

URBAN INTERSTITIAL SPACES AS COMMONS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The richness and multiplicity of meaning contained in the concept of boundary comes from the ambivalence of the human act of marking a limit. Pier Vittorio Aureli quotes Carl Schmitt as saying that it is also the beginning of any type of law. Marking the territory, establishing borders are not only primordial modes of giving shape to colonization, but also ways of regulating the coexistence of populations and the formation of any type of power “based on new spatial divisions, new enclosures...”. This frontier has taken different forms throughout history, but always tended towards a political and often defensive objective. During Antiquity and the Middle Ages, city and countryside shared a dual vision based on the idea of the city as a place of identity, thought and a protective island against the unknown of the outside worlds. The founding of a city is also the authoritarian constitution of an interiority, of a sealed and controlled “inside”.

Economic and demographic growth pushed the city out of its administrative boundaries, embracing the unknown outside. The ideals of the industrial revolution and the modernist vision of urban renewal guided a rational planning of the new districts. As in Le Corbusier’s “Radiant city” or in the “Plan voisin”, transportation networks had to be upgraded to link center and periphery at national and international scales. The technocratic approach to urbanism produced major interior urban transformations at the expense of the consolidated neighborhoods. This brief summary recalls the disagreements, during CIAM¹-meetings, between the young generation headed by Van Eyck, the Smithsons, Bakema, Candilis and Woods (later to become the team-10 meetings) and the original founders at the time of the Charte d’Athènes, in 1943. The schism paved the way for the Charte de l’Habitat, proposed in 1953.² A common desire was that cities should aim to create environments that encourage relations between inhabitants, between a building and its environment, and that accommodate the cultural needs of people. New phenomena such as residents’ participation and the controversy surrounding urban renewal would then become central concerns of the group.

The modernist planning of the territory, the reconstruction of the center of the war-torn city, and the rise of land

prices across metropolitan Beirut testify to a vision that did not include the human scale in urban planning and demonstrated the failure of municipal governance. The erasure of the traces of historical neighborhoods dismantled embedded social complexity and led to the slow exclusion of the urban poor and middle classes. Working-class markets, narrow passages and streets are being hastily destroyed to allow for car-oriented zoning, removing unplanned areas in the historical center. This neoliberal approach has created open spaces whose

appropriation is hampered by private security agents, thus preventing the city from providing its protective “inside”.

Inhabitants are now profoundly unable to identify with their surroundings, and a growing need to find alternative open spaces in lieu of the ones imposed by the ruling hierarchy. The idea of a city oriented towards the common good, as expressed in antiquity, is no longer a fundamental principle for the governing bodies.

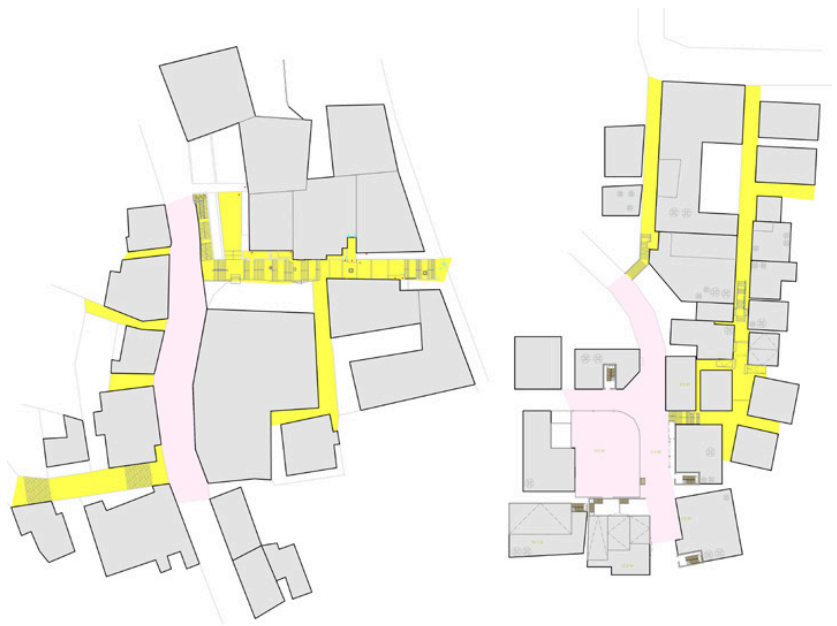


Figure 1

2. THE INTERSTICE

Contrary to the planned and normalized voids, which tend to reintegrate the urban substance as variations of continuity, vacant land incarnates a discontinuity without compromise. Although Eastern culture has since long incorporated the value of the principle of indeterminacy associated with emptiness, Western rationalism would rather have it removed. Freed of its negative connotations, the indeterminate opens the space to the imaginary. The void embodies this potential liberation of thought.



Figure 2

In the case of Beirut, the porosity of the historical fabric and the social practices it hosts are unique situations that allow boundaries to remain permeable, while the current governance of the city encourages impervious ones. The “interstice”, this common micro-territory, opposes the planned and normalized void and disturbs the clarity of the modern urban figure responsible for the homogenization of the city.

This work is an inquiry into what are now considered irrelevant places, unattractive areas, non-monuments, unremarkable buildings, within the words of Aldo Van Eyck: “Whatever space and time mean, place and occasion mean more. For space in our image is place, and time in our image is occasion” (Van Eyck, 1959).

Through the study of historical maps, cadastral documentation and recent listings of public properties

in the city of Beirut, two types of potential contexts emerged: The vacant plots or pieces of land that are leftovers of planning processes and their failed attempts, now home to a variety of informal usages; and the historical passages and alleyways widely described in Arabic literature, where children used to spend long afternoons, and which act as antechamber to the private realm of the heart of the blocks.

Can these margins, these small interstices, become opportunities, escapes from the fortifications and monuments of the contemporary city? Can we identify urban informal voids where space is used, shared and negotiated inside a community of neighbors—spaces not primarily defined by their formal ownership but by how citizens use them, as coined by Jeffrey Hou? (Bradley, 2015).

Finally, could the interstice become a testing ground for establishing a prototype of common governance?

3. ATABA, HARA, HAY, ZANQA, ZAROUB, ZOQAQ... | PLAYING IN THE COMMONS

The medieval fabric of the city offered layers of spaces that suggested different degrees of privacy. Passages, courtyards and gardens provided shade and space, enabling a variety of social practices between the residents of the block and passersby. The space division was the result of a cultural and social organization.

The morphology of the Arab city is structured as a group of clusters of different scales, connected by a network of circulation systems with a specific hierarchy. The “shari” is the relatively large road open at both ends, while the “zaroub” or “zoqaq” describes an alleyway. In “A travers le Mur”, Depaule and Arnaud (2014: 107-108) describe the diversity of circulation systems and their degrees of privacy: “The progressive narrowing of the path announces that it -or its ramifications- is entering in an exclusive world away from the general hassle and will eventually end in a dead end” The “zanka” is the narrow dead-end.

The notion of “hay” referred to several clusters of houses implying a larger neighborhood. That of “hara” described the contiguous houses opening onto the same alley, and thus a more immediate neighborhood. In this intricate fabric, spaces were shared according to customs and social practices. The residents of the “hara” would therefore gain a form of authority and would ask about the whereabouts of a visiting “stranger”: “are you looking for something or someone?” (Depaule and Arnaud, 2014: 122). Within this existing pattern, the space reserved for children was not only the inside of the private house, but also the “zaroub” or “zanka”. Within this safe space, safe since it was overseen by the residents, the children could socialize and interact. This circulation system offered an example of a shared space between the residents of the

“hara”. An “ataba” is the threshold. Traditionally, it is a square tiled space located at the entrance of a house. The “ataba” is usually a step lower than the rest of the indoor space; it is where the visitor is supposed to leave his/her shoes. The “ataba” starts at the “bartush”, which is the threshold-raised tile defining the limit with the outdoor circulation space, road or alley.

Different artistic movements have tried to produce alternative urban experiences to the imposed setting of the built environment. The “dérive” was a way in which the Situationists hoped to create a “playful city”, in which the act of “walking” and “wandering” would be at the heart of the urban experience. Careri (2009) talks of the “city-as-a-path” and links architectural creation to a nomadic act rather than the result of sedentary practices. The subjective emotional perception of the everyday environment resulted in a city that was continuously changing.

In this way, the originally deep private space can be seen as an open interiority, working as a transversal shortcut between lots. It can suggest situations of detours or “dérives” beyond the everyday homogeneous context, offering a migrational city (De Certeau, 1980).

4. MOUSSAITBÉ

The neighborhood of Moussaitbé is a 19th-century suburb of Beirut characterized back then by a few sparse constructions and large agricultural orchards where mulberry trees were cultivated. Since then, it has undergone drastic changes in a short period of time, to become one of the capital’s most dense neighborhoods. Several waves of incoming residents from different districts of the capital gradually densified the area as early as the 1920s. Organized along a road (Moussaitbé Street) linking the district of “Zokak el Blat”³ in the center to the agricultural fields, over the years the neighborhood has suffered the incursion of many roads, starting with the Salim Salam highway in the 1960s and its dependent secondary arteries. Cadastral maps reveal the sometimes-absurd imposition of the road network on the fabric and the difficulties faced during the implementation process. Here and there informal vegetation, cars and open-air grocery stores have occupied the cavities produced by the unfinished roads. And yet, more roads are to come, the network becoming more like a strict grid layered on top of the original passages, now too narrow to allow cars inside.

The newly created streets are no longer spaces of encounter and exchange, as in the historical city. The recently authorized trend of merging plots in order to increase built-up areas and floors in new construction projects detaches buildings from the alignments and cancels the possibility of interacting on their thresholds or in front of shops.

The extensive, visible fragments of the old fabric and the absence of open green areas in the neighborhood made

Moussaitbé the ideal location for testing the theoretical assumptions we formulated.

Four situations were identified, all direct consequences of the penetration of the road network into the urban fabric, and located on public property.

Site A: A dead-end mostly used as a parking space. The planned road was supposed to connect the Wassef Baroudi and Hassan Medawar-streets, and has not yet been implemented.

There is a pedestrian connection linking the north and south streets through a staircase at the end of the dead-end. A concrete bench has been installed in the change of levels. A pocket garden is maintained in the center between the buildings, and trucks delivering water and vegetables reach to the core of the dead-end. Windows and balconies overlook the open spaces and building entrances lead to the common space.

Site B: Also located between the Wassef Baroudi and Hassan Medawar-streets, this site is parallel to site A. A newly paved road cuts through the existing fabric, producing slivers of residual spaces yearning for a second chance. The leftover spaces on either side today are derelict and not yet appropriated. Blank party walls and fences share a space with no other users than the cars parked next to the unusually wide sidewalks.

Site C: An L-shaped pedestrian alley going through a block next to the Salim Salam highway. The space is now partly used as a parking lot and includes a derelict area where an abandoned old house sits. The whole area will soon disappear, since a wider road is planned and some of the buildings have been expropriated. As in the traditional urban fabric (zanka, zaroub), this site is appropriated by children and becomes a space of socialization and play.

Site D: Three small plots (728, 738, and 739) sit in front of the Salim Salam mosque, between the boulevard and a construction site. The plots are still vacant and sometimes used as informal parking. Their size and shape make them an ideal location for a garden or a playground for children.

5. CONCLUSION

This ongoing research stems from previous work that looked at the spatial practices taking place on the staircases of working-class neighborhoods in Beirut. It argued that the staircases were important not only as pedestrian routes offering gathering points, calm open areas away from the busy street, but also because they acted as social generators for the residents living in the immediate vicinity. Through meetings with neighbors, we found that a shared feeling of belonging had emerged, and that there was a fundamental need to protect and manage this shared common space. In the case of Moussaitbé, there is an urgency to halt the destruction and shed light on the everyday use of the



SITE A



SITE B



SITE A: Pedestrian passage between Wassef Baroudi street and Hassan Medawar. The master plan includes a new road going through the fabric but occupancy of the space, user groups and expropriation issues has delayed the project.



SITE B: New road between Wassef Baroudi street and Hassan Medawar. The road cuts through the existing fabric and expropriates the residual left overs.

Figure 3

spaces and the actual needs of the residents. Sites A and B provide a before and after side-by-side inside a city block. Under the current status quo, the whole block could be reimagined as real-size pedagogical tool and in-situ laboratory, where alternative scenarios could be tested and proposed. As a recommendation, an updated regulatory environment is required to avoid excessive destruction and gentrification, with four key principals emerging to protect the public sphere: stabilizing the existing social renting-pattern through

regulation addressing low-income family's needs; working towards the preservation of the day-economy and the importance of the street as a zone of exchange; protecting the traditional urban fabric; and improving the general quality of life and the quality of the shared space.

Otherwise density will continue to increase through the construction of taller buildings, and the open shared space will be increasingly occupied and gradually absorbed into the private sphere.



Figure 4

FOOTNOTES

1. The Congrès internationaux d'architecture modern. CIAM's early attitudes towards town planning were severe: "Urbanization cannot be conditioned by the claims of a pre-existent aestheticism; its essence is of a functional order... the chaotic division of land, resulting from sales, speculations, inheritances, must be abolished by a collective and methodical land policy."

2. "Man may readily identify himself with his own hearth, but not easily with the town within which it is placed. 'Belonging' is a basic emotional need-its associations are of the simplest order. From 'belonging'- identity- comes the enriching sense of neighbourliness. The short narrow street of the slum succeeds where spacious redevelopment frequently fails." Team X response to CIAM 8 report, 1951 (Frampton, 1992: 271).

3. Zokak el Blat is located in the center of Beirut and is one of the first sites of Beirut's urban expansion beyond its boundaries.

FIGURES

Figure 1. Interstitial situations in the historical fabric. Left: Massad Stairs, Rmeil. Right: Rmeil. Beirut.

Figure 2. Area of Study in Moussaitbe with Street penetration in the 1960's on the Left. Right: Current situation with pending streets in red.

Figure 3. Comparison of parallel situations between Wassef Baroudi Street and Hassan Medawar. Above: Sita A. Interstitial space is not widened and transformed into a street. Below: Site B. Situation post street widening.

Figure 4. Daily informal Market occupy the street until the planned prolongation towards the north is executed.

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