

FROM THE REGULATORY “UN-BUILT” TO THE UNBUILT POTENTIALITIES OF BEIRUT

Stéphanie DADOUR (Author 1)
Mazen HAIDAR (Author 2)

Author 1: PhD from the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Grenoble

Author 2: École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris La Villette, Sorbonne Paris 1

Often dismissed from the field of architecture and furthermore associated with pejorative ideas, transitional situations eloquently reflect the cultural context. Perceived as spontaneous and rebellious, the urban multi-layered fabric of Beirut functions as a favorable site of analysis. By offering a decentered outlook on the city, we will explore how these places struggle to be valued as having “potential” rather than posing a “threat”. Indeed, by deconstructing specific situations, this contribution seeks to explore alternative ways of fabricating the city and living in it.

Following this logic, *abandoned territories* at an urban scale can no longer be observed only as voids in the strict meaning of the term; interrupted and abandoned construction sites or buildings for example gradually become an integral part of the urban open landscape. Given the extended duration of these presumed transitional situations, boundaries between what is commonly considered as a moment of discontinuity on the one hand (such as the remains of an old building, an excavated site or an abandoned concrete building structure) and what is usually described as a positive representation of the cityscape on the other (finished buildings and planned spaces) are seemingly fading.

What are the silent processes proving that the city is not dominated only by the “built”? Under which conditions do these *territories* appear? Furthermore, what forms of power and negotiation are they subject to?

From this decentered perspective, we will present three situations known for their recurrence and duration or extension in time in the city of Beirut. For each example, we will propose scenarios allowing us to pursue and develop the idea of transition and translation of spaces.

1-PARKING LOTS AS *THIRD LANDSCAPES*

Apprehended generally as a vacant zone destined to disappear, open-air parking lots in Beirut offer a more sophisticated narrative when observed as dynamic processes rather than static entities. An unbuilt space waiting for a development, or a deconstructed spot within the saturated city, a parking lot retraces a long trajectory between abandonment, demolition, temporary reuse, construction sites and finished buildings. Addressing each one of these phases can lead to a better consideration of the interconnections between appearance and disappearance of these interstitial places. In other words, understanding the multiple meanings carried by these open spaces is achieved through a reading spread over different periods of time.

While parking lots generally consist of a simple improvised asphalted area, they often bear witness to the evolution of a neighborhood. Being arranged in the first place in a makeshift fashion, they often show traces of pre-existing structures. These vary from residual walls still visible leaning on adjacent buildings, to fences and door gates of demolished houses reused temporarily, or even climbing plants and trees that once outlined the perimeters of gardens in the early and mid-nineteenth century villas and residential blocks. As a revitalized space in a dense area, these parking lots remind users of a particular situation or scenery that was interrupted. At the same time, the passive preservation of fragments of the past develops a projection into the future in the common imaginary, where the space will shift from a boundless temporality to a well-defined present,

captured in a new finished building. Even when the site does not show any trace of a former construction, it represents by its very existence an interval between a place that existed and a place that will exist. In fact, according to the old rental law in Lebanon, the eviction of renters of a residential building is possible if the building they occupy is to be demolished. At the same time, during the waiting period following demolition works and the acquisition of a construction permit, empty urban lots must be upgraded and re-used according to the building code, to provide temporary solutions to congestion problems.

Drawing on this varied process, car parks can be approached as interstitial places dedicated to processing and reshaping the urban memory there; the constant change of the urban landscape comes to a halt, allowing old and new residents to either look back on what was eradicated from their neighborhood scene, or to anticipate a forthcoming situation. Considering the historic dynamism of the urban fabric of the city of Beirut, these evolving sites can therefore be tackled at different levels.

Firstly, they can be considered from the point of view of their ability to offer temporary solutions to the shortage of recreational space in the city: While retaining their vocation as parking lots on the ground, elevated provisional structures could host a public space for educational and cultural activities. Secondly, they can be addressed as an itinerant project, giving a positive meaning to the seemingly inevitable demolition of part of the existing city.



Figure 1

2- BILLBOARDS ON CONSTRUCTION SITES AS EXPECTED USAGES

To advertise construction projects in Beirut, developers often display large billboards *in situ*, reproducing the proposed reality to come. These displays exemplify computerized “biopolitic” renderings that simulate the building, its interior, surroundings, illusory residents and their lifestyle.

The displays themselves work as an apparatus. Not only do they act as an image of a ready-made future, they are also utilized as a physical barrier to close off the scene



Figure 2

behind them. As such, they serve to veil and replace the transformation and the theatre of the construction site. The real environment is hereafter objectified and takes on the form of a projected reality. The monumentality of the billboard is furthermore emphasized by the “augmented reality” of the virtual, making the difference between the real and the semblance of reality barely distinguishable. This overlap eliminates the hybrid spatial experience, raising fundamental questions about the correspondence between reality and its representations. The superposition of these two layers constitutes the experience of an image contained within itself. This image looks to reach an unattainable simulated reality.

Here, different perceptions of utopia are prevalent within the social consciousness of the city. In other words, a projected image of an anonymous global city that is produced by the schemes of politicians, investors, developers, contractors, promoters, architects and consumers.

Condemned for the agenda they hide, billboards are also celebrated for the ideal world they represent. A world that is, moreover, part of an omnipresent nostalgia in the collective Lebanese imagination; that of a Middle Eastern Switzerland.

Thus, this virtual reality seems to be more real than the current reality. The image always refers to a project of a “good” or “positive” appearance: a modern and clean city at the height of the world’s great cities, offering breath-

taking views and heights. It is hyperreal in the sense that its blooming character is accentuated: the sky and the sea are bluer than blue and the streets are purified from anything that can recall disorder or undesirable scenes, such as the construction sites themselves.

Beirut, collage-city par excellence, allows the implementation of these billboards as small utopias. In their possible simulacra resides their strength: they elicit a reaction and interaction. Given their large size, they are to be considered among the remaining spaces to have the potential impact of establishing a more balanced dialogue between citizens and planners. Rather than remaining confined to the promotion of luxury, they have the potential of also becoming a space to project and reformulate expectations for the future, offering practical solutions to the actual disorder in the adjacent buildings and urban sites. By dedicating an imaginative space extending beyond the plot area and by identifying and exemplifying methods to upgrade the neighborhood, billboards become a space to raise awareness of architecture and the quality of the built environment.

3- DWELLED/INHABITED IN TRANSITION

The suspended and the unfinished have characterized the urban landscape in Beirut since the beginning of the twentieth century. Anticipating new needs of the growing family, individual properties adopted an incomplete posture, usually remaining visible for long periods through pending structural elements. Resembling a continuous construction site, buildings are completed decades later, often with an architectural language differing from the original.

Another type of transitional dwelling includes the adaptation of abandoned newly finished apartments by Lebanese refugees. After the first rounds of the civil war, the phenomenon of occupying empty buildings became a common and instinctive practice. Evicted families from the Qarantina, Nabaa and other districts of East Beirut have been occupying spacious residential blocks since 1976 in the once exclusive districts of Ramlet el Bayda, Tallet el Khayyat, in beach resorts such as Acapulco, Saint Michel and Saint Simon in South Beirut, and in a number of hotels. Spacious apartments over-equipped with bathrooms, service areas and entrance doors offered different options for space rearrangement to the new inhabitants, allowing them to split the space into several residential units, with the goal of hosting various families.

A more recent example includes construction sites inhabited by workers. Adapted to basic needs, unfinished spaces are made livable by the workers themselves, who mostly come from neighboring Syria. The materials added by the workers are very often light and easy to manipulate (metallic structures, hollow blocs) and the techniques they use often lead to forms different from

those of the original architecture. Many of the spatial occupations try to reproduce different local common models of inhabiting and socializing, depending on their origin, habitus, etc.

As the site progresses, the shelters move, following the rhythm of construction development. Mobile shelters, therefore, define new ways to accommodate daily and basic needs while redefining the meaning of *suspension* and *the unfinished* in the collective consciousness.

From sophisticated dwellings to basic appropriations, these can represent an important source of information about usage possibilities of the built environment and hybrid implementation programs. By redefining security norms, suspended construction sites can become a welcoming place for temporary activities and become a space of hospitality rather than rejection.

The site thus becomes a place in the making, in the broad sense of the term, not only in order to become a building, but to imagine and formulate possible scenarios of living in buildings in transformation.

A QUESTION OF TIME, A QUESTION OF PERSPECTIVE

Focusing on transitional situations, our contribution aimed at suggesting potential uses and to offer a new reading of particular situations that produce the identity of a city.

What do these “objects”, “moments” or “places” tell us? How can we rethink them and mobilize them as a resource for the making of the city? To what extent are they resources that can help us change our relationship to the built environment?

Once built and inhabited—in other words, when it is appropriated and transformed by inhabitants or users—a construction, building, or project becomes architecture. At any time in the life of a specific building or site, a presence can represent an absence, while a void can determine a presence. Besides the binary emptiness-fullness, transitional situations such as in between void and construction, construction and dwelling, abandonment and demolition, or demolition and reconstruction, relate to a new way of looking at and fabricating architecture and the city.

The interest in such transformations lies in the tangible evidence of stratification of sites and buildings that can be explored. Indeed, the cumulative experience of subtracting, adding and suspending places acquires a patrimonial value that witnesses the evolution and the particularity of a city. In this perspective, the process of alteration and transformation becomes part of the city’s heritage. By reassessing the place through a dynamic reading without stressing on one specific phase, a more exhaustive appreciation of its abilities and potentials can be reached.



Figure 3

These places are often not physically free but they constitute an open field of action, a moment of suspension, dream or even of purification of memories and forgetfulness, becoming an essential part of the historical landscape of Beirut. This makes it possible to identify the existing gaps or what can potentially nest in these unfinished spaces that can be looked at, according to a different reading, as places of the infinite.

FIGURES

Figure 1. ©Randa Mirza (Beirut is back and it is beautiful)

Figure 2 and 3. © Mazen Haidar

AUTHORS

Stéphanie DADOUR holds a PhD from the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Grenoble and is an architectural historian and writer based in Paris. She is an associate professor at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Grenoble in "Histoires et Cultures Architecturales," member of the "Laboratoire des Métiers de l'Histoire de l'Architecture (ENSAG)" and the "Laboratoire Architecture, Culture et Société" (ENSA Paris-Malaquais). Her research projects deal with various themes, such as the divide between theory and practice, feminist theories and architecture as a domain of cultural representation. She has been awarded fellowships from the FQRSC and the Centre Pompidou, and took a Visiting Scholar position at Columbia University in New York.

Mazen HAIDAR, École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris La Villette, Sorbonne Paris 1. Architect in conservation who graduated from "La Sapienza" Rome, Italy, where he lived for over ten years. As a practicing architect, he is currently involved in several conservation projects in Lebanon and has taught in several academic institutions, including the Lebanese American University, the American University of Beirut and the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA). His ongoing PhD project at Paris 1, La Sorbonne, deals with the history of the residential building in Beirut and the practices of appropriation of architecture from the "modern movement."