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Beirut: the new front lines of urban research

Éric Verdeil

[Reviews]

Keywords: civil war, reconstruction, public space, Lebanon, Beirut

Reviewed: Bou Akar, Hiba and Hafeda, Mohamed. 2011. *Narrating Beirut from its Borderlines*, Beirut: Heinrich Böll Stiftung – Middle East Office; and Shayya, Fadi. 2010. *At the Edge of the City. Reinhabiting Public Space Toward the Recovery of Beirut's Horsh Al-Sanawbar*, Beirut: Discursive Formations/Heinrich Böll Stiftung – Middle East Office.

In Beirut, the extremely rapid transformations of both urban spaces and urban policy raise a number of questions and give researchers much food for thought. Two recent collective works reflect the vitality of urban research in Beirut today and the revival of critical urban theory.

Since the Civil War years, urban issues have become much debated in Beirut. Researchers explored the social and sectarian roots of the fragmentation of urban areas in Lebanon (Seurat 1989; Nasr 1985) and became interested in the destruction of public space and the possibilities for its reconstruction (Beyhum 1991a, 1991b; Khalaf and Khoury 1993). Since the mid-1990s, downtown Beirut and its controversial reconstruction have prompted numerous studies in various disciplines by (young) researchers of various nationalities, and from various academic backgrounds: Lebanese, of course, including expatriates in Europe and the United States, but also French, German, Danish, etc. (published works alone abound on this subject: M. F. Davie 1997; Rowe and Sarkis 1998; M. Davie 2001; Kassir 2003; Hanssen 2005; Schmid 2002; Verdeil 2010). The question of built heritage and the memory of war have gradually developed into major themes (Haugbolle 2010; Sawalha 2010; Mermier and Varin 2010; Larkin 2012). Meanwhile, research has progressively extended to areas beyond the city boundaries; for instance, the southern suburbs have been the subject of much attention (e.g. Clerc-Huybrechts 2008; Harb 2010; Fawaz 2008), owing to the originality of the urban-planning activities of Hezbollah and the major challenge that is the reconstruction of Haret Hreik, destroyed by Israeli shelling (Fawaz and Ghandour 2007). The eastern and northern suburbs first attracted the attention of geographers because of their spectacular urban sprawl in the 1990s. More recently, research has explored the changes in municipal governance (Farah 2011) and commercial developments in the area. Spanning over thirty years, successive studies[1] have, of course, be understood through the prism of generational renewal: a

[1] This list of works cited in this article is not intended to be exhaustive. Priority is given to monographs published in collective works, conference proceedings and original academic works and articles, with some exceptions made for literature deemed essential reading.

distinction can be made between a first group of academics, who wrote about the war as it was experienced and then on the rebuilding of the city, and a second group, which began its research during the reconstruction years.

Peripheries, front lines and political commitment

In recent years, we have been witnessing the emergence of a third generation of researchers, born during the war or even during the reconstruction process, exemplified by two short books published by the Heinrich Böll Foundation. What they have in common is their focus on what we might call the new front lines that have divided the city since 2006–2007 and the events of May 2008. This is precisely the subject of *Narrating Beirut from its Borderlines*, edited by Hiba Bou Akar and Mohamed Hafeda and comprising four articles. *At the Edge of the City. Reinhabiting Public Space Toward the Recovery of Beirut's Horsh al-Sanawbar* is marked by this context of tension, but also touches upon themes and questions from the reconstruction years, such as the extent to which urban planners are capable of recreating shared public spaces. Horsh al-Sanawbar – the "Pine Woods" – is a park located on the old Green Line (the demarcation line between East and West Beirut), on the border between the city of Beirut proper and the southern suburbs, and which thus spans one of the fault lines revived by the growing tensions of the past five years. This space, designed to re-create an atmosphere of conviviality, but which is almost never open to the public, is a symbol of failing reconciliation and reconstruction. This book – the product of a collaboration by 38 authors – alternates analytical texts, personal accounts, press articles and graphical and even multimedia documents. It is a work that can be read either as a research paper on the emblematic Pine Woods or as a collection of archive material.

The fact that both of these works were published by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, just a year apart, is not the subject of any particular justification by this German foundation, which has links to the German Green Party; only a few words at the end of the book on the Pine Woods emphasise the need to rethink the relationship between citizens and their urban space, highlighting the importance of such a green area – not so much from an ecological point of view as from a policy standpoint. In fact, the support provided by this foundation echoes the work of many similar institutions that financed the publication of academic works in Lebanon throughout the 1990s and 2000s.[2]

These institutions give priority to projects that combine an academic dimension with reform-related objectives. On this point, however, the two books differ somewhat: *At the Edge of the City* is a public appeal aimed in particular at Beirut city council, the owner of the park and the institution responsible for its failure to open, suggesting various paths for its appropriation by the Beiruti population. *Narrating Beirut*, on the other hand, favours a research-based text, although one of its constituent papers summarises an architectural proposal for a remarkable set of buildings in the Lebanese capital (the Druze community centre, in the Verdun neighbourhood in the west of the city).

Art and design: tools of urban critical theory

Despite this difference, the two works share a common language, as well as common forms of expression, evident in the same high quality of both works, which are much closer to design objects than to traditional books. The elaborate layouts combine unconventional formats (a 13 × 13 cm square and a 19.5 × 26 cm landscape format), using two- and four-colour printing, numerous illustrations (refined photographs, graphics and even works of art) and, in the case of *At the Edge of*

[2] For example, the rival German foundations bearing the names of Konrad Adenauer (conservative) and Friedrich Ebert (linked to the Social Democratic Party of Germany), the New York-based Ford Foundation or the Norwegian foundation Fafo.

the City, fold-out pages, a poster and a CD-ROM. Moreover, this book is complemented online by a multimedia website.[3]

This graphic originality itself reflects the diversity of disciplinary and professional approaches. Anthropology, sociology, geography and history are intertwined and linked by artistic interventions and viewpoints – some of an ephemeral nature – and proposals by architects, designers and landscape architects.[4] This combination of stances is the defining feature of this third generation of (sometimes very) young scholars and critics of Beirut. This more broadly reflects the cultural vitality that characterises the Lebanese capital, despite – or thanks to – its political instability.

Breaking with intellectual and urbanistic references

The choice of English is another key marker of these collectives. Arabic is, in fact, little used in urban research in Lebanon, unlike other disciplines such as sociology and history. The use of English – despite the fact that many authors are from French-speaking academic backgrounds – is also a sign of the growing role of the American University of Beirut and its Department of Architecture and Design in this field, a development echoed, moreover, by the rising importance over the last decade or so of the *City Debates*[5] organised by the university. This is more generally a sign of the increasing attractiveness of English-speaking universities (British, Canadian and American) for Lebanese students compared to local or foreign French-speaking establishments.

Another striking aspect of the positions adopted by these authors is their critical radicalism, especially with regard to urban planning, which has played a central role in the normative discourse on reconstruction and reconciliation in post-war Beirut. In a recent paper,[6] I pointed out that the active French-language research in the French establishments around the Mediterranean generally takes the form of a sustained and constructive dialogue with many planners who are directly involved in urban policy, albeit from a critical viewpoint. In the case of Beirut, one only needs to think of the role played by the IAU ÎdF (formerly IAURIF; Institute for the Urban Planning and Development of the Île-de-France [Paris] Region), as an companion to, or even as a direct partner of, the Observatoire de Recherche sur Beyrouth et sa Reconstruction between 1993 and 2003.7 This form of "companionship" also included many Lebanese urban planners. References are necessarily made to the IAU ÎdF in connection with the Pine Woods park, as it was the main partner in its regeneration, via an international landscape architecture competition in 1992 and via funding from the Île-de-France regional council, as part of its cooperation with Beirut. This continues today through joint thinking on sustainable transport in the city, with the aim of resolving the issues that are forcing the city council to keep the park closed.

However, the authors of *At the Edge of the City* do not adopt positions that continue this tradition of cooperation. Indeed, a highly critical attitude emerges from this book regarding the conventional

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3 Web address: http://attheedgeofthecity.wordpress.com.

4 At this juncture, I should like to mention a publication that is, in spirit, closely related to the two works reviewed here: *Tamáss 1. Contemporary Arab Representations: Beirut/Lebanon*, Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2002. This collective uses art as a means of interpreting the city. Also, the exhibition and book entitled *The Beirut Experience* (URL: http://villabernasconi.ch/beirut_experience.htm), organised by the Swiss association Attitudes around the themes architecture, urban planning and development, memory, history and cultural identity. The exhibition took place in Geneva from 21 April to 10 June 2012.

5 See http://rumor.hypotheses.org/2451.

6 Verdeil, Éric. 2012. "Chercheurs et professionnels de l'urbain en dialogue au sud de la Méditerranée", *Rumor* (*Recherches urbaines au Moyen-Orient et ailleurs/Urban Research in the Middle East and Elsewhere*, an academic blog), 19 February. Retrieved 29 April 2012. URL: http://rumor.hypotheses.org/2271.

7 The Observatoire de Recherche sur Beyrouth et sa Reconstruction ("Observatory for Research on Beirut and its Reconstruction), later renamed the Observatoire Urbain du Proche-Orient ("Urban Observatory of the Near East"), has been a permanent programme of Ifpo, the Institut Français du Proche-Orient (French Institute for the Near East), since 1993 (Pieri 2012). I was the coordinator of this observatory from 2000 to 2003.

urban planning approaches that are ingrained in the local power structures, regarded as elitist and exclusionary. For these authors, the closure of the park – long justified, officially, by the need to wait for the plants to grow, and later by a lack of resources and personnel – is seen to be symptomatic of a mistrust of public appropriation of the park, for fear that damage might be caused. Implicitly, however, this refusal to open the park is also viewed as the city council wanting to protect its territory from the Shiite and Palestinian populations of neighbouring districts. This criticism chimes with a shift in opinion that pushes public policy and planning into the background in favour of an analysis of practices and feelings at ground level and in the day-to-day lives of users.

The traces and sounds of the city

Narrating Beirut is even farther removed from any conventional analysis of official urban planning. The two most successful texts in this collection take as their starting point the traces present in the city, rather than urban projects. This alternative approach is evident first of all in Hiba Bou Akar's article on the ruins that still mark the landscape of the old demarcation line in Mar Mikhael, in the southern suburbs of Beirut. Instead of analysing these remains in terms of the aftermath of the Civil War, this paper shows that they are largely maintained voluntarily by their owners. They express the resistance of Christian religious authorities in the region in the face of real-estate development that is seen as a Trojan horse for the neighbouring Shiite communities that are experiencing significant population growth. Conversely, though, many Christians refuse to return and settle there, giving the area the appearance of a no man's land suspended in time.

Mohamed Hafeda, on the other hand, offers the reader a highly original account of a trip in a "service" (shared taxi) as the pretext for collecting the sounds that mark territories in ways other than through architectural materiality. The journey, punctuated by snatches of politically and denominationally opposed radio media or extracts of conversations drifting in from the pavements, echoing the concerns of a neighbourhood, is recounted in the form of timelines. By indexing these intangible traces and archiving mobile soundscapes, this research – the ultimate outcome of which is worth keeping an eye on – invites us to interpret the urban space and the experiences of Beiruti political divisions in a different fashion.

Beirut is a unique urban laboratory. But this is not due only to its violent destiny or the complexity of its urban policies with contradictory inspirations: as an intellectual hub, nurtured by constant exchanges between the Arab world, Europe and North America (and even South America, with strong relationships maintained with Brazil and Mexico), the city and its changing dynamics are the primary focus of the creations and critical reflections of a multilingual elite. Both of these works, full of originality and promise, offer an exciting vision of Beirut and new ways of thinking via multiple registers of expression and the "polyphonic crossover" of these registers.

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