‘Urban challenges’ forum

Beirut: Normalities and abnormalities of a complex city

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This short article is based on a five-day visit to Beirut and its surroundings by four urbanists from UCL. The main objective of the trip was to scrutinise Beirut from different angles and form a deeper understanding of the city from the viewpoint of an expert outsider. This approach was intended to become a somewhat loose methodology for understanding complex cities in a short period of time – a methodology that could possibly be replicated in other cities. In this article we focus on how the scrutiny of the physical form of a city in connection with its social, economic and political aspects can contribute to shaping such a methodology. In this approach a light analysis of urban form assists an outsider in consolidating his or her observations on the site and what is heard from the residents. As such there is less emphasis on what other experts have written or thought about the city, and rather a focus on how we can add our own perspective by a first-hand examination of the real thing.

Why Beirut?
Beirut is commonly considered one of the most complex capital cities of the world due its journey from a thriving Middle Eastern city in the beginning of the 20th century to the focal point of large-scale sectarian conflicts, wars with Lebanon’s neighbours and military occupations in the last three decades of the same century. It is a sad journey by any measure, but anyone who knows this city well, would comment that it has always maintained its unique life even in the harshest possible conditions. Like any other capital city, Beirut has to deal with all other urban challenges, such as traffic, pollution, congestion, urban heritage, planned growth, informal scatter and environmental issues. The combination of all these issues with the physical conflicts and wars that have happened in this city, make Beirut a living urban laboratory for inquisitive outsiders.

Despite the horror stories told by Beiruties about their city, the first thing that you notice in Beirut as

Figure 1:
The different facets of Beirut: car domination, controversial new project, scarred buildings and new commercial centres.
an outsider is that it is a normal city! People move and find their ways as they do in other cities. Beirut seems to have organised itself well in terms of locating the city centre, urban sub-centres, places of high interaction, distribution of densities and economic opportunities. Streets seem to function adequately in terms of accommodating overlapping activities and there is a good presence of people in public spaces. There is a hierarchy of urban spaces and there seems to be a logic in this hierarchy. As an outsider, you get the impression that this is, at least at the present, a normal city. But is it really so?

Is Beirut an abnormal city?
Beirut originates from a very old Roman or Phoenician settlement, but what we know as Beirut today has very little to do with that ancient origin. The medieval core of the city, which has been modified significantly during the Ottoman rule and French Mandate, seems to have played a major role in shaping the structure of the city as it is today. The oldest part of the city still remains as the most important centre of the city, despite all major transformations of the 20th century. This is also where the Ottoman and French interventions, and more recently the total rebuilding of the city centre by Solidere, have occurred.

The main streets of Beirut extend to all directions from the historic centre and form the physical skeleton of the urban network. This extension integrates the topography of the city and the smaller settlements at the outskirts of the old Beirut with the more modern features of the city, such as the airport, universities and the port. So far, this process seems to be similar to many other organically grown cities across the world. Judging by its physical form,
Figure 3:
Historic Beirut.

Figure 4:
Physical transformation of Beirut in early the 20th century.
Beirut as we find it today does not exhibit major signs of abnormality.

Let's look at this issue in a more analytical way. An analysis of the street network and public spaces of Beirut, using space syntax methodology, confirms some of the above-discussed characteristics (Figure 5). In a city-wide proximity analysis, which calculates how close each place is from all other places in the city, we see that the most accessible streets (red lines) extend outwards from the southern edge of the historic centre. In fact, the most accessible point is where the famous Martyrs’ Square is located.²

The analysis indicates that from the historic centre of the city, three major arteries extend to the south. Two of them meet again near the airport, where the so-called southern suburbs of Beirut have consolidated themselves into a distinct part of the city.³ The third one, which extends to the south-east is called Damascus Road. As the name suggests, this has been the historic route between Beirut and Damascus and is where the city was divided into east and west Beirut and where the notorious Green Line was introduced after the 1970s sectarian war (Figure 6). The phenomenon of separation created by the most accessible routes is a known feature in other cities and it seems that the city has responded to the issue of physical division in that same way that the other cities do.

We could also identify in the same analysis (Figure 4) three major parallel east-west roads which laterally connect the different parts of the city and

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Notes:

² Martyrs’ Square, formerly known as the Canon Square, changed name in 1920s to commemorate the execution of nationalists in this place.

³ Due to lack of map information on the informal settlements of the southern suburbs, most of these areas are not included in the model.
various communities together. These are currently among the most important routes in Beirut and it could be reasonably imagined that the main physical barriers between communities were created along these alignments during the war days. The accessibility of these streets intensifies when they get closer to the historic centre; another feature that Beirut has in common with many other cities of the world.

So far, it seems that despite its unique socio-political history, the city follows a global-scale logic which is consistent with how cities normally behave. What we mean by normal in this context is the ability of the city to adapt with physical, social, economic and political transformations. But what about the impact of all those extraordinary conflicts and bitter wars? What about those divided communities and the horror stories told by the citizens? There must be some distinctions between a city like Beirut and her more normal counterparts.

The city of ‘urban scars’

Beirut is usually considered one of the rare cities that we call ‘divided cities’. This term by itself is a self-contradictory concept. Cities by nature are not there to be divided. They are built to do the opposite: to integrate and consolidate people, society, activity, trade and so on. Convulsive socio-political events, and in particular wars, sometimes lead to divisions that are seen in some cities such as Berlin and Nicosia. This physical force of separation is very likely to create all sorts of urban impacts and ‘urban scars’ that cannot vanish quickly. In Beirut some of them are very fresh.

The scar of the Green Line separation, particularly when you get closer to the historic centre, is forcefully evident in Beirut. The ruins and devastation on both sides of this imaginary line, the bullets and explosive marks on buildings, and the vastly neglected public realm are all there. In a normal city, we would expect something else in such places. Nice boulevards and public spaces, surrounded with great buildings and shops, decorated with pleasant landscapes are the elements normally found in this type of place. What strikes an outsider in Beirut is not only a great lack of urban normality along the line, but the remnants of the old politico-military structures, such as kiosks and tents that remind one about what happened before and what might happen in the future.
The best example of this urban scar is the Martyrs’ Square itself. The sorry situation of this vast space is in sharp contrast with its glorious past (Figure 8). Almost half of the square is used as a car park and the rest is either busy roads or inaccessible public space. A controversial new mosque dominating the townscape does not really help the visitor feel any normality here, nor do the hoardings that promise the next phase of Solidere development on the east side of the square. There have been some efforts to bring normality to this place, but they have barely succeeded. It seems everybody agrees that in the most important part of the city, nothing should happen!

However, a bit further down from the most politically charged urban spaces in Beirut, there are signs of growing normality. The main streets that extend from the Martyrs’ Square are being quickly

Figure 7:
Walking the ‘line’: the urban character of the Green Line today.

Figure 8:
The past (left) and present (right) of the Martyrs’ Square.
regenerated. This process seems to be totally apolitical and market driven. The best examples of self-generation are the Gemmayze and Mar Mikail areas. These areas are shaped around a major street that extends from the Martyrs’ Square to the east in a predominantly non-affluent Christian area. The proximity to the centre, good access to the urban network, a suitable street width and precedence of urban activities along this axis, have made Gemmayze an urban phenomenon in Beirut. Trendy shops and restaurants are appearing every day and new businesses are thriving. A community of artists/designers have moved to more remote neighbourhoods. Old buildings are being renovated quickly and new buildings are popping up everywhere. The local residents of the area are astounded to see a massive luxury tower building being erected by one of the best-known Lebanese architects, Al-Khori, in the most remote location of this area. A while ago, and even now, they would have considered it madness!

It seems that Beirut is trying hard to remedy its urban scars. The biggest disruption of Beirut’s urban fabric has arguably been the destruction of the city centre following decades of wars and fighting. The photographs of this part of the city before its reconstruction show the magnitude of devastation, but after the massive reconstructions undertaken by Solidere, that type of devastation is not visible any more. This development perhaps created other problems, which I will discuss in turn, but which are not unique to Beirut and are very similar to the issues that can be found in many other cities around the world. There have also been great reconstruction efforts in the southern suburbs of Beirut following the devastation of the recent war with Israel, but that is a different phenomenon which I will address separately.

The city of divided communities

Beirut has always been a city of diverse communities. Maronite Christians, Druzies, Sunnis, Shias and Armenians are among various communities that can be found in the melting social pot of Beirut. However, this melting pot makes more sense – or used to make more sense - in the central parts of the city where they have traditionally mixed. Outside the centre, there are clusters of different people...
who tend to form isolated communities. This formation is not a recent phenomenon in Beirut. It has always been the case throughout the long history of this city. What is new perhaps is that since the 1970s these communities have been involved in continuous fighting and damaging conflicts, which can disintegrate any society.

Before discussing these communities further, let’s see where they are and if their character has anything to do with how they are positioned in the city. Figure 10 shows the approximate clustering of these communities in Beirut. There is a clear east-west separation between Christians and Muslims, but there is also a north-south divide between Sunnis and Shias in the west of Beirut. With the exception of the inner-city slums (if they could be called so), the north-south divide seems to correlate also with people’s economic status – the more affluent being found in the north and the less well off in the informal settlements of the south.

Using again a space syntax analysis that captures the local structures, we could look at this issue more objectively (Figure 11). This analysis measures the accessibility of the urban spaces within a radius of 1200m, which is about a 15-minute walk. The analysis picks up nicely the focal points of local areas, such as Ashrafiyah, Hamra and Gemmayze, which are considered to be the focal points of the named communities. The analysis shows clearly that the communities have developed distinct locali-
ties, but are also embedded into the wider urban fabric through their city-wide connections (see Figure 5). It seems that the social conflicts have only consolidated their historical positions.4

A very interesting observation in the local analysis of the city is that the city centre, which appeared to be very strong in the city-wide analysis, does not show any strength in the local analysis. This is consistent with what we know about Beirut’s city centre. Before the devastation, the centre used to be the focal point of social and economic activities, which intensified the mixture of different communities. This area also had the right physical form and urban structure to accommodate the overlapping activities that had to happen in the city centre. The rebuilding of the city centre and the severance created by physical barriers, such as the first ring road, seem to have changed this dynamic. In other words, while the city centre is still the focal point of the urban structure as a whole, it has lost the appropriate local structure that is needed to be vibrant and inclusive.

The divided communities of Beirut seem to have used the characteristics of spatial network to maintain their distance from each other, but still remain part of a bigger system. Something that does not

Notes:
4 It should be noted here that the model does not fully cover all informal settlements of Beirut and therefore misses some of these named areas, but even without those details some focal points of the divided communities can be identified in the south of the city.
see to have caught up with this process is the development of the city centre. Part of the blame can be attributed to the need for total reconstruction after the war, but undoubtedly another big part lies with how this reconstruction has been laid out.

The city of spectacular developments
What really surprises an outsider in Beirut is the huge appetite for large-scale developments. Why in such a politically unstable situation, with the threat of another war looming, are so many large developments happening? Isn’t this supposed to be a contested city, where everything has to halt due to uncertainties? This certainly is not the case in Beirut. The city does not seem to be short of resources for rebuilding. It is widely believed than 80 percent of Lebanese live in other countries and a large percentage of these people are very keen on investing in Beirut. The money also comes from rich non-Lebanese investors in the region, who see Beirut as a good place for investment. If this is the case, it is even more puzzling. Why would a divided city attract so much interest?

Apart from the huge private developments that are happening almost everywhere, the most spectacular development in Beirut is Solidere’s reconstruction of the city centre. This project has been achieved through a public-private partnership engineered by the late prime minister of the country, Rafik Hariri. The development is clearly a commercial endeavour which seems to have been successful in rebuilding an entirely devastated part of Beirut and replacing it with a contemporary development that is seen by many observers as a remarkable achievement. The development, however, is heavily criticised by many residents for its lack of focus on fundamental urban issues. Critics say that this development has wiped out all remnants of the historic Beirut and replaced them with an imitation of what is happening in characterless modern cities, such as Dubai and Doha. They also say that the development has severed many people’s access to the sea. The methods of compensating people through compulsory purchase seem to have been very loose and a lot of people think that they have not received the real value of their properties.

The biggest criticism of the city centre development is that it has ruined the unique mix of people, communities and activities which was the trademark of Beirut. What has been created is anything but a natural mix of people and activities. Everything in this area is highly programmed and tightly managed. You see people and activities where they are supposed to be seen, and you only see the type of people or activities that are considered suitable. The reason for such a situation is that the entire area is one single entity, owned and managed by a single company. This centre is simply intimidating, unaffordable and discouraging for the majority of Beirutites.

But what is wrong with that? Why do we need an inclusive and vibrant centre? The fact is that Beirut had always been a city of diverse communities, but they all came together in the heart of the city and created the melting pot which connected everything together. Now that melting pot seems to have been lost. What is left now in Beirut are the divided communities that have been divided even further, but with nothing to link them back together. The analysis of the city on a local scale confirms this very well (Figure 11). We would normally expect the city centre to emerge as the strongest local and global centre of the city. While the city centre is globally the focal point of the city, it has no local significance. The area is simply designed to function as a centre of commerce for the whole of the city, not as a place for all communities to come together and interact.

It is a shame that the city centre has lost its vibe, but Beirut is resourceful. Just to compensate for what has been lost in the city centre, other areas have emerged as alternatives. We mentioned
Gumayzeh as an emerging centre, but an even better example is found in Hamra, where the urban grid has created the conditions for a major active urban centre with all the characteristics that you’d expect to find: pedestrian activity, active streets, shops, restaurants, offices. Other centres such as Ashrafiah, Verdun and even the centres of the southern settlements seem to function as urban centres that have been formed to compensate for the dysfunctionality of the city centre.

The city of isolated suburbs, informal settlement and refugee camps
As if it is not hard enough to grasp what is happening in the central areas of Beirut, an outsider is told they must see the informal settlements of Beirut and the southern suburbs of the city to realise the true extent of its complexity.

The southern suburbs are the areas that were damaged heavily during the 2007 invasion. These areas, which are predominantly occupied by Shias are also associated with one political party, Hezbollah. This gives a very special character to these areas and approaching them as an outsider you feel that you are entering almost a different city. The before and after images of the reconstruction project are almost as impressive as the city centre project, but instead of relocating the original residents of the community to other places, the main focus of the reconstruction has been to retain them (Figure 12).
This approach is criticised as a purely political strategy to maintain the voters’ stronghold of a particular political party, but the product of this project seems to be more focused on improving the community’s conditions rather than economic return. Quite counter-intuitively, by consolidating the original community which was divided from the rest of the city, it seems that the project is contributing to further divisions in Beirut.

The southern suburbs form the largest part of informal urbanism in Beirut, but there are other types of informal settlement in Beirut as well. The old Palestinian refugee camps such as Sabra and Shatila, which have been sites for reoccurring atrocities, represent another challenge in Beirut. For outsiders these areas feel like real slums. The poverty and lack of proper infrastructure is mixed with a strong presence of all political parties, particularly those with military orientations. A complete analysis of these areas is beyond the remit of this short article, but anyone who wants to see real divided communities of Beirut needs to go to some of these places. They are isolated, problematic and intimidating.

**The city of forgotten public transport systems**

Another rather striking thing in Beirut is the total lack of public transportation. This seems to be another issue that everybody agrees not to disagree about. In the past 30-40 years there has not been any successful effort to develop an efficient public transport system in the city. This is sometimes blamed on the wars and social divisions, but it is puzzling why a city that can undertake big projects has not tried to address one of its biggest problems. Beirut is now choking on its traffic and this will only get worse if public transport is not taken seriously.
So, is Beirut a normal city?

Yes and no! Beirut is what it is. A city caught in the middle of regional wars and internal conflicts of a diverse nation. It is a city that has undergone military occupations, total devastation, bloody conflicts and physical divisions. This is not normal in any sense. However, the same spatial and socio-economic rules that govern all other cities of the world seem to be working in Beirut as well. This is a city that turns abnormalities into normality through a fast process of urban adaptation. The product of this process feels very normal in many places and different time periods, but there are other places and times where the particular challenges of Beirut suddenly surface.

One disturbing fact about Beirut is that everybody thinks there will definitely be another war soon. This is repeated to such an extent that you feel maybe people have a desire for it. However, if you observe this behaviour more deeply, you realise that this is also part of the process of adaptation. By accepting the eventuality of the worst-case scenario, the residents of Beirut try to shift their focus onto short-term normalities. From an outsider’s point of view, this temporary normality has to change in people’s mind-frames to create the conditions for longer-term normalities. The fact is that the foundations for such long-term normality already exist, but people tend to forget about them and focus on what they can create in terms of short-term normality. This is a problem in Beirut.

So, what should or could be done? The answer is not easy, but finding them has to start with understanding the city as it is, not as it is seen through contradicting prisms. This understanding in such a divided city has to be based on objective analysis and unbiased evidence. Starting with non-politicised facts can assist communities in realising how their lives can be improved within the context of the whole city. This will help achieve a normality that endures for longer.

About the author:

Dr. Kayvan Karimi (k.karimi@ucl.ac.uk) is a Senior Lecturer within the Space Research Group at the Bartlett, UCL, and a Director of Space Syntax Limited, a UCL spin-off company that utilises Bartlett’s research in professional consultancy. Kayvan is an architectural and urban designer with more than twenty years of academic and professional experience. His academic and professional experience spans from the East, where he originates, to the West, where he has spent most of his professional life. He has worked extensively on a wide range of research and consultancy projects, including: strategic city planning, urban regeneration, large-scale urban master planning, urban conservation, revitalisation of historic centres, regeneration of informal settlements, complex buildings, public realm design and pedestrian movement planning. In recent years, Kayvan has been developing advanced methods for evidence-based design and planning of the built environment, from a very macro scale, such as master planning of an entire city, to very micro scale, such as the design of small public spaces or buildings. Kayvan has maintained his teaching and research activities in parallel to his main role in leading consultancy projects. He has become a senior lecturer at the Bartlett School of Graduate Studies, UCL, since January 2011.