
CHANGING REALITIES: TRAUMATIC URBANISM AS A MODE OF RESILIENCE IN INTRA-WAR BEIRUT

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In 1975, and in an ambiance of increasing tension, the streets of Beirut served as a stage for a series of violent events and in a matter of days, the sounds of mortar shells and machine guns provided an applied interpretation of the conflicting interests of the different Lebanese and global political players. With few intermissions and a fluctuating intensity, the urban warfare continued for the following 15 years, and resulted in massive destructions and significant movement of citizen's displacement. Following its instinct to survive and as a reaction to the on-going conflict, Beirut induced new forms of urbanism to maneuver through the imposed reality. The city became divided into two sides, and the once cosmopolitan vibrant city center, developed into an uninhabited green buffer between the rivals. Checkpoints were introduced to re-mark the acquired territories and the citizens' relation to their public space was redefined by the fields of snipers' fire. This metamorphosis of the city, together with the irregular and inconclusive nature of the conflict increased Beirut's immunity to a fatal end. During the 15 years course of the conflict hopes were revived with every ceasefire and few reconstruction plans were developed. This presentation looks into the spatial production in Beirut under the traumatic conditions of the Lebanese civil war. It argues that the continuous process of spatial production which is displayed in the rearrangement of spaces and everyday urban practices is in itself a demonstration of resilience.

Keywords

Civil War, Beirut, Resilience, Traumatic Urbanism

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Lebanese civil war, like most civil conflicts, had left a strong imprint on Beirut's urban fabric. In 1976, by the end of the second year of the 15-year conflict, a significant number of the buildings in Beirut downtown and hotels districts was already devastated by the crossfire of the rival militias.

Escaping both real and magnified threats, and seeking 'safety in similarity', many of the citizens of Beirut relocated in other districts throughout the early years of the war, creating more homogenous enclaves in many parts of the city. Checkpoints and roadblocks were installed by the fighting groups along the borders of these new territories, and strategic locations became occupied by militia members.

According to the available scholarship on Beirut's war spatiality, nearly every neighborhood of the city has been impacted by the armed conflict (Colleo, 1989, p.110). However, looking more closely, this paper argues that the transformation of the city during the war has created relatively safe enclaves. These enclaves have provided a considerable level of protection for the built environment, and a minimum practice of everyday life, which took place within its boundaries (Al Azm, 2017). As the conflict became largely contained on the border lines and particular fighting axes, many of the buildings within these enclaves survived the conflict and continued to stand during the following years.

In his work on the post-war reconstruction of Beirut, geographer and professor Heiko Schmid, documents and illustrates, that with an exception to some buildings along the fighting lines, many buildings around Beirut districts remained till the end of the war (Schmid, 2006). Similarly, Lebanese architect George Arbid agrees that "While many buildings were destroyed during the war, the majority of buildings were destroyed after" (Creative Cities Cairo, 2016).

The arguments of both Schmid and Arbid, are mainly addressing the case of downtown Beirut, posing criticism to the post-war trends in the re-construction of the city. Nonetheless, the arguments also provide an insight on the "structural" status of Beirut's built environment at the end of the war. Taking this further, and through establishing relationships between the physical structures, and the everyday life confined and shaped by (but also, actively shaping) such structures, an understanding of the level and dimension of the quotidian practice during the conflict could be developed.

Looking at this continuous process of spatial production, in terms of practices and spaces which shape and are being shaped by the built environment and other forces, the majority of wartime spatial interventions and transformations were not driven by a formal planning process, but rather by impromptu necessities, and in a spontaneous response to various actions and forces. Building upon this, the discussion here is based on a recognition of the city as one intelligent adaptive evolutionary system (Moystad, 1998; Malfroy, 1998) encompassing actors, structures, networks and the built environment. The following paragraphs explore the theoretical foundation of adaptive urbanism, or what has been termed by many authors as "Urban Morphogenesis".

2. DEFINING MORPHOGENESIS

Over the past years, the morphogenesis of the urban form, has become a rich area of study for urban historians and scholars. Swiss professor and architectural historian Sylvain Malfroy (1998) provides a good entry point as she proposes the city as a "woven tissue" of different elements, which transforms over time, through organizing and reorganizing itself, following particular modes or logics. Departing from this hypothesis, both Malfroy (1998) and Moudon (1997) explain urban morphogenesis as the transformation of the built environment as a result of the sum of uncoordinated small acts carried by individual groups.

Over time, the urban setting transforms and configures its form in reaction to various social, political and economic forces. The users of the built environment, regularly alter their spaces and the way they use them, to respond to their changing priorities and needs. The scale of these alterations could vary from the very intimate space to the neighborhood. The inter-relational network of these alterations, taking place without previous planning could be rendered as morphogenesis. A deviation from what is planned, or what has been seen as a final state, driven by the actual situation, with an aim of facilitating or securing the use of space. In this sense, the city with all its structures and actors is rendered as an evolutionary system that is responsive to changing forces and contexts.

Following this interpretation, the process of urban morphogenesis highlights the open end of spatial production and the resilient capacity of cities in general.

3. DEFINING RESILIENCE

In order to investigate whether the transformation of the Lebanese capital during the civil war could be seen as a form of resilience, a relevant definition of resilient urbanism is brought to discussion. Architect and educator, Adrian Lahoud (2010) defines the resilient city as “one that has evolved in an unstable environment and developed adaptations to deal with uncertainty”. For Lahoud, resilience is the ability of cities to adapt to the shock, caused by an unexpected traumatic event. He stresses on the difference between “recovery” and “return”, for resilient cities do not return to their pre-traumatic state but try to develop “new forms of stability” based on their history and traumatic experience.

Similarly, Diane E. Davis defines resilience in operational terms as the acts to establish pre-violence normalcy. She explains that resilience becomes clear through the ability of the citizens to practice their everyday activities by adapting to the new violent conditions (Davis, 2012, p.32). The pre-violence normalcy which Davis talks about, does not contradict with Lahoud’s refusal of defining resilience as a return to a pre-traumatic state (of stability). The normalcy here is understood as a minimum degree of practicing everyday life, but not a particular (previous) urban state. Davis clarifies “resilience is evident when residents [are able] to cope with and adapt to violence such that their lives are able to absorb it without being in consistent disruption” (Davis, 2012, p.32).

In the same context, Vale and Campanella argue that recovery is an on-going process. They argue for an understanding of resilience, as how we go through traumatic events, and not how we get over them (Vale and Campanella, 2005, p.14). It becomes clear here that adapting - regardless of how passive the term may sound - is a main aspect of urban resilience. In urban and architectural terms, this adaptation could be translated to every spatial practice and modification to the built environment which contribution to the development of an “everyday normalcy”, as opposed to a “state of shock”.

Furthermore, Davis introduces the concept of Negative Resilience, where “decreased levels of violence are achieved through the domination of non-state armed actors”, a definition that could facilitate our understanding of the case of Beirut, where the strong presence of armed militias played an important role in creating spaces for resilience, as the following sections will discuss.

A challenge emerges here as the paper tries to avoid falling into the problematic comparison between the action and the reaction, for that case “urbicide” and “negative resilience”. Sara Fregonese (2008), interprets urbicide as both a deliberate violence against the built environment, but also, and this is more important for the scope of this paper, “as a statement, for example, the destruction of heterogeneity and its substitution of homogeneity”. She argues that according to Martin Coward’s “politics of urbicide”, the re-arrangement, and the creation of new spatial orders that limits and reduces the interaction between the different groups, is an intrinsic part of the process of Urbicide. However, this paper proposes a different reading, which locates this homogenisation (safeguarded by checkpoints and armed actors in the case of Beirut) in a morphological transformation of the urban fabric. It argues that this morphogenesis, had actually created an enabling environment for resilience, which became manifested in the survival of a large portion of the built environment, and the creation of new shopping districts within this homogenous enclaves, benefitting from the relative safety created by the very act of homogenization. This paper hypothesizes, that without this process of transformation during the conflict, the damage to the built environment and everyday practices could have been larger under the particular condition and nature of the Lebanese civil war.

It is important to clarify that this paper does not attempt to give more value to homogeneity, over heterogeneity, but rather tries to avoid this discussion by looking directly into the spatial resilience of Beirut, the divided city, throughout the civil war.

4. BEIRUT’S MORPHOGENESIS AS A MODE OF RESILIENCE

Different writers and scholars tend to view the Lebanese civil war in its complete destruction of Beirut and its livability. However, a closer look onto the urban fabric, brings our attention to different scenarios.

In the early weeks of the conflict, as the fighting has intensified, checkpoints were introduced by the rival militias drawing new boundaries and territories. As a result, a wave of displacement took place as inhabitants of Beirut found more safety in districts controlled by militias belonging to their own sects. Many of the Christians of West and South Beirut, had moved to the Eastern side of the city and its Northern suburbs. These areas were mainly controlled by Christian and nationalist militias like the Kata’ib, and the Tigers. Similarly, Sunnis of East Beirut sought shelter in the Western neighborhoods, at that time controlled by the Palestinian militias and their Lebanese allies. After the failure of a handful ceasefires, and as it started to become clear that the conflict will last for more weeks, the commercial activities, faced by the increasing destruction in down town, moved to these new homogenous enclaves to meet the purchase needs of the displaced population (Beyhum, 1994).

In the following paragraphs, the paper explores the available data about the practice of everyday life - or what we can term here as resilience - in the different neighborhoods during the conflict.

Starting from the (North) Western district of Ras Beirut, Maria Abunnasr argues that, to an extent, Ras Beirut remained both safe, and inter-confessional during the first years of the conflict (Abunnasr, 2013, p.248). In 1976, it was described as the safest part of the city (Abunnasr, 2013, p.223). At least till 1982, the district has witnessed a presence of both local Christian and western communities, in what was rendered as the Muslim side of the city. In the years following 1982, the situation has slightly changed, with increasing attacks on the Westerners living around Ras Beirut. Abunnasr discusses the transformations that took place in the district during that period, quoting Maha Yahya’s (1998) estimate of around 6,000 homes being partially or totally destroyed during the battles of 1984 between the Lebanese army and the the opposition. Nevertheless, she assures that the war has not destroyed Ras Beirut so much physically, as much as the postwar period (Abunnasr, 2013, p.255).

Looking more closely at particular streets and neighborhoods of Ras Beirut, Hamra, which had served since the early 1970s as a high-end commercial pole, next to downtown's older market, started to adapt to its new clientele. Many of the Christian traders left to the other side of the city, creating a confessional homogenization among the remaining traders. Imported goods were replaced with affordable Middle Eastern and Asian ones, and the currency exchange offices took over the place of the fancy jewelry shops and cafes (Arnaud et al., 2013). This transformation and adaptation to a new conflicting position, could be discussed here as a mode of resilience. Hamra remained an active commercial spot. The trade activity - the small unorganized acts taken by traders and street vendors, who had decided to remain (or relocate to) Hamra, and have their businesses open and operating - is in this sense an act of resilience; an attempt to create a space, where everyday life could be practiced, as opposed to the violence and uncertainty of the war. It could be even further argued, that the close off of the northern part of the "Green (dividing) Line" at the end of 1976, had contributed to strengthening such activities. At this moment, with some exceptions, the fight in Beirut became largely contained along the green line. The majority of destruction took place there as militants exchanged fire from the two sides.

Naturally, Ras Beirut, already had particular social qualities which, some could argue, paved the path for its resilience. The district has long been inhabited by a multicultural, multi-ethnic population, creating a mini-cosmopolitan zone within the city. Yet, similar resilient practices could be noticed in the other enclaves which has been formed during the conflict.

Mousaytbe, which did not have the same historical and social qualities of its neighboring Ras Beirut, witnessed the departure of the Greek Orthodox inhabitants to the Christian dominated quarters on the East side of Beirut. During the war, Mousaytbe became dominated by Muslim inhabitants. This had developed in parallel to an increase of the commercial activities which sought new locations outside of the older centers (Arnaud et al., 2013). Particularly, in Mar Elias and Mazraa, many shops and small businesses started to appear in what previously used to be a residential area, as it "was considered safe in respect to the armaments used" (Davie, 1994, p.2). Similarly, in Geitawi, on the eastern side of the divided city, the shops started to re-open again. Adapting to the new situation in East Beirut, and its disconnection from the other side of the city (Arnaud et al., 2013). During the 1980s, two shopping malls were established in Geitawi street, offering a variety of commercial activities, which were funded and supported in many cases by the militia system. Besides, many empty spaces around the area were illegally occupied and transformed into gaming halls or beauty salons (Arnaud et al., 2013).

While the commercial activities discussed above, represent only one dimension of a multi-dimensional resilient behavior in war-torn Beirut, an extensive investigation of the other spatial practices could provide a deeper insight into the everydayness of urban communities during conflicts.

5. CONCLUSION

Generally, the spatial patterns manifested in the built environment and the way it is experienced transform over years. During wars and conflicts, the pace and intensity of such transformations become evident as the urban fabric combining architecture, networks and users try to adapt to the unpredictable event. The process of adaptation to the conditions of the conflict, trying to establish an everyday normalcy lie at the core of urban resilience. During the Lebanese civil war, large parts of Beirut have been exposed to various forms of violence, forcing different groups of population to relocate in other parts of the city, and creating more homogenous enclaves. The enclaves were usually bounded by checkpoints, roadblocks, barricades and (or) the existing geographical and topographical boundaries. A strong presence of a particular militia group would define the nature of the territory, and control the access points. This form of transformation has contributed to the creation of relatively safe zones within these enclaves, pushing the armed conflict to the borders between the newly created territories.

Owing to this, a minimum practice of everyday life was exercised within this enclaves. Some schools and universities continued to function during the conflict. Smaller stores and grocery shops had their doors open. Responding to the changing needs of the resident of the city, new shopping activities started to appear in both sides of the divided city.

In addition to educational and commercial activities, residents of Beirut adjusted their spaces and the way they use it in order to go through the traumatic events. All these acts together formed a statement of resilience – an open process of continuous adaptation to the changing conditions of the civil war.

As a result, different parts of the city managed to survive the conflict, even if with some inevitable losses to the built environment and the urban life. The transformation of the city had, to an extent, limited the major destructions along the fighting lines and provided a space for a minimum level of everyday life practices within the territories marked by such lines.

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