‘Urban challenges’ forum

Four men and a methodology (?) in Beirut

William Hunter
Development Planning Unit, The Bartlett, UCL

Pages: 242-245
The Four Men met a few times over the previous months. They discussed what exactly they would do when they arrived. They thought, we should go here ‘because’, we should go there ‘because’. Because there was something there.

In truth, three of the Four Men had never been to Beirut. Of course they were all, in their own way, knowledgeable enough about the city and its history. But then again who wouldn’t be, given an, at times, profound global fixation and being that they were all men of an urban discipline persuasion. In fact the sole veteran visitor of the group had not set foot in the city for some 10 odd years - before the 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Hariri, before the Israeli-Hezbollah war in 2006 that rocked the southern suburbs, and long before Solidere had enacted its eminent radical reconstruction agenda on the downtown.

Captivated by the promise of intrigue, the Four Men were like any honest tourists - banking on the assumed fulfilment of simply witnessing something new in the flesh.

If the idea of the city itself held them in an excited gaze, it was another purpose that tempted this association. You see, the Four Men weren’t everyday accomplices, not of the hopelessly devoted kind anyway. Though they were, at the very least, mutually respectful acquaintances operating on the same spectrum of urban matters. And it was in their separate locations on this spectrum that lent an opportunistic juxtaposition of opinions and perceptions.

On one end you had a keen belief in the veracity of data-driven evidence-based analysis. On the other, there oozed a socially-critical ethos for borderline naïve anti-capitalist development. Somewhere in the middle sat a potentially conservative credence for holistic check-listed planning. Finding a common ground within these healthy nuances could be like looking for a strained ego in room full of politicians.

Well that might be underestimating the quality of the Four Men and the eager manner in which
they agreed to embark on this challenge. Certainly when they received the menu of activities, so graciously prepared for them by their local facilitators, they were convinced that the idea of knowledge exchange through immersed city observation would not only be easy, but amusing. And by that it’s possible that the Four Men loosened up their ambitious curating notions and simply let themselves be bathed in an array of contextual contradictions, all the more historical, physical and political.

As they awoke the day after arrival, the Four Men found themselves ushered early from their hotel to a travel agency where it quickly became apparent that arguably none of them had bothered to read the updated itinerary and therefore found themselves slightly dumbfounded when the tour van sped off carrying its bushy-tailed tourists in tow. Some form of carefree feeling allowed them a less critical response to the tour guide’s announcement that they would be visiting the world famous Jeita Grotto that, to her prideful anecdote, had been shortlisted for the new seven wonders of the world. It lost out of course to the likes of the entire Amazon Rainforest. Nevertheless, the Four Men were awestruck by the sight of surprising splendour before them.

This turn towards the naturally majestic was surely not research, they told themselves. ‘Our real work starts Monday they kept defending.’ Yet, somehow they made justifiable sense of this detour when it was mentioned that the caves were used for hiding artillery during the various sectarian wars.

But, the Grotto was only a start of this cultural diversion, for not a long drive away was the mythical city of Byblos, the second oldest known settlement in the world after Jericho in Palestine. A tour of the old town revealed for the Men and their fellow travellers a rich and overlapping history of occupiers and religions. After all, it is religion and culture that defines this fertile region. The stone edifices told the secrets of time - the technological advance, the disruption of method. This is land as breeding
ground - for cultural evolution, for occupation, for war. Lebanon is where wars come to unfold. What is it about this place? - a paradise strewn with violence at its doorstep - a region in constant turmoil, a site of question and endless offering - intellectual, satisfying, confusing.

... Days later, a walk across Clemenceau, from Hamra towards downtown Beirut, is a perfect spring morning stroll. Early mid-century mansions and villas, once considered summer houses away from the city, are now completely immersed in the central urban fabric, both its past and its future.

Beirut’s main train station 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 view for the rest of the neighbourhood. Many buildings remain remnants of war, abandoned by their original residents and occupied by squatters. The line of hotels and towers overlooking the area dominate the landscape.

What methodology is to be found in the middle of this landscape? What would it mean? And perhaps a better question - is it possible to devise?

Nothing is as it seems in Beirut and nothing seems to change. From 1975 to 1977 a brutal battle overwhelmed this area. Snipers from opposing militias perched amongst floors engaging in militarised dialogue. So goes what is known as the ‘Battle of the Hotels’. These hotels, including the infamous Holiday Inn stand as testaments to that bygone era and a realistic future.

Once dubbed ‘the Switzerland of the Middle East’, hustling and bustling with casinos, cabarets, cafes, hotels, opera houses, cinemas and beaches, the glory days of the city are known to the entire Beirut community of all ages. Stories are told by those who lived it and exposed to those who followed - a milestone for contemporary Beirutis, nostalgia for the past which frames the city’s hopes and dreams 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.
‘Urban challenges’ forum

Hunter, W.

As the Four Men walk the streets of this fabled city, at every corner, on nearly every face, old or young, the past is imagined. The 15-year Civil War which engulfed Beirut broke the city into two sectarian pieces - the Muslim west and the Christian east - with the Damascus road, also known as the city’s ‘green line’, operating as an open, fluid, yet extraordinarily harsh physical barrier. The two separate areas of the city have developed to become largely self-sufficient; the services on either side of the divide having been duplicated such that osmosis of citizens across the border is unnecessary. Despite a formal and political ‘stitching up’ of east and west Beirut, after the war ended in 1990, the scar of the green line and its impact on the sectarian fabric of the city discreetly lingers to this day.

This was ground zero for a decade - the area adjacent to the green line, suffering the greatest physical damage during the war. And it is because of this that the area has undergone the greatest reconstruction in the post-war years. A playground for a conglomerate developer, Solidere has attempted to incorporate both the aesthetic of pre-war Beirut ‘charm’, and post-modern neoliberal design into the development of the 21st century city.

Because there was nothing there.

To be continued…