers in forking vectors. Like the ancient beach that was once the site, the planar lapping waves of the sea inspire striated spaces in horizontal layers, as distinct from vertical objects. The horizontal and the planar become a geometric force shaping the new harbor spaces. The form allows a striated organization of public and private spaces, which includes apartments, yacht club, public facilities, har-bormaster, restaurants, and specialty stores.[6]

CS_02: B018

Designed by locally based Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury, "B018" is a nightclub known for its unusual music and evocative atmosphere. The proj-ect builds upon an urban scar left from the war with a design that is a clear reflection of both Beirut's nightlife and cultural history.

The site for B018 is near the port of Beirut. The highway that borders it is the main northern access to the city. Across the highway is a densely pop-ulated urban living and working area. It was a "safe-haven" refugee camp in the 1920s for Armenians and represented hope for a displaced popu-lation. During the French colonization, this was the quarantine zone for the port. Later by 1975, it became home to war refugees—about 20,000 Palestinians, Kurds, and southern Lebanese

Figure 3: Palestinian refugees in the La Quarantaine refugee camp, Beirut, Lebanon, where several hundred Palestinian civilians were executed by Lebanon's Right wing Phalangist militia during the civil war.

In January 1976, local militia-men launched a radical attack that com-pletely wiped out the area. The slums were demolished along with the kilo-meter-long bordering wall that isolated the zone from the city. More than twenty years later, the scars of war are still perceptible through the dispar-ity between the scarce urban fabric of the area and the densely populated neighborhoods located across the highway that borders the zone.

Figure 2: Solidère's Zaitunay Bay by Steven Holl

Figure 3: Palestinian refugees in the La Quarantaine refugee camp, Beirut, Lebanon, where several hundred Palestinian civilians were executed by Lebanon's Right wing Phalangist militia during the civil war.

Figure 4: © Françoise Demulder, 1976. This woman is begging for her husband's life. The photo won the World Press Photo award that year, and marked the first time a woman was honored with the top prize.

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The site witnessed atrocious scenes of persecution and massacre, even to the point of attempted ethnic cleansing.[3] During this time the only architectural element visible from the road was a wall with a long, narrow hole through which the militia snipers could shoot the passersby.

The macabre history of the location is incorporated into the club's general concept. B018 is almost invisible to the world outside, until the late hours of the night when it comes to life and its articulated roof structure constructed in heavy metal retracts hydraulically, exposing the club to the world above and revealing the cityscape as an urban backdrop to the patrons below. A giant distorted mirror over the bar rises and stops at a 50-degree angle to reflect the city and the cars of the freeway into the club (Figures 5 and 6) During the daytime, B018 appears more like a quiet memorial or a tomb of remembrance, while at night it becomes a nocturnal emission of activity and playfulness. It is also one of many gay-friendly establishments—in a country

Figure 5: B018 nightclub after hours © Khoury

Figure 6: B018 nightclub at opening (left) and dusk

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where homosexuality is against the law. While homosexual activity (technically, sexual relations that officials deem "unnatural") is illegal in Lebanon, as in most of the Arab world, Beirut's vitality as a culturally enriched Mediterranean capital of night life has fueled a flourishing gay scene—albeit one where men can be nervous about public displays of affection walking the streets during the day, but at night for many subcultures, another set of rules seems to exist. But even more than the partying, Beirut represents a different Middle East: the only place in the region where they can openly enjoy a social life in the public realm denied to them in their homeland.

"What's interesting is that the Arab areas that were once controlled by the French, like Lebanon, are the ones with laws against homosexuality, because the French felt comfortable talking about sex," the editor of the 2007 book *Gay Travels in the Muslim World*, Michael Luongo said, "while the areas controlled by the British never have those laws because they didn't talk about sex. As a result, flowing from that French history is a relative familiarity with homosexuality in places like Lebanon. You have more gay life where the laws exist against it."[8] For many, Beirut means freedom above the law. There is an interesting hedonistic dichotomy between day night; right/ wrong; pleasure/pain; public/ private; and ecological/well-being.

CS_03: THE LOST ROOM PROJECT

Although it is a contested city, Beirut encapsulates many places, which are filled with memories and nostalgia. Studio Beirut's, *The Lost Room Project* acts as a multi-media memorial, highlighting city-specific memories and personal narratives of random Beirut citizens.[9] As shown here in Figure 7, 'under the bridge downtown' is the site for political sit-ins and public discourse. It is also the site of the lost memory of sweet handholding and kissing in the backseats of a cinema that used to exist there in the pre-war and pre-Solidère days. Monsieur Karam, sitting in a plastic chair outside his tent under the bridge, reconstructed a spatial map of nostalgia for (us) as he pointed toward burnt, shelled, or non-existent buildings. These sweet moments are lost in a city that no longer exists except in his mind, but has now been transformed to what he coins "the pornographic space of shame."[10]

In 2006, this same space was used for a massive sit-in with opposition supporters demanding the current government step down to make way for a more representative national unity government. This massive demonstration was followed nine days later with an even bigger show of popular force that, according to veteran journalist Robert Fisk, grew to two million people, a surreal number considering that Lebanon›s population is just over four million.[11] The sit-in continued for four consecutive months in an impressive tent-city with a backdrop of Solidère's version of downtown Beirut, a juxtaposition that perfectly exemplifies the dichotomy of Lebanese society.

Figure 7: Site today as memorial during the day

Figure 8: The "Pornographic Space of Shame"

CS_04: SUBVERSIVE POSTERS

The activist group, Abrand, has sought to challenge the repackaging of Lebanese heritage and tradition, through subversive posters, which mock the process of global branding. One image shows the familiar Beirut Corniche promenade, which serves as a public space for evening walks, exercise, and socializing, transformed into an elite exclusive setting. Rather than a street vendor selling cheap *kaake* (a bread snack) from his three-wheeled wooden cart, instead it was covered with a pristine white table-cloth, adorned with vintage wines and spirits and surrounded by Lebanese elegantly dressed in formal evening attire. The criticism is implicitly aimed toward the gentrification of Lebanese public space. A second poster displays a traditional Lebanese dish of stuffed aubergine '*koussa mehchi*,' transformed and masqueraded as Japanese Sushi, complete with chop-sticks, carved vegetables, and a wooden serving dish. This poster is a veiled warning against Lebanon losing its very soul, identity, and cultural unique-ness, in its desire to commoditize and market its heritage.[12]

Beirut's historic dynamism is invariably born out of Lebanon's troubled national imagining. Pressing contemporary issues, such as the resolution and celebration of social pluralism and multiculturalism, as well as, acting as a safe-haven and mountain refuge for religious minorities, such as, Druze, Shi'a, and Maronites, has defined Beirut. The city has worn many hats throughout its life from being a republic of tribes and villages to becoming a fusion of the Arab East and the Christian West; then growing into a cos-mopolitan mercantile power-sharing enclave. The dichotomies and visions appear as endless and complex as the Lebanese experience itself. Certainly it helps explain the ambiguous and contested place downtown Beirut has always held in the collective understanding. The case studies analyzed clearly point to dichotomies (contradictions) within how societies that live in a divided city, like Beirut, provide the basis for alternative possibilities for the construction of a new ethics and aesthetics of hedonistic urbanism. ◆

ENDNOTES

1. Eric Verdeil, Plans for an Unplanned City: Beirut (1950–2000)

2. 'Beirut: Ancient City of the future' is a motto used in Solidère's promotional literature.

3. See webpage: http://www.theplan.it/J/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2077%3Abeirut-urbanistica-edonista&lang=en

4. Yasser Elsheshtawy. *The Evolving Arab City: Tradition, Modernity and Urban Development*. New York: Routledge, 2008, pp. 314.

5. Interview at LAU regarding recent architecture develop-ments in Beirut.

6. See webpage: http://www.stevenholl.com/project-detail.php?type=construction&id=34

7. See webpage: http://www.archdaily.com/179261/flashback-b-018-bernard-khoury-architects/

8. Michael Luongo, Gay Travels in the Muslim World, London: Harrington Park Press, 2007.

9. See webpage: http://studiobeirut.org/thelostroom/

10. See webpage: http://www.partizanpublik.nl/thelostroom/

11. See webpage: http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/apr/13/middleeastthemedia.lebanon

12. See webpage: http://www.sharebeirut.net/en/about