Post-war Beirut: Interventions for Public and Private Spaces

Historically, Beirut is a paradigm of a city, where layers of history literally exist on top of each other. The location of the main anchor points of the city dates back to Phoenician or even Canaanite times. Some of the main elements of the Roman city are still present in the urban fabric, most prominent being the Roman baths, located just below the Ottoman 'Grand Serail', next to French Mandate buildings and houses from the pre-war independence era,.....Excavations in the downtown area have unearthed layers from 7-different cultures, including Phoenician, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Crusader and Ottoman Empire... gathering 2000 years of urbanism within a few meters of each other.

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Lebanon today is at a fateful crossroad in its eventful sociocultural and political history. At the risk of some oversimplification it remains ***adrift*** because of it is imperiled by a set of overwhelming predicaments and unsettling transformations....(Beirut) is a living and vivid example of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1995), where the obsession with appearance and image-making become forms of false consciousness and public distraction. (Khalaf: 2012, *Lebanon Adrift*, prologue, pp. 13, 15)

Beirut has become a branded city of constant transformation involving some inevitable distortion of reality as *branding* rarely tells the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Here: Beirut becomes a city that's reality is understood as a blurring of fiction and nonfiction building upon its memory of being called the *Jewel of the Levant* and the *Crossroads of Civiliation.* After the Second World War, Lebanon gained independence from France and made Beirut it's capital in 1943. The city thrived, and as such, became a major centre in the Middle East for culture and business–the capital of relaxation, excellent cuisine, political debate and easy living with a thriving middle class. It was during this period that it became known as the European *Gateway to the Middle East.*

It soon also became a top tourist destination for many Europeans and wealthy Arabs because of its diverse cosmopolitan culture, food, high fashion and large multi-ethnic population of intelligentsia. Beirut then became referred to as the

Paris of the Middle East. Just before the Lebanese Civil Wars spanning 1975–1990, the country experienced a long period of relative calm and renowned prosperity, driven by tourism, agriculture, commerce, and banking. because of its

financial power, neutrality, and diversity, Lebanon was also known in its heyday as the *Switzerland of the Orient*. Many Lebanese cherish remembrances of the pre-war era when their country's prominence as the Middle East's banking center and more precisely the presence of a mountainous terrain led the French poet and historian, Alphonse de Lamartine to call Beirut the *Switzerland of the East,*[1] long before the Lebanese Secrecy Law was promulgated.

> At the time, this law constituted a major achievement towards increasing confidence in the Lebanese banking system, while encouraging foreign capital to choose Lebanon as a refuge. Moreover, it has been one of the major factors that have been contributing toward the growth of the banking sector in Lebanon, and making Lebanon a major financial and monetary center in the Middle East. (Dr. Walid Abdulrahim, Professor of Law, Lebanese University)

At the end of the civil war in 1990, there were extensive efforts to revive the economy and rebuild national infrastructure. The war, however, had changed the demographics of the city, Beirut's once mixed religious and ethnic neighborhoods have became increasingly divided and hundreds of thousands of people left the country. Today, the legacy of the civil wars still mars Lebanon's divisive and turbulent politics, but the city itself, it seems, has moved on.

Beirut's endless capacity for reinvention and transformation is best observed in its city center. This pivotal district has known as many public spaces and an urban forms as it has historic lives. The medieval bourj for one, the Ottoman provincial port another, and then, the French colonial 'Places des Canons', and lastly the independent 'Martyrs' Square' (Sahat al-Shuhada), which today has been succeeded by an ultra-modern global cityscape of alterity. Therefore, Beirut has now been re-branded as "*the Ancient City of the Future.*"[2] This new futuristic landscape has become both a symbol of Lebanon's national recovery and the source of its post-war critique as its re-birth as a *city of culture*: one among its many masks worn through its turbulent history.

Figure 1: Postcard showing Maytr's Square as an example of a cosmopolitan city with low-scale buildings with views to the sea.

Figure 2: Postcard showing Beirut's similarity to Paris. and its pedestrian oriented streets.

Perhaps no city has been more absorbed by a "loss" of memory, and no place more concerned with its retrieval, than has the city of Beirut. This city....is only now beginning to deal with the conflicts aftermath. Part of the post-war "restoration" process has been physical---the city being rebuild to recoup the country's economy at the very least. The matter of psychic restoration, however, has been another matter. (Becherer, 2006)

INTERVENTIONS FOR PUBLIC + PRIVATE SPACES

The work of Lebanese artist Nada Sehnaoui tackles the contested issue of public space in post-conflict urban environments with a meditative aesthetic that engages forms of repetition. The artist work communicates directly to the audience by essentially turning public spaces in cities, into free-meeting spots for people. Sehnaoui often fills vacant lots in the downtown area of Beirut with hundreds of repeated items, and encourages viewers to reflect on how the space is being, and has been, used through their engagement with these often idiosyncratic objects.

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In her installation Haven't 15 Years of Hiding in the Toilets Been Enough? She installed 600 toilets in downtown Beirut in memory of the 15-year long Lebanese war, a time when people used to hide from bombs and shrapnel in their bathrooms. She invites residents of the city to sit on the toilets, rest their feet and interact.[3] During the daytime, the installation acts as a public park using actual toilets as street furniture organized into a street grid; whereas at night, it becomes a place of demonstration and debate.

Sehnaoui's name has been linked to art installations that address the public's memory and collective amnesia pertaining to the Lebanese wars. Her work embodies the desire to build a nation and reflects the main theme on the minds of a Lebanese inhabitants. Her work is motivated by a positive and individual desire. She wants to implicitly tell the public: we must get to a place where our city's public space is a social collector open and accessible to all rather than a battlefield.[4]

Figure 3: Haven't 15-years of hiding in the toilets Been Enough? Public intervention spanning 4-months in downtown Beirut by Lebanese artist Nada Sehnaoui. Installed in April 2008.

The resulting work in the last two decades seems unable to avoid attracting a certain voyeurism in its urban public and private spaces. In 1991, Bernard Khoury proposed to turn the process of demolition of war-damaged buildings in Beirut's City Center into a collective architectural experiment. His proposed scenario

"Evolving scars" was, first of all, a political act in opposition to the adopted "Western" conventional urban planning methods.[5] The project consists of:

> a temporary transparent skin that is implemented around the outer periphery of a ruin and a "memory collector" that deploys itself within the perimeter of the ruin while collecting data. The intensity of collecting information is translated by the gradual demolition of the existing edifice. The "remains" of the ruin are collected and contained within the transparent peripheral membrane. The method and rate of demolition becomes a consequence of the intensity of collecting information. The process ends with the complete demolition of the ruin, the physical saturation of the transparent peripheral membrane and the saturation of the memory collector. The proposed concept did not project the city into a hypothetical future, nor did it propose the erection of physical structures in the city. "Evolving Scars" was instead, an attempt to translate the demolition of buildings into an ephemeral architectural act. (Khoury: 1991, architect's project statement)

Just after the Israeli-Hezbollah 34-day war referred to in Lebanon as the July Wars in 2006 a series of protests began in December. After a period of calm and re-building, works like Khoury's *Evolving Scars* and Sehnaoui's *Haven't 15-years in the Toilets Been Enough?* only begins to scratch the surface of Beirutis plight, but the ability of citizen's need and freedom to express their civil liberties bears new meaning to a democratic state as Lebanon continues to survive.

One of the most publicized anti-government rallies in Beirut during this time was held in the same urban public space as Sehnaoui's toilets once sat. Multi-ethnic group of citizens grouped together 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 up to 2 million people, a surreal number considering that Lebanon's population is just over four million. The sit-in continued for four consecutive months in an impressive tent city with a backdrop of the developer's--Solidère--version of downtown Beirut, a juxtaposition that perfectly exemplifies the dichotomy of Lebanese society.

CONCLUSION

The study of urban public and private space provides a powerful physical portal into the complex social and political issues that make up Beirut today. My hope is that an investigation of post-war interventions will have the potential to provide important research on how specific spaces have been and are being used, providing insights on how new spaces might be designed be multicultural spaces ameliorate divisions. A bold goal for Lebanon, but one informed by the fact that, although public space is contested, it is also shared.

ENDNOTES

1. Beirut, like many other capital cities acquired a multitude range of unofficial names, many sources are unknown like *Paris of the Middle East*, while others like *Switzerland of the East* was given by the poet Lamartine as quoted by the authors of *La Revue Phenicienne* in 1919. Later a guide from the 1930's predicted the future of Beirut as the *Nice of the Levant* as an image inspired by high society occupying the salons, impressing tourists with their elegance and multi-lingual abilities. Lebanon was also a place that offered the visitor plenty of desired resources to indulge in during their stay (Kassir, 2003).

2. Ancient City of the Future is the nomenclature given by Solidere the development company primarily responsible for the reconstruction of Beirut's Central District since the civil wars ended in 1990. The master plan's aim was to re-create Beirut's glory days and show the world that its embracing its future while looking at its past.

3. During an interview with *Art Forum*, Nada Sehnaoui speaks about her intervention as *bringing order to chaos.* Description of piece from press release as well as images. For a time-lapse video see website: www.nadasehnaoui.com.

4. Ibid.