‘Urban challenges’ forum

Sectarian divide, socio-urban fragmentations and the case for interdisciplinary research and observation in Beirut: An intro

William Hunter
Development Planning Unit, The Bartlett, UCL

Pages: 108-109
From science to medicine, geography to politics, interdisciplinary research has held, even in its most infantile and sceptical forms as well as its expanded adoption, an endless amount of potential for addressing the world’s greatest conundrums. For the parallel disciplines of Architecture, Planning, and Urbanism, the notion of ‘interdisciplinary’ has always had, at the very least, a default presence. And in fact there have been countless moments where an interdisciplinary agenda has taken a central role in the pursuit of formulating a better understanding between diverse viewpoints. The belief here is that fruitful and respectful communication across distinct approaches to an urban problematic might in fact yield complimentary methodology that could lead to more advanced and sophisticatedly holistic strategies for action.

In regard to the urban landscape, the notion of research itself wears many different hats, its most important face arguably being that of observation. To observe in space within an interdisciplinary directive is to immerse one’s self and be free, if lucky, from the most influencing assumptions and opinions. We soak in what and who surrounds us in order to understand our own worth in society and in this particular case, our location on the disciplinary spectrum.

The following essays in this special Forum section represent this type of experience. Made possible by a Bartlett Grand Challenges Small Grant fund, the authors, all academics based in different departments within the Bartlett School at UCL, laid out a flexible observational mission with the intention to expose themselves to the vantages of different practical and theoretical urban processes. As with any urban research, they needed a geographical platform in which to apply those vantages. For one reason or another Beirut - that most sectarian and modern of Middle Eastern cities - came to the centre.

Beirut still finds itself some 20 plus years on from the end of Lebanon’s Civil War (the 1990 date being clearly inconclusive amongst the public) in a state of grand reconstruction and struggle over the urban domain. And with an apparent division between large-scale elite capital-driven development and a more socially accessible plan for the city’s most vulnerable and lost spaces, many believe that the naturalising reconstruction effort is a mere fictional projection of a peaceful and prosperous Lebanon. For the outside observer, Beirut is a city of confusion. In some areas, it still commands a healthy and local cosmopolitan feel, the kind of place we all could feel at home in. While in others, a less critical eye would be mesmerised by the richness of a tabula rasa afforded luxury. Then you have the battleground, those central and peripheral areas of the city still in cultural, religious and edificial disarray that saw the brunt of militarised violence from 1975-1990. It is these spaces and the debated heterotopia that speak volumes to the puzzling enigma and uncertainty of Beirut. The abandoned nature of Martyrs’ Square and the symbolically literal Green Line, for example, signal the opposing and
unhinging lack of decisive conversation regarding the city’s heritage and future. Transecting the city through its degraded neighbourhoods and war-torn monumentality, its traffic-strewn thoroughfares, and its newly-built glamour reminds the casual and astute observer that this is a city in flux - but not simply of the development type. Speaking with locals it is almost disheartening to hear the unapologetic pessimism in voices, young and old. The majority of the public feel (or know) that the region is a volcano of potential eruption, simply sitting in a stagnant moment of seemingly calm composure. In a future uncertain where everything is connected, yet so disconnected, it almost seems impossible to fathom any kind of coherent planning mechanism that could achieve such an intricately complex elucidation of the facts.

This brings us back to the point of interdisciplinary engagement. If everything before us seems pitted for fragmentation and incoherency, then we find ourselves at a point to rethink our method and ability to conceive change. As we know change must be critical, we also know it is easy to illicit transformation. In Beirut’s bombed out former downtown, Solidaire, the development office and eponymous geographical locale single-handedly revived and replaced a defined perimeter with a particularly one-sided aesthetic and real estate value. So how do actors think about the city beyond this area? The charge of urban research is to contemplate and analyse before acting, at least beyond an acupuncture scale. Arguably the distinct and comparable voices that emerge, if communicated with an open mind, should yield a more profound capability to address the multiplicity of issues facing a divided city such as Beirut.

In light of this, what we find in the three essays here are a complementary mix of observations and reflections of the same city through distinct lenses and voices. Kayvan Karimi of the Space Syntax Group wrestles with the question of whether the complexities presented in Beirut suggest a normality or abnormality of a city, ultimately contending that it exudes both characteristics. Matthew Carmona from the Bartlett School of Planning recalls the idea of planning evolution, suggesting that in seeing Beirut through five particular development models, one can perceive that without a common direction that includes government, private sector and local action, the city could simply diverge into another inept model. Camillo Boano of the Development Planning Unit and Dalia Chabarek, a DPU alumnus, also look to Beirut’s past and future, albeit in a different way. Their gaze is more symbolic and phenomenological, hinging on the city’s memory through monumental architecture, presenting revelations that are beneficial for assessing both past and future trends.

Dissecting Beirut’s urban system thus provides the opportunity and challenge of interdisciplinary research in the face of an equally challenging context. Results may only scratch the surface, but the critical purpose is something to champion and reproduce in order to understand the vast potential of collaborative conversation, however diverse.

This thematic Forum section is based on a weeklong field research visit whose success was the result of immensely generous efforts and support by many individuals. Special acknowledgement goes to Professor Robert Saliba and Abir Al-Tayeb of the American University Beirut for their hosting, planning and arranging a most thorough and eye-opening account of the city. We also wish to thank AUB alumni Salwa Sabbagh, Gamar Markarian and Dalia Chabarek for their enthusiastic local wisdom throughout. Not least, additional appreciation goes to Rabih Shibli, also of the AUB, for his guiding tour through the streets of Shatila. All these encounters provided a rich and memorable experience for the authors.