

MASTER PLANNING IN LEBANON: MANUFACTURING LANDSCAPES OF INEQUALITY

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Over the past decade, many urban geographers have engaged with the relationship between law and geography, in an attempt to clarify the connections between these two increasingly complex concepts. The convergence of legal and geographical perspectives on the city has changed our understanding of both "space" and "law", and new questions and research topics have emerged (Blomley et al., 2001: xvii). In Lebanon, law has often been seen as a process that is devoid of a social dimension. In fact, it has been reduced to how the political class influences legislation, a process that has had a deep impact on planning and urban development.

This research paper documents the practice of master planning in Lebanon, and takes a critical look at land-use maps, studying the mechanisms that produced them, and investigating the ways in which they have impacted people and landscapes. By focusing on the towns of Damour and Debbiyeh, we explore how planning interventions replicate existing inequalities and power relations, and maintain the dominance of the privileged few over the landscape.

On the local level, although municipal councils - elected to guarantee representation and residents' interests - take part in the making of master plans, it is common knowledge that they are rarely elected by local residents, and end up representing the patriarchal dynasty of landowners who originate from the area. On the national level, a review of the urban planning law also underscores the absence of any mention of the principle of participation in master planning, which reinforces a purely administrative and technocratic practice, and contributes to the proliferation of different forms of corruption, including favoritism and clientelism. If we look at the performance of the General Directorate for Urban Planning, we find that it has put aside the primary role of master plans, as having "a social purpose" in organizing communal life. In fact, based on a comprehensive database of all master plans approved in Lebanon by virtue of a decree from 1954 to date, we were able to draw a map of planned regions in Lebanon. We found that unplanned areas today account for 85% of the Lebanese territory. These are arbitrarily neglected,

as they have several partial plans, and are subjected to a multitude of illegal decisions, which allows for the misuse of authority at the local level.

MASTER PLANS AND THE VILLAGES ON THE CHOUF COAST

At the onset of the Lebanese Civil War, the coastal Chouf areas and Iqlim El-Kharroub witnessed a geographical transformation and a sudden displacement of their residents due to massacres and military battles. After the end of the Civil War and with the beginning of the

capital's reconstruction, the rising cost of real estate in Beirut led to a flow of residents moving to settle in the Iqlim, which had the benefit of being close to the city and the real estate projects there. This rapid process of construction was launched in the absence of just development policies and a local framework. Not only was the contribution of the construction and real estate sector to the local development of the municipalities on the Chouf coast and in the Iqlim very limited, but it also strained resources, which fueled political and sectarian tensions. Real estate developers from outside the area took advantage of the relatively low-priced plots of land on the coast of the Iqlim and Chouf. These quick changes in the rural environment stoked fears of a change in the

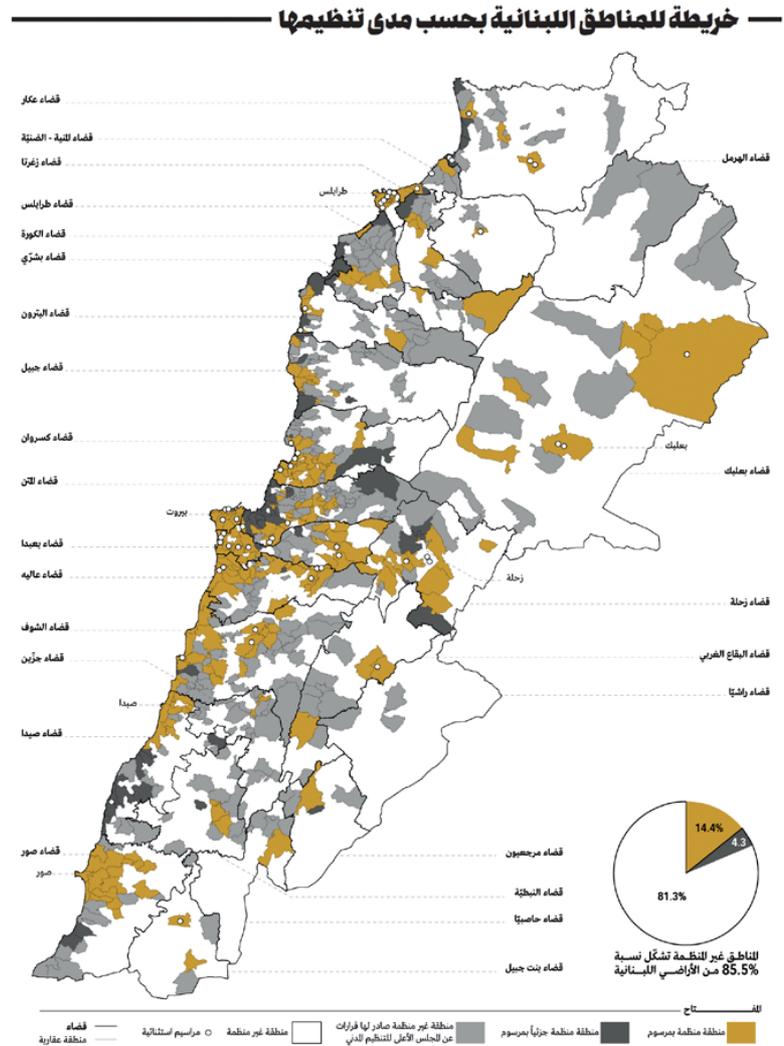


Figure 1

identity and social fabric of the area, which were instilled by a history of sectarian violence and massacres.

How did the local authorities in Damour and Debbiyeh deal with this historical reality? And how did they manage urban planning in the two towns?

DAMOUR: CLASS-ORIENTED VISION AND ECONOMIC INTERESTS UNDER A SECTARIAN COVER

Damour is a coastal city south of Beirut, historically famous for its silk production and later its orange and banana plantations. The first master plan for Damour was developed in 1968 to reflect the situation of the town at the time: two mixed zones for commerce and residency, a residential area, the agricultural valley, an industrial region and a touristic region. The old town had the highest allowed built-up area, to curb the expansion of urban development into agricultural and natural lands.

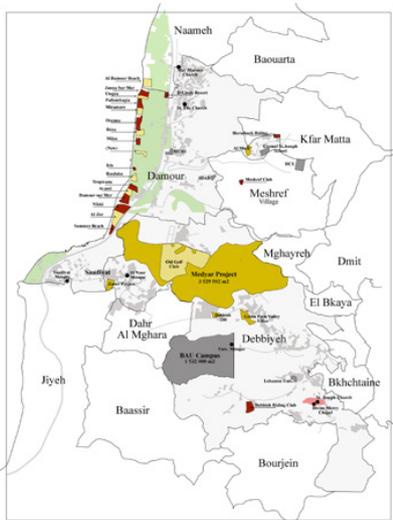


Figure 2

When the Lebanese civil war broke out, and in the wake of a painful bloodbath in Damour in 1976, the town witnessed some quick changes and the sudden forced displacement of citizens. Around 620 buildings were destroyed, the agricultural valley was evacuated, and sand removal from Damour's beach shrunk its surface significantly.¹

The war greatly changed the demographic composition of the city. Only a few Christian families returned home after it ended, as they had adapted to living in countries other than Lebanon. Moreover, a study conducted by UNDP

(2017) shows a sharp division between Christian Damour and Sunni Saadiyat (which is within the municipal area of Damour). Saadiyat's citizens demanded separation from Damour. In parallel, citizens from diverse social groups moved to Damour and the surrounding villages to escape the high cost of living in Beirut. Sectarian tensions worsened, and the intimidation discourse escalated.

Forty years after Damour's first master plan, a new plan was released in 2008. A municipality member said: "We created the new plan to serve the best interests of Damour and its citizens in terms of reducing investments and expanding the residential apartments' area, to be in line with our vision for the city. The old plan included an industrial area that was canceled. We established an area along the coastal line (where we can see resorts now) that had a touristic classification."

The new map of the master plan shows that the areas by and large have relatively low investment rates, compared to the surrounding municipalities. When we asked the member of the municipality about the reason for this, he stated: "We want Damour to be organized and to attract people from abroad. Imagine if we allowed the construction of buildings with two, three or four apartments per floor. The town would become low-income, and this is not our vision."

With these words, it becomes clear that the vision of the municipality for the future of Damour is a classist vision, with economic interests. Those who cannot afford the cost of buying a house and living in the "new" Damour are unwanted citizens, especially so since the majority of people who want to move to Damour are Muslims. In fact, a contractor who works in Debbiyeh and Damour told us in an interview: "Damour is dubbed a desert because building permits for non-Christians are forbidden, to prevent them from construction works, except for Saadiyat," which is located in the southern part of Damour and has a majority of Muslim residents.

Under this sectarian cover, beach resorts emerged, and the new master plan encouraged exclusive residential complexes. Additionally, newspaper articles considered the case of the Mtail real estate project (gated community) as a direct motive for releasing the 2008 master plan. Through a political partnership between Damour mayor Charles Ghafari and MP Elie Aoun, the "Real Estate Development and Investment Company" of Saudi owner Tariq Al-Rasen and MP Elie Aoun managed to acquire a plot of land in Damour. It is building several huge residential projects on plots where construction was previously not allowed. The 2008 masterplan changed the classification of properties that are part of the project, angering Damour's residents, who asked: "Why sell our land and build projects where we do not live?"

The Mtail-project was the talk of the town until the 2016 municipal elections, for which parties ran with slogans like "Damour land is not for sale" and "Damour for Damouris". Ghafari's rivals were using the Mtail-project to show that it included 300 residential apartments,

and that it would lead to a demographic imbalance in Damour. Sadly, yet not unexpectedly, landownership and its authenticity (from a sectarian lens) became the subject of electoral battles and inflammatory debates in and over Damour, when in fact we argue that the real gist of the matter is fair local development for everyone (be they original citizens or residents).

DEBBIYEH'S NEW MASTER PLAN: BETWEEN PUBLIC FEARS AND PRIVATE INTERESTS

Located 30 km south of Beirut, Debbiyeh represents the coastal entrance to Iqlim El-Kharroub in Chouf. Its historical village sits on the high slopes, surrounded by green hills and highlands overlooking the sea. Since the 1990s, the establishment of the Beirut Arab University campus and the Lebanese University's Faculty of Architecture played an essential role in stimulating Debbiyeh's economy and urban expansion. Despite this moderate growth, the town retained its characteristic green expanses over the years, until a 2.1 million square meters gated community emerged on its western slopes in 2017.

1998: A failed attempt to populate the western slopes of Debbiyeh

In 1998, the first master plan for Debbiyeh was released, in light of "a specialized study conducted by the municipality to preserve the rural, environmental, traditional and architectural character of the town and its identity and history," explains attorney Chadi El-Boustani (Al-Boustani, 2016).

However, according to architect and developer Jalal al-Ali,² the large proportion of subdivided lands in the plan aimed to attract residents to Debbiyeh, in an attempt to revive its economy after the end of the war. "There was more openness and readiness to sell in areas like Debbiyeh and Jiyeh, where residents are more diverse compared to Damour," he said. "Many Christians did not return to Debbiyeh after their displacement in the 1980s. They also do not hesitate to sell their properties and immigrate." Moreover, Debbiyeh's eastern slopes, that are facing the sea, form an attractive site for real estate development. However, despite the planning of vast land-subdivision areas, demand was much smaller. They remain, for the most part, unbuilt.

Fear, politics and loopholes: the covert sale of Dalhamiyah Hill

In the early 2000s, "strangers" flocked to the town to buy land (Atallah, 2014). "Since the 1990s, everyone bought land on the Debbiyeh-coast," Al-Ali says. "Many politicians have plots of land, so do Shiite expatriates living in Africa." During that time, the Boustani family was looking to sell one of its properties, Dalhamiyah Hill: a green hill overlooking the sea, and extending over 3.5



Figure 3

million square meters (Mansour, 2013). Part of the land (around one million square meters) contained a golf club, and appeared in Debbiyeh's first master plan (1998) as a "protected area" that was almost unbuildable.

When Ali Taj Al-Din, a Shiite businessman, expressed interest in buying the land, Debbiyeh's residents asked the Maronite Patriarch to intervene. The Patriarch asked wealthy businessman Robert Mouawad to buy the land, instead of Taj Al-Din. However, Bahij Abu Hamze, Walid Jumblatt's advisor at the time, interfered with Mouawad's project for the land, leading Mouawad to cede his shares in the Dalhamiyah Development Company (DCC) to Taj Al-Din in 2011 (Akiki, 2016). Through this process, landownership was transferred without the knowledge of the municipality, as the effective ownership transfer took place at the level of the company,³ not the land (Akiki, 2016)—a common legal loophole. The deal triggered a largely sectarian discourse in the media, which either adopted or exaggerated the town's concerns. Furthermore, the deal was seen as part of an underlying strategic plan for the wider area.

Profit-driven planning: the DCC redraws Debbiyeh's landscape

In 2012, upon the request of the DCC, the Debbiyeh municipal council held a meeting to vote on amending the 1998 master plan. The council voted against the amendment (6 vs. 5) that aimed to increase the exploitation ratio in the newly acquired Dalhamiyeh Hill. In 2013, a second session was held to reconsider the request. The council voted in favor after an opposing council member was swayed. This situation led opposing council members to resign from the municipality, effectively dissolving it. In the following weeks, and after an electoral battle polarized between those in favor and those against the amendment requested by DCC, the municipal list in favor of the amendment was voted into the municipality. On July 6, 2013, a municipal decision requested increased exploitation ratios for the hills of Dalhamiyah and Al-Halyouni. In response, the Higher Council for Urban Planning ratified an overall increase of exploitation ratios in Debbiyeh. The municipal council rejected this decision, officially reverting to the original master plan of 1998.

In 2016, the new Debbiyeh municipal council requested a period of six months to prepare an objective study of DCC's amendment request.⁴ Meanwhile, the situation was used to fuel a sectarian discourse that played on collective fears of demographic change, pushing aside questions of public good and private interests, or about such a project's environmental impact on the town and its limited infrastructure, or the binding nature of master plans. By the end of 2016, days after Hariri's nomination of Michel Aoun to the presidency, the ratification of a new master plan for Debbiyeh reflected shifting sectarian alliances on the national scale. Today, the once protected Dalhamiyah Hill sits enclosed in construction boards, watching "Medyar, a city" rise.

CONCLUSION

Protecting local resources in any planning process is not about curbing investment based on social class and sect. The places in Damour and Debiyye that remain open today and that constitute a large percentage of the land - in light of the current master plans - embody existing power relations and reinvent inequalities on multiple levels.

FOOTNOTES

1. Coastal area management program camp-Lebanon – July 2004
2. Has been living and working in the town for 36 years. Excerpt from an interview conducted by Public Works.
3. Janoubia (2011). Debbiyeh municipality was not informed of the land sale on its outskirts, December 27th. Available at: <https://goo.gl/9C517K>
4. Proposal of Minister Azzi in cabinet about the master plan of Debbiyeh, August 18, 2016. Available at: goo.gl/irqeFx.

FIGURES

Figure 1. Map of Planned Areas (in yellow) in Lebanon, Public Works Studio, creative commons.

Figure 2. Context Map for Damour and Debiyye, Public Works Studio, creative commons.

Figure 3. Photo taken along the Beirut-Saida highway, Public Works Studio, creative commons.

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AUTHORS

Abir SAKSOUK, Monica BASBOUS, Nadine BEKDACHE. Public Works Studio is a multidisciplinary research and design studio that engages critically and creatively with a number of urban and public issues. The studio initiates research projects that study, shape, and implement counterstrategies to urban planning and policy making in Lebanon. It also offers commissioned professional services in graphic design, architecture, development planning and consultancy within a communal work environment. Work and research initiated are rooted in the belief that all dwellers have the right to play an active role in creating the future of their desired city. Our projects aim to forge possibilities that make urban planning a democratic process where ordinary citizens can understand, judge, and take decisions to make interesting, viable and just spaces.