

Miscellaneous City: Chaos and Coherence in Beirut

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“What is Beirut today?... A monstrous pile of miscellaneous architecture.”

L'Orient, 1954 cited in (Kassir, 2011: 409)

Beirut, along with Cairo and Damascus, has served as one of the originating sites of the modern Arab identity (Kassir, 2011). Beirut stands out in its relative youth and location on the threshold of two seemingly “conflicting civilisations”. Let us not be mistaken, Cairo and Damascus were and are larger and richer but, with the advent of the steamship, Beirut as a city on the sea served as the interface between the industries and knowledges of the Greater Mediterranean. In this, Beirut – led by the primarily Maronite Lebanese elite/interpreter class, but also with a fair share of wealthy Sunni – became one of the epicentres of Arab media, both in print and wireless, through which formations of Beirut, Levantine and Arab modernities sprung. Beirut was at the forefront of modern Arab creations, especially during the Nahda, a period of modern Arab renaissance influenced by European enlightenment with all its contradictions, problematics and progressivisms (Kassir, 2011). These periods of ‘modernity’ are not viewed through rosy nostalgia, but rather as indicative of the primary inclusions in the city’s written history. This history is of iterating, dominating hegemonies – from the Ottomans, to the French, to the post-colonial bourgeoisie – each seeking to impose a vision on the space. Somehow, however, the city resisted these unifying visions.

In odd derision and perhaps tragic irony, L'Orient, one of Lebanon’s leading French dailies at the time, frustratedly decried Beirut as incoherent. This disapproval was born from an annoyance at Beirut’s lack of order and an expectation of a unified identity. Beirut today persists as a pile of miscellany, one further exacerbated by the sectarian civil war.

Although incoherent in the eyes of the L'Orient author, Beirut’s architecture could also be interpreted as the product of manifold and contradictory experimentations with modernity and processes of local indigenisation: the

“creative synthesis of Western imported materials and local know how” (Saliba, 2004: 27). For example, the adaption of the now famous red Marseille tiles, a trend that has continued with the “malleability of concrete... appropriated... as a ‘new vernacular’ traditional, fostering the hybridisation of architectural form and the proliferation of eclectic ornamentation” (ibid: 32). This “creative synthesis” made Beirut unique in comparison to other colonial cities in that there was “no clear demarcation between the European and the Arab city – the opposite case to Algiers, Tunis, or indeed Cairo” (Kassir, 2011: 129). Modernities here were superimposed. The old fabric presented itself as malleable to the new requirements, leading to an orderless mishmash.

Beirut, then, is familiar with the tumultuousness of modernity, what Marshall Berman seminally describes as being

an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are... It is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish.

(Berman, 2010: 15)

In a similar vein, Samir Kassir in his Beirut biography described the advent of the first experimentations of modernity in the city as a period of “uneasy coincidence, typical of an era of transition, of what still existed with what was beginning to come into being” (Kassir, 2011: 212). We see such creative syntheses, paradoxical unities and uneasy coincidences today, as Beirut is mired in multiple development models, miscellaneous architecture and fractured neighbourhoods. This calls for an extension of Kassir’s and Berman’s observation not only as an uneasy and paradoxical

occurrence historically – a tussle between the traditional and the modern – but one that is also current and specialised in the geography of the city. In this paper, we offer a reflection on Beirut’s long history of experimentations in unifying, modernist visions of space and identity, and of the multiple, miscellaneous and juxtaposing formations that have been omitted by the written histories of Beirut. Finally, following Saliba’s observation of Beirut’s creative synthesis, we speculate on opportunities of appropriation and encounter that contemporary Beirut affords.

The Building of Identity

There have been multiple iterations of Beirut’s urban history as each major political power has sought to impose itself on this layered space. The Ottomans were the first to cut through the organic souk fabric in the guise of modernisation by placing central axes running through the core. This was largely for the purposes of circulation, but also for the “upgrading of public amenities following the rules of hygiene and embellishment set by Istanbul” (Saliba, 2004: 30). This was later expanded and placed within a more comprehensive macro-scale network of the French Mandate. Indeed, during “the whole of the first decade of the Mandate, Beirut [was]... an immense building site” of projects both private and public in nature (Kassir, 2011: 268).

The latest attempt in the running thread of unifying building projects is that of Solidere. This quasi-autonomous, private cum public, for-profit developer instrument is tasked with the rehabilitation and reconstruction of downtown Beirut with full planning provision over the space. Although an overlapping of private and public sectors is not new in the Lebanese political landscape, the current scale at which private capital aims to reconstruct Beirut is unprecedented. The mechanism has origins in the private funding vehicles devised by the French to procure Levantine infrastructure. This was eventually replicated by the mercantilist, laissez faire policies of Bishara al-Khuri and Camille Chamoun that led to the Lebanese miracle in the mid-twentieth century



Top
Solidere Master Plan. A new scale of development, replicating the dense souk patterns in certain spaces, but acquiring a larger grain northwards, and especially on the newly reclaimed land. (© Solidere.)

Bottom
Beirut in 1841 indicating the dense pattern of souks in “Downtown” Beirut, before fractures by wide thoroughfares implemented by the Ottoman Empire and French Mandate. (Davie, 1987)

(Kassir, 2011) and the rule of the dynastic business families of each sectarian group. The latter controlled much of Beirut’s politics and even factionalist wars. As Kassir remarks, so “closely were business interests interlocked with those of the public sphere that the question of the proper relationship between the private sector and city planning did not even arise” (ibid: 412).

It would also be a mistake to label Solidere simply as a “Western” intervention, since the scope and style reminds more of Dubai and new-Istanbul than anything else. Crucially, Rafic Hariri, the initiator and founder of Solidere himself cited his vision for Beirut as closer to the “Hong Kong of the Mediterranean” than the more common “Paris of the East” (Schmid, 2002: 233). Both formations, in and outside downtown Beirut, are part of constant “worldings” (Roy and Ong, 2011), “[c]ontemporary experiments to remedy an urban situation that has been assessed as problematic” (Ong, 2011: 4), where the paragons of development now also lie outside the proverbial “West”. Here then, the considerable investments in religious icons, the Ottoman-scale and styled Sunni mosque, the new bell tower of the Maronite church which seeks to upstage the height of the mosque minaret and the newly renovated central synagogue provide hints of Solidere’s “philanthropy and restoration work” (Ragab, 2011:113; see also Schmid).

The intervention of Solidere is a unique, contextual intervention. In its post-conflict context, the government-linked organisation faced the difficult project not only of reconstructing the war-ravaged downtown, but also by implication, building a spatial manifestation of the post-war Lebanese identity project. War provided the partial condition and the complete excuse for the physical tabula rasa, but the pseudo-governmental Solidere had to contend with the remaining fragments, and the tall structures of history that remained in mental and literary memory of the city. The project required Solidere to contend with the spatial and historical multiple Beiruts, and emerge with a unified undertaking, a narrative of a singular Beirut that would serve in the reconstruction.



Top

A view of the Zaitunay Bay development, juxtaposed by the Prince George Hotel adorned with a “Stop Solidere” sign. Luxury yachts, private pools and international food chains are common place.

Bottom

A declaration of private property upon entering Zaitunay Bay, accompanied by notices of ten activities not allowed in the space.

Top

The newly built, Ottoman-revivalist Blue Mosque inaugurated in 2008, adjacent to the Saint George Maronite Cathedral completed in 1894. Not to be outdone, a new clocktower of similar height is built appended on the latter.

Bottom

Preservation of the Roman ruins near the Grand Serail.

This is what makes the absurdly-scaled Solidere intervention so intriguing; perhaps even hubristic. Its solution however, is unsurprising.

History is a friendly companion to profit and real estate motives. It plays well with polished public relations which have the ability to finance archaeological studies, create tourist walks that easily stitch together multiple histories, and hire superstar architects who hark back to varied times in their aestheticism and facadism (Ragab, 2011; Saliba, 2013). These interventions only serve to legitimise and increase the value of the intervention in the eyes of the state, investors and particular demographics. As Solidere markets Beirut as a city “re-born” from its “layered history” or “an ancient Beirut for the future” it is making a judgement to move beyond, and possibly to ignore, the undercurrents of sectarianism in the fractured weak state and conflicting multiple, sectarian deep state. In Solidere’s renewed vision for downtown Beirut, the physical restoration and presentation of Phoenician and Roman elements seek to create a Lebanese identity from more ancient “depoliticised” identities, ironically the same heritage that led to “Maronite exceptionalism in the late 19th century” (Nagel, 2002: 723; cf. Kassir). This is at the expense of engaging with the current, fractured nature of Beirut (Makdisi, 1996). Solidere deploys strategic



creation of a “usable past’ for citizens of a modern state... whose territory and institutions have emerged from a colonial experience” (Reilly, 2011: 165). This objective of a unified Beirut and Lebanese socio-spatial identity is a difficult project especially since “accept[ing] that Lebanon’s politically charged confessional identities are products of modern history” also means that “attempts to craft state-centered historical representations will exist in tension with the consolidation and assertion of subnational communal identities” (ibid.).

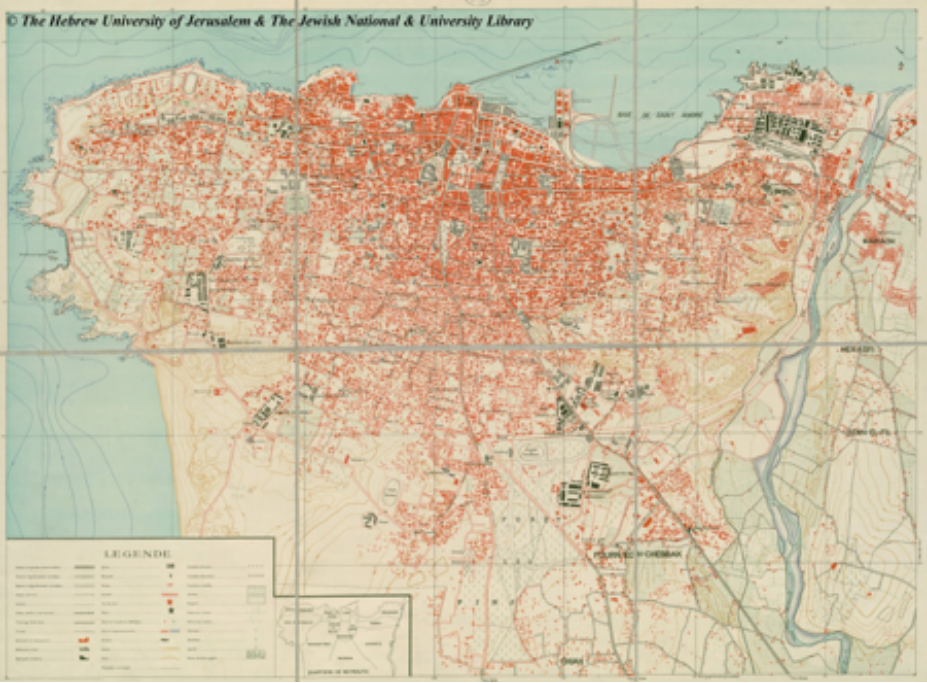
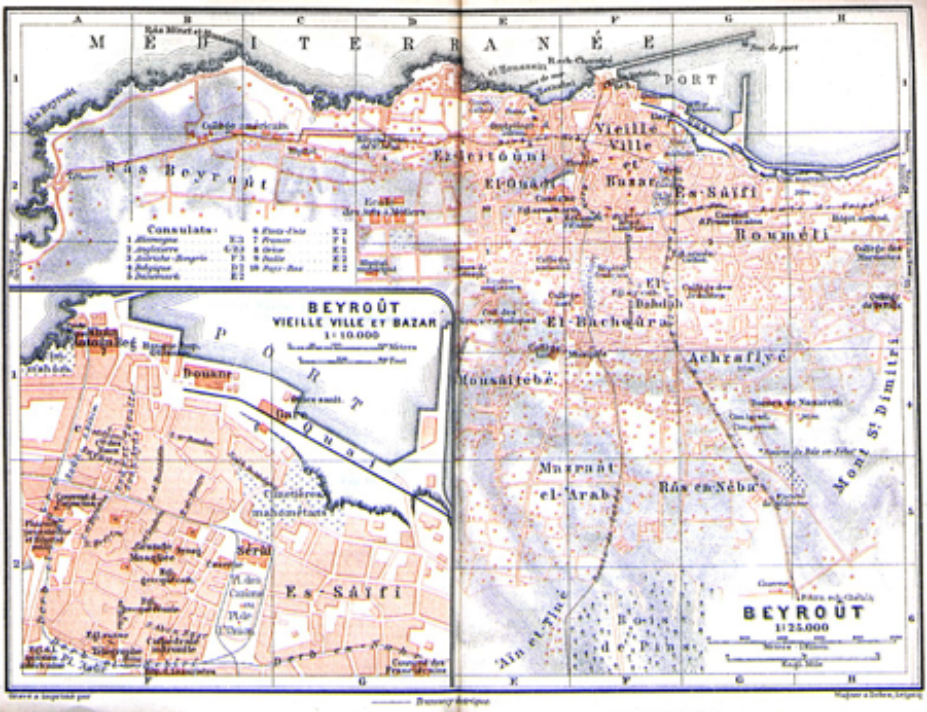
This project immediately presents itself as precarious in the context of suppressing tensions and erecting false facades of usable histories. Again, this is not necessarily a unique event in Beirut’s history. Hatim El Hibri traces back to when the French brought the Napoleonic cadastre system to Beirut, replacing the Ottoman Deftter Khane system of mapping and property management. The Mandate set out to establish and associate each plot with an individual owner, replacing the “musha form of feudal land ownership, wherein villagers were leased land on an annual basis by local leaders... and not with a single owner per se” (El Hibri, 2009: 123). The religio-institutional and collective awqaf system which allowed for the semi-autonomous governance of minorities in the Ottoman government was instead replaced by and indi-



vidual property system. The French also sought to establish the new city centre in the form of the “Beaux-Arts-style Place de l’Etoile as the jewel of the seat of the Mandate” (ibid: 126). The traditional French radial design was superimposed upon the “traditional souqs and land owned by both Christian and Muslim awqaf” (ibid).

Here, we not only see a negation of the rich, encounter-inducing fabric – the 1932 French Mandate city plan by the Danger brothers remarking that the “physiognomy of the quarters indicates well enough the general mixture of races and religions” (Danger, 1932 cited in Genberg, 2002: 84) – but of the corresponding imposition of a governance system, and an organisational logic which negated the space, politics and identity before it.

Left: Rafael Moneo’s “modern” souk, to be shortly accompanied by a Zaha Hadid building. Right: Looking towards Place de l’Etoile through the rehabilitated fabric. Note the automobile barriers that deny vehicular access for security purposes.



A Lack of Encounter

Solidere’s vision of a unified, post-conflict, almost reconciliatory space, resides in the context of a civil war-induced spatial rift (Genberg, 2002), with areas and street names that have changed corresponding to sectarian occupation. The city effectively became a set of independent territories and the “[s]paces within which people circulated and interacted shrunk (sic) still further” (Khalaf, 1993: 33 cited in Genberg, 2002: 85). Solidere’s intervention only exacerbates the trend. Early writings about Solidere’s intervention remarked that entering the renewed downtown area meant leaving “daily life behind: the only people you could see on foot in this area were people working there or tourists and teams of journalists” (Genberg, 2002: 88). It is a space which some described as a “foreign country” (ibid). Solidere’s intervention was, therefore, seemingly constructed for a particular class, through a specific vision of Beirut as kitschy, commodified simulacrum (Ragab, 2011). Following the Dubai model, Solidere, at least according to early writing about the space, sought to attract rich, global tourism with its non-political ancient heritage, air-conditioned luxury shops and high quality but securitised landscape design. This is most obvious along the reconstructed souks but also in adjacent Saifi Village, with restored and reconstructed facades in the style, typology and height of the French Mandate and Ottoman eras. What feels like a New Urbanist’s dream is also one almost entirely devoid of people and activity.

Top
Baedker Handbook for Travellers Map of Beirut from 1912. Indicates early Ottoman intervention in the fabric including the public squares and wider streets. (University of Texas Libraries, 2015)

Middle
Palmer map of Beirut from 1923, in the same year of Mandate ratification. The map accompanied the “Report on the Provision of Harbour facilities”. (Historic Cities Centre, 2000)

Bottom
Map of Beirut by Bureau Topographique de Troupes Francaises du Levant from 1936 indicating extent of growth and intervention during Mandate, including the widening of streets and partial radial reorganisation with Place de l’Etoile. (Historic Cities Centre, 2000)

Top
A remnant of the old buildings in Saifi Village with a view of what it is to replace with in the Quartiers des Arts. Though similar in scale, the effect of pastiche is left wanting of patina and diversity.

Left
A well-designed niche in Saifi Village. The space is pleasant to stroll through due to its human scale, adequate seating and shade.

Right
However, the street remains devoid of activity.



Walking through Solidere’s intervention provides an indication of a neutered space, which had a rich history where inter-communal mixing was the norm. The pedestrian markets that these spaces, including the souks, allowed are remembered nostalgically in Beirut after their destruction in 1975 (Kassir, 2011: 434). Historically, the design allowed for a “variety of architectural styles and customers that gave them their distinctive quality, scattered throughout a maze of streets that was nonetheless modern” (ibid) to exist.

Yasmeen Arif conducted interviews with residents who had lived in old downtown Beirut, asking for their impression of the space before displacement either from the war, or due to their lack of funds to “renovate according to the company’s [Solidere’s] stipulations” (Arif, 2013: 110). One interviewee, a

Druze former hotel owner in the area spoke of the “ruh-al-wataniye (the spirit of the country), people mixing together from all religions, involved together in work” (ibid: 110f). Arif also speaks of the importance of Wadi Abu Jmeil, just south of the souks, which was known as the Jewish quarter. But as the war broke out, the population was on the wrong side of the Green Line, and Maronite groups forcefully relocated groups to “safer’ Christian sections of the city” (ibid: 113). However, Wadi remained diverse as Kurdish, Christian, Muslim groups and “one last Jewish resident” continued to live in the space (ibid.). Arif recounts how Kurdish and Jewish residents talked fondly of their Shi’ite neighbours who were relocated South. The highly cosmopolitan space that encouraged encounter and acted as an “interface” for diverse groups has today been transformed into a space

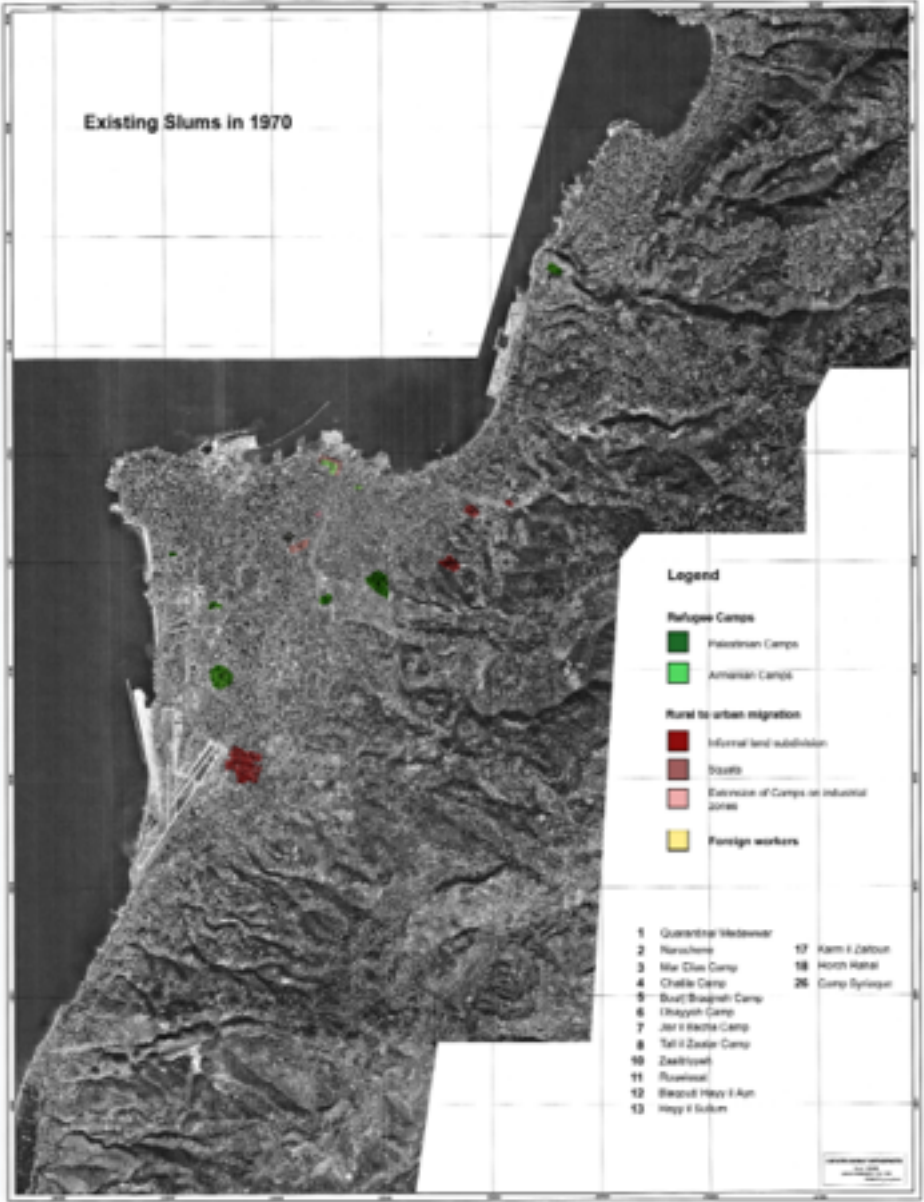
very much like Saifi: up-market and “restored”.

Omitted Histories, Hidden Spaces

However, in its macro-scale focus, with its smaller scale intervention in the city centre, these plans – and the particular histories they represented – ignored much of Beirut, tending not to include or foster spaces of encounter, or even survey the growing “misery belt’ of slums in Beirut’s southern suburbs” (El Hibri, 2009: 128). This belt of settlements simultaneously denied services to the residents, but also provided a scope for creativity and informal social networks (Fawaz, 2009).

In these war-fractured and sectarian spaces, Beirut’s multiplicity contrasts with Solidere’s presented unity. In the peripheries, contesting modernities are being formed and, as investigated by Mona Fawaz and Isabelle Peillen (2003), have been continually so since the French Mandate era. The unrepresented populations churned with the influx of Armenian, Palestinian and Shi’ite refugees across eras, all of whom left their indelible mark on the city. This is a continued characteristic of the city and Mount Lebanon as sites of strategic safety for relative minorities in the Greater Middle East; historically the Maronites and Druze. Each of these groups now occupy significant pockets in contemporary Beirut, and for Armenian and Palestinian communities, the city has served as a proxy media hub. The tragedy, however, is that the presence of these groups and subsequent regional importance of Beirut, have made it a site perceptible to its regional neighbours’ geopolitical reach. This has been the case in the recent past, in Beirut’s role as a port, and especially in the country’s conflicted relationship with Nasserism and with Syria as a whole. More recently, Iran and Assad’s Syria hold considerable influence over the Alawi (Larkin, 2015) and Shi’ite populations, counteracting the influ-

Left
An attempt at mapping beyond Beirut’s peninsular core indicating the extent of the informal and peripheral settlements. (Fawaz and Peillen, 2003)



ence of Sunni powerhouses and local Maronite power. Portraits and images of political leaning have recently been banned in an effort to reduce sectarian rifts, however it is not uncommon to see “larger-than-life portraits of radial clerics and Iranian nobles” (Nagel, 2002: 724) persisting in the poorer southern neighbourhoods, graffiti against the Turkish state in the Armenian quarter or even overt support for Michel Aoun or Bashir Gemayel in the Maronite and Armenian quarters, not to speak of the Al-Assads in the Alawi neighbourhoods (Larkin, 2009). Lebanon’s highly active role in the Palestine-Israel conflict has only heightened this tendency, with much capital, and many arms, secrets and people flowing in and through the city. In this, Beirut quickly became a “symbol for the promise, then the failure, of a secular, liberal multi-ethnic city in the Arab Middle East” (El Hibri, 2009: 119).

Uneasy Co-incidence

The spectre of the rising Shi’ite population has altered Lebanese politics, and its significance is substantial enough to be refused acknowledgement by the Maronite-Sunni power complex: there has been a continued denial of a new census since 1932, and electoral constituency is linked to ancestral rather than current home in order to maintain a semblance of power. As a result, most Beirutis votes are Sunni, Greek Orthodox and Armenian while Maronites tend to vote in the North and Shi’a in the South (Harb, 2015). To counter this lack of democratic intergration, Hezbollah and Amal have formed new networks of social services which target the lower-middle class and newly middle-class Shi’ite populations who now occupy much of Beirut (ibid.). As Mona Harb and Lara Deeb (2013) describe, the new leisure economy is a reflection of the identity contestations of this new social group. They understand these movements as forms of the same project as Solidere’s; of forming a modern identity and spatial configuration for Beirut.

We see a “plurality of urban forms marked by politics and religiosity: forms that do not fit the idea of a secular mod-

ern epitomised by Solidere” (Harb and Deeb, 2013: 726). In this space, sites like Dahiya which are decried as under-planned (Larkin, 2009) or backwards, but in reality are active and evolving, “participate equally in the making of Beirut’s urban modernity” (Harb and Deeb, 2013: 727). Here, the proliferation of new leisure spaces for the historically disenfranchised, less affluent Shi’ite population fit into the notion of resistant consumption, where secular spaces and shops “associated with the USA, such as Starbucks” (ibid: 729) are avoided for political reasons.

This contrasts with Solidere’s mega-project and, in following Jennifer Robinson (2005) and Jyoti Hosagrahar (2005), we can re-investigate the quotidian processes of socio-spatial production that are afoot. Solidere is but one of the multiple stories that occupy contemporary Beirut and has already been written about more skilfully, thoughtfully and thoroughly than we can address here. A focus on Solidere’s intervention also perpetuates the incomplete, sole investigation of large capital formations, ignoring the progressive or contradictory agencies of the resident, labourer and citizen who occupy the urban. Focusing on Solidere ignores the multiplicity of Beirut as well as Harb and Deeb’s call to refocus our lens beyond Solidere and investigate the new spatial production in Beirut’s “periphery”. In the gaps of Beirut’s incomplete modernist visions, the liminal spaces and niches are appropriated by urbanites and have resulted in “a cosmopolitan mode of dialogue and engagement” (Gaonkar, 2001: 22). Hosagrahar (2005) showed how public space and colonial-era housing provisions were constantly altered, appropriated and subverted for indigene means, values and purposes in the context of India. Such processes are not only prevalent in Beirut, but due to the regional influence on the site, the city is rife with such experimentations. Modernity, then, is subject to “culture-specific and site-based” readings (Gaonkar, 2001: 15), which require “us to rethink the web of meanings the projects of modernity encompass” and move beyond “the persistent monopolisation of Modernism by “Western” cultures” (Çelik, 1999: 381).

These spaces draw from objects and designs from South Lebanese villages, disrupting the hegemonic Maronite notion of the quintessential Lebanese village. But they also borrow from contemporary and even French styles to form an appropriated, but utterly contemporary form. This newly formed Lebanese aesthetic is “eclectic, bringing together assumptions about myriad civilisations and eras” (Harb and Deeb, 2013: 737). Fawaz’s and Peillen’s (2003) counter-history of construction in Beirut’s forgotten spaces since the 1950s is important as it provides an indication of counter-productions to that of the Ottoman, Mandate and early Lebanese state-era formations. Again, such counterforms cannot be viewed nostalgically as they were not always “inclusive or democratic... [replicating] the same social hierarchies” especially across gender and sectarian boundaries (Fawaz, 2009: 838). However, these informal networks of production made home ownership and occupation more accessible for many of the city’s residents.

Hezbollah as Developer

In contemporary Beirut, Hezbollah’s counter-position to Solidere is significant as “Hezbollah is in fact a vast social welfare and development apparatus whose work on behalf of poor and displaced Shi’ites is recognised as ‘radical planning’” (Roy, 2009: 161). Commonly vilified in Anglophone media, multiple accounts suggest that “Hezbollah’s services are available to all who exist in a neighborhood, be they Christian or Muslim... Hezbollah’s institutions of development are indeed open and inclusive but they exist in territories that have already been reshaped as primarily Shiite” (ibid: 164). Hezbollah and the coincidental informal building networks provide services and spaces for these newly urban citizens, populations resented by older Beirutis “as being the ‘polluting’ outsiders who have progressively invaded... cherished cosmopolitan ideals of mixed living” (Arif, 2013: 111). Incidentally, historians such as Hassan Hallak stress that “new generations need to be taught about Beirut’s and Lebanon’s history. Their lack of knowledge, he writes, poses a problem for national cohesion or ‘belonging’” (Reilly,

2011: 168), implying a more Islamic reading of Beirut’s history, emphasising the Ottoman intervention and Islamic governance structures, rather than those of the French Mandate. However, these efforts towards “belonging” ironically serve to alienate minorities and deepen sectarian feelings. Here, such historical constructions and politics of service provision are interlinked with that of real estate development as Hezbollah works to counter Solidere’s influence by building traditional villages such as Assaha:

[A] top-ranking Hezbollah official said of this space: “Beirut has had its downtown; we have only had the suburbs; now we too have our downtown; and everyone will soon come to our downtown”. This urban sensibility of recreation and entertainment, leisure and consumption (good food but no alcohol, ghazal readings, the mixing of genders, massive screens for soccer matches, wireless connectivity, Disneyesque kitsch including Nasrallah memorabilia) is one that Hezbollah can proudly claim as a marker of its modernity.

(Roy, 2009: 174)

Coupled with macro-scaled interventions, Beirut’s spatial politics is one of contested spaces of encounter as well as instances of appropriation. These provide an important indication of a planning tradition which persists beyond state-led interventions and underscores Beirut’s everyday agency.

Appropriation

Kassir, in rather binary terms, provides an example of the histories of appropriation in these unified spaces. The Mandate’s “grand designs”, including Place de l’Etoile, were subject to

reconquest of the modern by the traditional, and of the legal by the illegal. The most striking example of this was in Place de l’Etoile itself, where the fountain at the base of the ‘Abed clocktower – thirty metres from the monumental Parliament Building – soon came to

Top
Assaha traditional village with its revivalist aesthetic.
(Harb and Deeb, 2013)

be used by the porters of the old Nuriyyeh suq to wash themselves. Later, when the city council sought to remove this embarrassment by draining the basin, it became an unauthorised garbage dump.

(Kassir, 2010: 289)

This is a profound set of events in the history of Beirut, and perhaps foreshadows our analysis of Solidere’s present day intervention. Surely the proverbial washing basin will return alongside the restored facades and newly air-conditioned souk? What would such an intervention imply in contemporary Beirut? More critically, for the purposes of this essay, how can one conceptualise such an event? Perhaps this presents a history of appropriation that is unacknowledged in the grand narrative of Beirut’s modernity. Craig Larkin extensively interviewed Beirutis youth about their interaction with the downtown, finding that a majority related to this more as a place of “imaginative and emotive investment, than as a place of actual lived experience” (Larkin, 2009: 8). Here we find a rich, diverse set of opinions, from interpreting the space as a “Westernised Lebanon... perhaps [more] the Gulf” to “I love Down Town, I always go there” (ibid: 11f). The space is divisive, but as the protests in 2011 showed, it is also a site of potential: of “popular protest and dissent... [where] groups subverted and distorted the neoliberal ‘spectacle

city’ and posed questions concerning Beirut’s national imagining” (ibid: 17). This is also mirrored in the continual and fruitful tactics used by Hezbollah in garnering higher compensation for Shi’ite squatters displaced by the Solidere development (Schmid, 2002; Roy, 2009).

Encounter

The downtown remains a contested site for fostering this cosmopolitan spirit as identified by the Druze hotel owner. Here, two much-publicised projects promote differing visions. The first is the Solidere-led Garden of Forgiveness project, adjacent to the primary religious sites of Sunni and Maronite denominations. The project consulted major denominational groups, but remains one based on usable histories, having located over the Roman ruins. In contrast was Harvard-based architect Hashim Sarkis’s failed proposition for a maïdan in central Beirut, which served to “provide a setting for cosmopolitan being” (Mayaram, 2013: 4). The maïdan was a traditional public space, literally meaning field, which served as a marketplace but also site where “people from the hinterland once camped in a space of exchange between peasant, pastoralist, and city dweller” (ibid.). The maïdan sought to provide a neutral space in which the different groups could interact. However it remains problematic in its lack of engagement with the divided





Top
Dense, active street life in Dar Al Fatwa, South of Beirut's core Downtown. (See also next page)

Middle left
Witness to the day-to-day in Ras Beirut.

Middle right
Street activity and bustle in Beirut's Armenian Quarter.

Bottom
Contents of the neighbourhood museum in Ain Mreisseh.

present and strategic utilisation of the neutral public commons in projecting the subject as an individualised citizen. Both these projects, then, fall into the trap of monumentalism. It is not that they are unsuccessful public spaces – if built they would probably be thoroughly used and successful in their own right – but in their lack of engagement with the everyday and counter-formations of modernity in Beirut. They sidestep the questions of multiplicity, segregation and existing difference in the city. This is why the memory of Wadi Abu Jmeil as a mixed neighbourhood is perhaps a more powerful datum for building a post-conflict identity, rather than those invoked by these two monumental projects. The everyday cosmopolitanisms that the appropriations and counter-projects in the peripheries create are not to be dismissed as products of fundamentalisms, but require deeper engagement.

Modernity of the Everyday

The multiple Beiruts exist on the streets of the various neighbourhoods as walked through during our short visit. The formations of new modernities

and appropriations existed as sustained business and local culture kept the global private coffee chain Costa Coffee open past midnight on a weekday on Hamra as people sat, gossiped and sipped coffee. Degrees of tolerance and coalescence were expressed as veiled women walked past images of right-wing militia leader Bashir Gemayel. Class and sectarian mix occurred in the falafel shop just off Hamra Street as a man in a suit speaking polished French walked in and ate alongside immigrants and a rowdy group of international students. However, we cannot ignore the fact that he could enter the rooftop bar at the Four Seasons in swanky Zaitunay Bay without a misstep, while there would be jitters and nervousness from someone doing the same from the other side of the falafel counter. Memory persists, accumulated in the bricolage neighbourhood museum in Ain Mreisseh and the countless older men and women who sit and watch their streets – and whom we suspect, have done so for many years, proving to be the best witnesses to the unending transformation of their neighbourhoods. New otherised groups appear, effectively outside the multiple, established sectarian

political and service formations, in the form of the precarious migrant worker primarily arriving from West Africa or South Asia. They utilise the city wherever welcome, such as the stoop on Hamra Street occupied by a group of Bangladeshi workers at 2am.

Crucially, we argue that these spatial practices demand to be acknowledged and understood by the multiple representational spaces projected by the likes of Solidere and Hezbollah. Beirut's history demonstrates a rich case of unitary spatial interventions superimposed upon each other, while spatial practices persist in the periphery and, in occasional moments, appropriate these representational spaces. We can perhaps draw two conclusions from the historical trajectory recounted here. The first is a romantic hope that Beirut and its unique modern formations outside of the history of totalitarian interventions have persisted, and perhaps will continue to do so within and outside these developers' spheres of influence. The second is to politically demand that this occurs.



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