‘Urban challenges’ forum

A stroll down memory lane – The Battle of the Hotels

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This short text has emerged as a written dialogue about places, times and imaginations while walking and exploring part of West Beirut during a study visit in March 2013. Strolling and discussing, while observing urban environments and their everyday life, impressions were conceived in a sort of situationist-remembrance - part of a wider reflection on urban design method, especially in states of uncertainty. Working with uncertainty as a rock-solid reality, Andrea Branzi (2006) developed the notion of ‘non-figurative architecture’ to refer to ‘an architecture that becomes an urban semiosphere’, surpassing its constructed limits and becoming a producer of immaterial qualities that change over time (p.9). Whilst strolling down many of the streets in Beirut, we were forced to (re)-imagine the past and the urban qualities that were changing over time: the once liberal and harmonic entourage with its French-influenced architecture, the booming trendy lifestyle attracting locals and foreigners, and the immense history dating back to the Phoenicians and carrying on to the modern day post-war reconstruction motivating the city to rise back from its ashes. Following almost unconsciously Branzi’s thesis of an architecture that acknowledges research, practice and concerns beyond building and buildings alone, we strolled down to Clemenceau, an area at the heart of West Beirut that serves well for this; the number of mansions and villas from the early to mid-century, once considered summer houses away from the city, are now completely immersed in the urban fabric, both of its past and its future. Entangled with this image are the high-rises and multinational hotels, some of which still suffer a war-destructive façade, while others are either renovated to their previous state or newly developed.

Beirut’s main train station was located in Clemenceau and has been completely wiped out, along with the train tracks linking Europe with Istanbul across Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, all the way to Egypt. New high-rise residential towers cover the empty plots of land, offering wealthy residents exclusive views of the Mediterranean, whilst blocking off the existing views for the rest of the neighbourhood. Many buildings remain remnants of war, abandoned by their original residents and often occupied by squatters. The line of hotels and towers overlooking the area dominate the landscape; the extremely short-lived Holiday Inn and the unfinished trade centre, Burj Al Murr, which served as points of panoptic surveillance during the war, loom large at the top of the hill, while downhill sits the lavish and gracefully refurbished Phoenicia Intercontinental Hotel, and the up-and-coming yet politically contested Saint Georges Hotel. The dilapidated buildings which dot downtown Beirut are constant reminders of what existed before, what was destroyed during, and what has occurred since the civil war that violently divided the city. Strolling in search of their history translates to imagining the future of Beirut. Discussing the so-called ‘Battle of the Hotels’ extended from the Minet-el Hosn area through Clemenceau, both in the heart of West Beirut, is researching beyond building and buildings alone, calling for urban semiosphere to build on lines, clichés and memories.

Lines, clichés and memories

Being a country with religious and socio-cultural diversity in the Middle East over the centuries, Lebanon’s sectarianism has been deeply inherent throughout its modern history. Following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, many Palestinians fled to Lebanon
as well as neighbouring countries to seek refuge, and have impacted on the politics, sociopolitical and religious status of Lebanon. In parallel with these events, religious clustering was occurring, categorising neighbourhoods and splitting the city. With the rising tension between Muslims and Christians, and their opposing views to politics specifically in terms of the Palestinian impact and the national versus Arab ideologies, a civil war broke out on 14 April 1975. The 15-year Civil War which engulfed Beirut split the city into two sectarian pieces – the Muslim west and the Christian east – with the Damascus road, alternatively known as the city’s ‘Green Line’, operating as a fluid and non-concretised, yet extraordinarily harsh physical divide between the two.

The Green Line extended from Martyrs’ Square to the Palestinian camps in the Southern suburbs of Beirut, with checkpoints regulating movement across the borders. Throughout the majority of the war, battles would occur across the Green Line, but not so much on it. The majority of citizens of the city moved to their respective religious side. The city had become two sub-cities, in which not only was diffusion from one side to the other prohibited, but services were duplicated so that individuals had no need to cross over. Israel’s invasion following in 1982 contributed greatly to the war and destruction of the city.

Despite a formal and political ‘stitching’ of east and west Beirut, after the war ended in 1990, the scar of the Green Line and its impact on the physical sectarian fabric of the city discretely lingers to this day. Beirut’s central district adjacent to the Green Line suffered the greatest physical damage during the war, and as such the area has undergone the greatest reconstruction in the post-war years. In doing so, planners and architects have attempted to incorporate both the aesthetic of pre-war Beirut ‘charm’, and post-modern and neoliberal design into the development of the 21st century city.

Battle of the Hotels

This paper focuses on an area which was overwhelmed by a brutal battle for two years at the start of the civil war. From 1975 to 1977, the ‘Battle of the Hotels’ extended from the Minet-el Hosn area through Clemenceau, both in the heart of West Beirut, in which the hotels and towers housed snipers of opposing militias engaged in militarised ‘dialogue’ (Traboulsi, 2007, p.187). Shortly after the ignition of the battle, the fighting spread across central Beirut. It was the first intense and military confrontation between the Christian Lebanese Front and the joint forces of the Muslim Lebanese National Movement and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). While some of those hotels and towers have been refurbished after the war, others have remained in dormancy as bold reminders of the anguish of war.

The hotels situated around Clemenceau included the Holiday Inn, Saint Georges, Phoenicia Intercontinental, amongst others such as Palm Beach and Excelsoir. The highest tower in the area, the Burj al Murr Tower, served tactically as a panopticon. Other towers in residential areas in both the Muslim and Christian areas also contributed to the battle. The Burj al Murr tower was initially dominated by the Muslims, namely the militia of the socialist Independent Nasserite Movement (INM), after which the Christians felt threatened and settled in the Holiday Inn, Saint Georges Hotel, and the Phoenicia Intercontinental Hotel. Days into the battle, a ceasefire was requested to allow hotel guests, residents and staff to evacuate, but the fighting proceeded as soon as the operation was completed. The Christians were eventually driven out of most of the hotels, but were able to hang on to the Holiday Inn. The domination of the hotels remained in the hands of their respective parties for most of the battle, while the fighting spread across the centre of the city. The ceasefire officially came into effect on April 2, 1976.
Towers and hotels: ruins and remnants of possible futures

Saint Georges Hotel (Figure 1) was once one of the most prestigious hotels in Beirut, lying right on the seafront immediately adjacent to the contentious and highly exclusive Solidere development ‘Zaitunay Bay’. The war-torn pink hotel has remained untouched since the war, but has since been converted and has functioned as a beach resort with swimming pools in recent times. In 2005, the Saint Georges (or more so the hotel building), was hit by the explosion that assassinated the former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, which took place just a few metres from the resort’s doorstep. The theatrical position and the contested nature of its tenure render evident a symbolic antagonism in the Saint Georges Hotel. The hotel and its bay still struggle to stand even after the vicious war, and have even entered into their own war with Solidere through its community’s resistance to the Zaitunay Bay development.

Currently the most prestigious hotel in the country, the Phoenicia Intercontinental Hotel (Figure 2), is located directly opposite the Saint Georges Hotel. The Phoenicia Intercontinental hotel projects nostalgic images of the pre-war era. It was left abandoned for 25 years but was restored in the late 1990s, reopening in March 2000. The hotel was damaged again in 2005 during the Hariri bombing, and consequently underwent another restoration. The glory days of the hotel have definitely undergone a renaissance. Rising from its own ashes and constantly reinventing its image, the Phoenicia Intercontinental Hotel is a hard-to-die construct and an unfinished project of reinvention.

Figure 1:

The Saint Georges Hotel draped with ‘Stop Solidere’ banner. Solidere is the development company charged with developing the adjacent luxury beach resort.

Figure 2:

The reconstructed Phoenicia Intercontinental Hotel (right) adjacent to the war-torn Holiday Inn Hotel.
The Burj Al Murr tower (Figure 3) is a 40-storey unfinished tower that was intended to become the Trade Centre of Lebanon. Its construction started in 1974, one year before the start of the war. The tower is a hard, concrete rectangular tube, which withstood the fighting that took place during the Battle of the Hotels. Dominated by Muslim militias throughout the two-year battle, the tower operated as a defence mechanism for the Christian militias who had seeped in to west Beirut. Its height and location on the top of the hill was ideal for a panoptic vision of the city. The tower still stands unfinished, hollow, full of scars, and protected by armoured tanks. There have been many attempts to refurbish it and indeed to demolish it by various groups, but its height and solidity make it extremely difficult to topple. It currently serves as an artefact that stirs memories within the residents of the city who have lived through the war, not to mention the generations that are still confronted with its presence.

Completed in 1974, just a year into its opening, The Holiday Inn (Figure 4) declared an emergency evacuation of its staff and nearly 200 visitors on 19 October 1975, when the Battle of the Hotels first commenced. The primary settlers of the hotel were Christian militias, for its height allowed alignment with their Muslim counterparts in Burj al Murr. The violent ‘dialogue’ was thus concentrated between these two towers. The Holiday Inn is, in a sense, another monument of the war; the hotel, severely damaged with bullet holes and left in dormancy, is still standing while surrounded by reconstructed, modern Beirut and protected by armoured tanks.
Nostalgia and memories of war

In *War and Memory in Lebanon*, Sune Haugbolle (2010) differentiates between lived and imagined memory:

‘whereas memory grounded in loved experience is a human condition, imagined memory is a distinctly modern phenomenon linked to the emergence of national publics and memory culture, which distils the cumulative experience of whole peoples in mass-mediated archetypical symbols, narratives and idioms’ (p.97).

The image of Lebanon before the war has become idealised, and has developed into a means of forcing amnesia about the war. In the few years after the war, discussions regarding the war were loaded with extreme sensitivities that grew out of competing ideologies and conflicting views. The amnesia became more grounded as the reconstruction phase specifically of the downtown area took effect; in one way erasing parts of the essence of pre-war Beirut, and in another producing a precise replica of it. The recovery phase was highly emphasised through the media and the cultural production of the city, altering the Beirutis’ perceptions and allowing them to relive the past ‘through their identifications, representation and imaginations of life through war and the postwar’ (ibid., p.64) – all of which became themes of public debate by the mid-90s. Walking anywhere in Beirut, one is confronted with the dynamic of what existed before the war, what was destroyed during the war, and what has been developed since.

‘Forgetfulness of the war as well as war and prewar nostalgia…are emotions produced by the traumatizing nature of the war, which either induce people to forget or remember very selectively’ (ibid., p.74). As the war happened to be in the hands of militias more than the citizens themselves, memories and perceptions of the war included many gaps serving to link the past with the present. The gaps were practically filled in with memories and stories of Beirut’s golden age – perhaps a result of repression to cope with trauma and the lack of a common narrative of the war. But repressed material sooner or later needs to re-emerge. Those motivating public remembrance, including intellects, artists and journalists, actively induced debates which they believed would promote a collective understanding of the war and a shared national history; and they equally feared that forgetfulness could lead to a repeat of the war. As these debates gained popularity, Solidere’s vision for the reconstruction of the city centre opted to accommodate visions of remembrance of Beirut at a peaceful time. Accordingly, the company decided to recreate the pre-war Beirut, referring to a better era of coexistence, but turned a blind eye to the forgetfulness – or selective memory – which it could potentially promote.

Clemenceau’s four elements discussed

It has become a cliché in the city to note that Lebanon before the war was ‘the Switzerland of the Middle East’, hustling and bustling with casinos, cabarets, cafes, hotels, opera houses, cinemas and beaches. Those glory days of the city are known to the entire Beiruti community of all ages; from those who lived through them to those exposed to the stories and photos from older generations. The ‘glory days’ in many ways operate as a millstone for contemporary Beirutis, a nostalgia for the past which frames the city’s hopes and wishes for the post-war era. Simultaneously, the dilapidated, war-torn buildings which dot the city are a constant reminder of the prolonged, exhausting, and destructive war which divided the people:

‘Militia power not only practiced ethnic, sectarian and political “cleansing” of territories but also committed “memoricide”, the eradication of all memories of coexistence and common interests between Lebanese’ (Traboulsi, 2007, p.233).
Each of the four buildings discussed above holds particular significance for the social history of west-central Beirut. While two bluntly display the cold, harsh effects of the war, one has been very successful in romanticising the past, and another is stuck somewhere along that path. Burj Al Murr was the highest tower of its time, significantly taller than any other building in Beirut. Despite the recent erection of high-rise towers on the seafront, Burj Al Murr stands alone, and its structure imposes mystification. The fact that the building was only ever used in conflict inscribes an aggressive and threatening presence to the tower. Similarly, memories of the Holiday Inn are inextricably tied to war. Its profound involvement in conflict and its physical reflection of the scars of war have developed into a mainstream descriptive image of the conflict. The two buildings could stir up disturbances within the people, either allowing them to contemplate the war and its circumstances, or forcing them to avoid its memories. On the other hand, the buildings could also be regarded as signs and symbols of a time when Beirut was a touristic, multinational, prestigious and financial hub, which would stitch the pre-war Beirut to a post-war Beirut, minus the 15 years of anguish and suffering. The Phoenicia Intercontinental Hotel is a relative success story, a landmark of early 70s Lebanon, which survived the 15-year hostile situation only to successfully re-emerge many years later. The atmosphere this hotel exudes is one that does not particularly illustrate the consequences of the war, but very lucratively transforms the setting into a chic and vintage experience. The Saint Georges Hotel could satisfy Haugbolle’s ‘cultural elites’; while bringing back a liberal and vogue beach culture to the crème-de-la-crème of Beirut, the scarred hotel building nevertheless allows visitors to reminisce about the war. Its current quarrel with the regeneration system is a gateway into public debates; be it regarding memory and nostalgia, politics, views on the regeneration, or the development of society over the years.

The battle of the hotels in Beirut seems never-ending and serves to preserve physical memories of conflict. And yet, each piece of architecture, every relic, does not simply signify an act of war remembrance, but also stands out as separate from the preceding developments, as spaces and buildings not-yet-become subject to the aggressive market-led redevelopment of the contemporary city. This involuntary presence in a complex urban environment stands as both memorabilia of the war and as resistance to regeneration, defying the oblivion of both the past and the future.

References

