‘Urban challenges’ forum
Planning, Beirut-style

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A number of colleagues and I from different parts of UCL’s Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment recently secured a small grant for a study tour to Beirut. Why Beirut? I hear you ask. Well it seemed like a good idea at the time.

In fact it turned out to be an inspired although challenging choice; challenging because an outbreak of sectarian shooting just up the coast on the day we arrived necessitated some rapid changes in our itinerary; inspired because the sheer complexity and enigmas of Beirut kept us engaged and debating for days.

In contemporary Beirut, as in Lebanon (indeed the whole region), everything seems to begin and end with religion. Whilst Beirut has a history that dates back to the Phoenicians who flourished from approximately 1500 to 500BC, Lebanon as a country is a completely artificial construct, created after the first world war as an area mandated to the French. Both city and country resemble a patchwork quilt of religious territories: Sunni, Shi’a, Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Druze, Greek Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Alawite, and Roman Catholic; whilst Beirut’s streets are controlled by groups within groups, each representing different political as well as religious affiliations, and each marking their own territories with flags, posters, and, occasionally, checkpoints.

Overlaying these territories and managing basic services for anywhere between one and two million inhabitants (no recent census exists) is a system of local municipalities. As the capital city, central government is also located in Beirut, and represents the last piece in a complex jigsaw of power relations. At this level a unique system of power sharing exists between the key religious groupings that typifies the uneasy religious and political alliances that run the city. Thus, for example, transport is located in one Ministry under one religious grouping, and development in another, the result being indecision. Indeed governance in the country is generally weak, so much so that it is not uncommon to hear locals refer to their system as ‘anarchy in action’; although that fails to recognise the true complexity of the situation.

The other important dimension to mention at the start is the profoundly unfortunate tendency for the resulting complex network of power bases, territories, ideologies and insecurities to generate frictions that from time to time give rise to local aggression, which, at its worst, resulted in the fifteen year civil war between Islamic and Christian groups. If an illustration of the pointlessness of religious inspired conflict is required, then this is surely it. The war was fought largely on the streets of Beirut between 1975 to 1990, and despite widespread death and destruction (120,000 killed), the war resulted in absolutely no gain for either side. Perhaps for this reason, some groups claim it never actually ended.

Lebanon has also long been the stage upon which surrounding more powerful countries play out their petty-squabbles. For these countries, battle on Lebanese territory is clearly much more palatable than fighting on their own, whilst the inherent weakness and fragmentation of Lebanese society makes resistance difficult. This, unfortunately, leads to the regular destruction of Lebanese towns and cities about which the Lebanese seem resigned, even sanguine. As one Hezbollah employee commented to us: ‘Everyone expects war, it is just a matter of time’.

Lets hope he’s wrong, but for an urbanist, Beirut at least provides a fascinating case study of how cities, even in the face of such endemic and concurrent problems, have the power to continually renew
themselves. Moreover, in the case of Beirut, this chaos has even given rise to a range of interesting, sometimes even admirable and surprising development models. Five models are apparent.

**Urban laissez-faire**

The first might be called the urban laissez-faire model as it applies to much of the inner urban fabric of Beirut and to large parts of the city’s suburbs. The roots of planning in the city date back to the French mandate, with planning controls that are largely based on Napoleonic law, and a system of zoning setting down as-of-right entitlements though FAR (Floor Area Ratios) and volume controls, e.g. daylight angles. The basic FAR entitlements, in the form of a series of concentric rings around the city of reducing density were established in the zoning plan of 1956 (never revised) with large parts of the city covered by a 5:1 ratio. After setbacks are taken into account, this gives rise to high buildings (10 stories plus) and an increasingly dense city. Beyond this, almost nothing is controlled

Within this context, and somewhat surprisingly given its inbuilt instability, Beirut has for some time been subject to a building boom that the UK development industry would be envious of. The source of this investment lies in the remittances sent home from the 15 million or so Lebanese living abroad (to a country with only around 4 million inhabitants). In Beirut, when mediated through the crude zoning system, this results in towers popping up willy-nilly across the city, towers that are often left unoccupied as expats buy and leave these spaces as long-term investments. Another result is that the city’s Ottoman and French Mandate heritage has been rapidly disappearing, as have good parts of the continuous street wall of the historic city which otherwise had survived largely intact despite its partial periodic destruction through conflict. Now, however, it is being increasingly undermined by unchecked speculation and insensitive planning.

Of even greater concern from this laissez-faire model is the manner in which the urban city has been allowed to become completely and utterly invaded by traffic, so much so that rush hour (in which large parts of the city are basically grid-locked) now extends through much of the working day. This state of affairs has been brought on by an almost complete absence of public transport and by the highest rate of car ownership in the Middle East (almost one car per two head of population). The result is streets that often seem to be little more than car parks, horrendous pollution, and endless frustration when trying to move around the city. It is sanctioned through the absence of any serious city-wide transport planning (beyond a desire to build more roads) that is largely a result of a stalemated on such concerns (as it is on any serious planning) resulting from the factionalisation of government which can’t agree on a way forward. It offers a masterclass in the over-politicisation of planning, and of what happens in a complex urban environment that continues to develop in an urban policy vacuum and with only the most basic of regulatory controls.

**Peri-urban laissez faire**

The problems of traffic in Beirut itself are further multiplied by a similar laissez faire approach in the

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*Figure 1: Streets as car parks.*
peri-urban surroundings to the city. Lebanon as a whole is subject to a further as-of-right entitlement (in existence since independence) that gives landowners a universal right to develop at 0.4-0.8 FAR, anywhere. This entitlement sets an expectation of development which is multiplied along the Lebanese Mediterranean coast by the huge pressure for development as people are driven out of Beirut by very high property prices, driven up by the demands of overseas investors.

The result is a more or less continuous urban sprawl in the zone along the coast between the sea and the Lebanon Mountains, with very little control on the quality of this development and no public transport to move people from these areas into the city (where the jobs are) and back again. As such, beyond its own local impact, this development further feeds the traffic and pollution problems of the city itself, whilst the edge city residents that live in these areas spend longer and longer in their cars to reach the city and to get home. With the possible exception of the county’s developers who continue to exploit the opportunities available to them and the ready market of the young and the middle classes for whom life in the city has become untenable, there seem to be few winners from this scenario, least of all the environment.

The case offers a further masterclass, this time in the need to set realistic urban growth boundaries, and to engage in serious strategic planning in order to focus and better direct the significant private and limited but important public investments.

Urban abandonment
If the first two models seem less than desirable, the third is certainly to be avoided. Indeed, a further reason for the desire of many with choice but without wealth to move out of the city is the extreme sectarian nature of the poorer parts of it. I have already mentioned how the city is divided into territories, but it is also interspersed with camps for dispossessed Palestinians who have occupied these places since the Arab/Israeli war of 1948.

The camps are a sight to behold, whilst their citizens are denied citizenship in the country at large (despite most having been born in Lebanon). Without the normal rights extended to Lebanese (to work, own property, travel abroad, etc.) generation after generation are forced to scrape out a living in the face of huge poverty, massive deprivation, and insanitary living conditions.

Whilst a few NGOs attempt to improve the situation, these massive unplanned and yet densely populated and hugely vibrant areas of the city have gradually become more and more permanent, although no more humane or safe. Instead, as our guide explained, they exist on the Darwinian principle of survival of the fittest. Planning, or any form of building control, might as well be from another world, and instead we see a potent mix of endurance and extremism and a stark reminder of the sorts of urban conditions that planning was first invented to confront. It is just a shame that, in this case (one suspects for political reasons), for over 60 years planning has been completely impotent to act.

But if all this seems too much to bear, then Beirut still has some interesting surprises up its sleeve,
The first regards its city centre.

As well as the government itself, the shareholders of the new company were to be all the owners and tenants of the area prior to the war who were then systematically tracked down (an exercise that took 12 years to complete as many had scattered across the globe). These parties were given shares in proportion to their previous interests in the area, whilst additional shares were sold to external investors in order to finance the reconstruction.

In this way planning and construction began almost immediately in a coordinated and well-resourced manner, and without the infinite complexity and fragmentation that would otherwise have dogged such an effort. The transformation has been huge, but 23 years later, the large majority of the area that is now widely referred to as Solidere has been rebuilt with a mixture of high rise, high density, and high end real estate, alongside extensive heritage reclamation, a true mix of uses, a network of high quality public spaces, and the return, once again, of a city centre that feels like the centre of a significant capital city.

The company now has ambitious future plans and has reclaimed a further 73 hectares from the sea next to the rebuilt city centre. This is space for a future highly profitable expansion for those original shareholders who hung onto their shares, and will also deliver the city’s first new public park since independence. Yet despite its undoubted achievements, Solidere is not without its critiques. Many argue that the area has become far more exclusive, over-sanitised, and is no longer (despite the presence of rebuilt places of worship from practically every faith) the spiritual heart of the city. Residential property, for example, has risen from $900 per square metre to $6,000 during the life of Solidere, excluding all but the very rich from living in the centre. For such critics the phoenix-like rebirth of the area by a private company is incompatible
with a truly ‘public’ vision for the area, whilst the ambitious plans for expansion (both into the sea and beyond the inner ring road) act to confirm this.

For the outsider looking on, however, the company’s achievements are truly impressive, not least in the creation of a coherent, connected and high quality urban fabric that has established a resilient structure on which the area will continue to develop and change, perhaps in a less corporate manner, long into the future. Indeed it is difficult to see how, particularly in Lebanon but perhaps anywhere, a less directed actor could have achieved anywhere near the same degree of success. Although private rather than public, the model clearly has resonance with the single purpose development corporation model that has been favoured in the UK when the state wants to get things done (new town corporations, development corporations, Olympic delivery authority, etc.). The fact that there is a democratic deficit (in all such cases) is the price to be paid. In Beirut, it has been worth it.

Suburban paternalism
But if the market has driven the success of Solidere, then a very different force has driven similar rapid development in Beirut’s Southern Suburbs, an area largely dominated by one sect, the Shi’a. In 2006, these areas were subjected to 4,000 air strikes in 33 days of relentless bombing by the Israeli air force who wished to destroy the headquarters and spiritual home of their arch enemy Hezbollah. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the campaign, the result was the significant damage or total destruction of 1,300 buildings, widespread devastation to much of southern Beirut, and 13,000 families made homeless.

Remarkably, five years later the area had been totally reconstructed, driven by a determination born of religious fervour and sectarian hatred; in this case focused on rebuilding the area as fast as possible and to a better standard than before in order to:

• Disprove the Israelis’ boast that the area had been bombed into oblivion and would never recover, and
• Ensure the community of the Southern Suburbs did not disperse, and with it Hezbollah’s powerbase.

Indeed it was Hezbollah that were behind the reconstruction. Hezbollah see themselves primarily as a resistance organisation (although others brand them as terrorists and fanatics), but in this case they quickly moved out of resistance mode and into reconstruction mode, setting up Waad Rebuild, an agency dedicated to rebuilding. The move has been branded by those cynical about their motives as simply an attempt to prove that, despite the bombing, Hezbollah remained as resilient as before, and undiminished in their power. But, like Solidere, even if one might criticise their motives, it is difficult to criticise their effectiveness or what was achieved.

Just as in the Central district, Hezbollah (via Waad) began by taking upon themselves the ability to control the reconstruction in its totality, this time though a ‘participation’ exercise that asked property owners if they wished to be part of a single coordinated rebuild, or to rebuild themselves. The
result was 90% in favour of a coordinated approach, with 10% opting out and rebuilding themselves. To do this, Waad quickly set about creating plans, contracting, and rebuilding, utilising finances both from the Lebanese government (who in other ways were not involved at all) and overseas, particularly from Iran. The plan involved providing temporary homes to all the displaced families, renovating within 12 months the 1,030 damaged but repairable buildings, before starting the reconstruction of the 270 buildings (5,800 units) that were beyond repair.

Alongside the buildings themselves, guidelines were established by Waad to rebuild the public realm, and to establish more parking in the area (largely underneath the rebuilt buildings), and to make some minor improvements to building alignment, corner treatments, street wall continuity, etc. where previously there had been inconsistencies. However, apart from these relatively minor alterations, the aim was to reconstruct a facsimile of what had been destroyed; the same types of buildings of the same heights, in the same locations, with the same number of apartments, etc. as had existed before. In part this was because speed was of the essence, and, despite Hezbollah’s power in the locality, as a civil organisation Waad did not see that they had the authority to challenge the FAR as set down in the 1956 zoning plan (a clear demonstration of the power of such regulations). Moreover, with no commercial motive, only a religious, social and political one, they saw no need to try and make a profit out of the redevelopment, or to achieve anything other than the speediest re-housing of the families that had been displaced.

Undoubtedly impressive, the dynamism and focus of Waad in the Southern Suburbs is in stark contrast to the situation in the Palestinian camps where so little effort has been made to improve the lives of the inhabitants, despite Hezbollah being active in the camps (alongside other groups) and the Palestinians being Muslims (albeit Sunni rather than Shi’a). There, the ongoing suffering of the disposed seems more potent, as a political message, than their rehabilitation or short-term wellbeing. This is the complexity and conundrum that is Beirut, and the Middle East!

The re-building of the Southern Suburbs undoubtedly illustrates that religious sectarianism can be a potent force for change, with the ability to mobilise a community to get things done when in their narrow interests. But this was also the area where those we met were most fatalistic about their future, accepting that the rebuilding was just temporary, until the next war. So, whilst concerned with construction, the forces that drove this fifth development model had at their heart ‘resistance’ rather than rebuilding, and this was predicated on the continuing destruction of the city and the lives of its inhabitants for whom they had a paternalistic, but not entirely altruistic sense of responsibility.

**The five models**

Beirut has always been a fascinating city, with layer upon layer of complexity. The five Beirut development models reflect this and also show how innovation can occur even in the face of adversity. This was most noticeable in the cases of Solidere and the Southern Suburbs, both of which (with...
very different motives) demonstrated the power of dedicated, non-governmental delivery vehicles to achieve real change, fast. Elsewhere, however, the city screams out for some real planning at both strategic and local scales and, without it, becomes ever more unsustainable and challenging for those without significant wealth to live.

So whilst the city as a whole shows great resilience and many citizens of Beirut, in particular the young educated middle classes, obviously continue to enjoy their daily lives despite their sometimes precarious situations, the city as a whole could deliver so much more if only someone would take charge. But that, in essence, is the problem in Beirut - too many factions, too much division, and no sense of a common direction. It needs planning!

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