

URBAN CRACKS IN BEIRUT'S URBAN LANDSCAPE: THE POTENTIAL OF LEFTOVER PLOTS TO ENHANCE DENSELY BUILT NEIGHBORHOODS

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ABSTRACT

Leftover plots within urban fabrics represent an opportunity to enhance the social and environmental dimension of densely built urban neighborhoods. These plots represent scattered "cracks" and fragments in the urban landscape that can be transformed into amenity spaces to enhance the social and environmental attributes of communities. This ongoing research project will investigate the potential of these spaces in the neighborhoods Mouseitbeh and Bachoura in Beirut.

Leftover plots are a result of urban planning dynamics. They exist in older and existing cities because of planning processes that are imposed on the existing fabric, including the widening of streets, property realignment, easements and property subdivision. In the context of Beirut, the superimposition of planned streets from the fifties and the continuous process of street widening have resulted in leftover plots from private and public properties. The typology of these plots can be categorized into leftover buildings (buildings half demolished to make space for streets) or small unbuildable plots as per zoning and building regulations. In this research, we are concerned with unbuildable plots. Some are left vacant; others are informally appropriated by adjacent uses, or form property edges with no designated use and vehicular islands. These spaces are left in the fabric, not part of a specific property, yet with an owner. In this research,

we name these spaces "urban cracks". In Middle Eastern cities that have grown organically over time with little formal public space, "urban cracks" are a land resource that is not tapped into. The Mouseitbeh-Bachoura-area is considered one of the earlier extensions of the walled city of Beirut. It has grown in a somewhat vernacular fashion with a dense urban fabric. The only open spaces are the streets, cemeteries and few small gardens as a result of the only public space development in Beirut during the 1950s. The neighborhood is characterized by low to middle-income working communities that include some traditional Beirut families. In the past couple of decades, and due to demographic change following civil strife, the neighborhood was further densified, with migrant communities settling in and replacing traditional communities. In its current state, the neighborhood is congested, lacking open space and a minimal tree cover with social space for residents to interact and socialize in.

"Urban cracks" represent an opportunity to support the neighborhood through extending the public realm by transforming these spaces into platforms for social exchange and opportunities to increase tree cover. We see these cracks as a modest way to re-stitch the public realm and provide nodes of activity along streets. These nodes are conceptualized as multi-functional spaces that programmatically respond to and support surrounding uses. Depending on the location and surrounding context, the cracks are transformed into gathering spaces, local transportation nodes, children's playgrounds, vegetated areas, and in many areas simply seating spaces. As

nodes, they are envisioned as extensions of the surrounding social and cultural context, connected by the improved pedestrian part of the streets. As such, "urban cracks" are envisioned as catalysts for an improved neighborhood life.

To identify viable "urban cracks" suitable for the purpose of the study, in-depth research was conducted that included the desktop analysis of planning documents, field surveys, spatial and social data collection, a SWOT-analysis and the development of an overall design strategy. The cadastral maps of Beirut Municipality and plot ownership records for the neighborhood were obtained, and a full analysis of all leftover plots was conducted based on the following criteria: ownership, public vs. private, location, contextual inventory, land use, adjacent landmarks, circulation, nodes, view sheds, current function, accessibility aspects, edge, and adjacent physical typology. Of the original 24 plots, twelve were identified as potential "urban cracks", as these are owned by the municipality of Beirut and therefore can be designated as public. The data collected for the selected plots showed that leftover spaces are either hidden, unexploited, fenced in by the municipality as a small neglected green island, or used informally/illegally by neighboring users. These plots were further analyzed using SWOT-analysis to determine their potential contribution to public life based on a set of criteria: accessibility, physical typologies, visibility, pedestrian flow, vehicular flow, openness, enclosure, maintenance, management, potential program, and other observations. The conclusion of this analysis showed

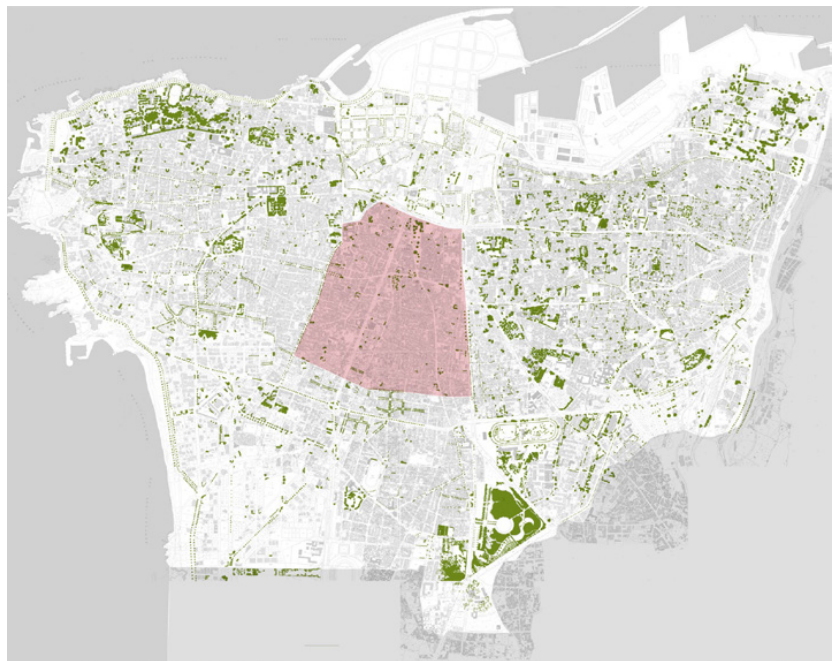


Figure 1

two major groupings of “urban cracks” within Bachoura and Mouseitbeh, prompting different approaches at the sub-neighborhood scales.

The “urban cracks” in the Bachoura sub-neighborhood are characterized by their linear organization along a major vehicular artery (Basta-Sodeco). These are a result of the process of street widening. All the spaces are adjacent to the street and abut the sidewalk. In this context, the strategy incorporates the two gardens along the same artery, improving the walking experience along the street and using the leftover spaces to connect commercial and educational adjacent uses into a coherent system of public space. At the programmatic level, the nodes will include greening locations, product display areas, seating areas, bus stop locations, and gathering spaces. In Mouseitbeh on the other hand, the “urban cracks” are more interstitial and tucked into a predominantly residential context. The strategy for these urban cracks will be focused on localized groupings of plots that serve the needs of residential buildings in the immediate vicinity. For instance: children’s play areas, social gathering spaces, spaces where mothers and women can meet safely, as well as greening opportunities.

Cities are compulsive melting pots of cultures, lifestyles, social behaviors, and opportunities. They entail complex settlements of social, political and spatial manifestations. They also consist of an ever-changing landscape, where rapid demographic and spatial transformations occur. The continuous shifts within their urban fabric represent a radical phenomenon, manifested in constant destruction and reconstruction patterns that result in scattered “cracks” in the urban landscape. People perceive these interstitial leftover spaces as dead, unattractive urban

spaces that are informally used, revealing the true meaning of ‘freespace’.

However, with increasingly limited land available for public space and the accentuated expansion of buildings and street networks, today the city strives for the slightest opportunity to improve and strengthen its fabric. And these scattered small plots happen to hold spatial and social qualities that possess a very high potential for extending the public realm.

By focusing on leftover spaces, the land opportunities of “urban cracks” are transformed into amenities. By integrating landscape and urban design methodologies, these cracks are envisioned as multi-functional spaces that respond to the social and commercial neighborhood context; enhance ecological function by creating new ecosystems; and are equitable as they are open-access and provide space for social interaction. In conclusion, “urban cracks” are anticipated as open public spaces that catalyze and improve the livability of neighborhoods.

FIGURES

Figure 1. Location of the Mousteitbeh and Bachoura neighborhoods within Beirut, Base map source: URBI, Habeeb Debs ©

Figure 2. The identified leftover spaces to be developed into a neighborhood strategy, Diagram drawn by Nour Bachacha ©

Figure 3. Preliminary planning and design strategy for the Mouseitbeh and Bachoura neighborhoods (Diagram drawn by Nour Bachacha ©)



Figure 2

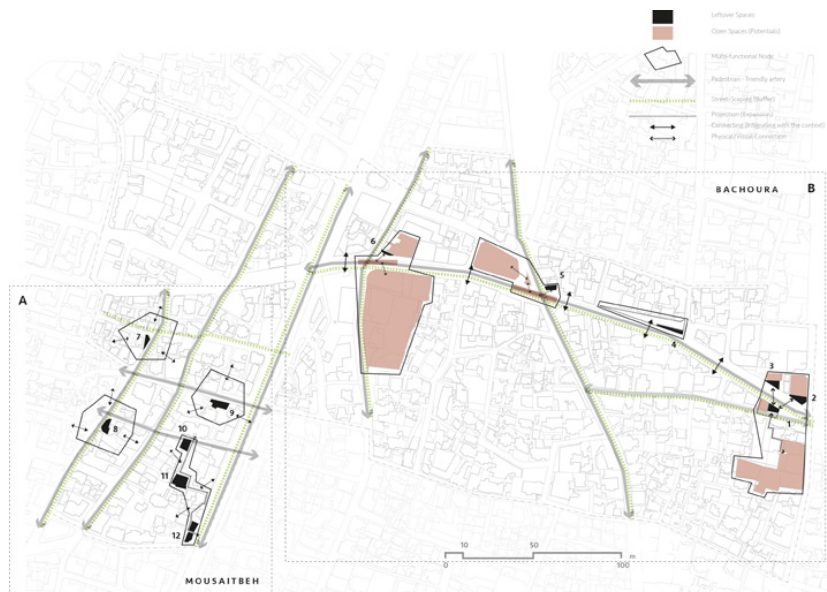


Figure 3

AUTHORS

Nour BACHACHA, is an undergraduate student in her final year in the landscape architecture program at the American University of Beirut (AUB). The research in presented here comprises her graduating capstone project advised by Dr. Yaser Abunnasr, which she will complete in May 2018. Nour is the president of Landscape Students Society at AUB, holds a teaching assistant position in the Landscape Architecture department at AUB. In the Spring of 2016 she participated in the IBDAA competition that was hosted by the AUB Nature Conservation Center and participated in two multi-disciplinary workshops on Culturally lead development of Tripoli, Lebanon. During the course of her studies, she participated in annual landscape exhibitions and was involved in several free- lance landscape consultancy projects.

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