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Connecting the Broken City

During the first days of Febraury this year, dr. Ole Moystad and Paola Yacoub conducted a students workshop at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Ljubljana. Dr. Moystad spent the last few years in Beirut and directly witnessed the main characteristics of the destructive processes of urban development and proposed reconstruction, while Ms. Yacoub participates in the planning process and the inclusion of archeological sites into the new structure of the city centre.

1. The Scene

The city of Beirut grew exponentially since its choice as capital of the state of Lebanon in 1920, when the population was 70.000 inhabitants, until 1975, when it rapidly grew to 1.250.0. The disproportion between Beirut on one side, functioning as the capital city and largest harbour in the country and the state as such, having 3.000.000 inhabitants, is according to some, one of the main reasons for the outbreak of the war. The dual function of the city still represents one of the primary urban development problems [1].

During the war the population of metropolitan Beirut stabilised at 1.250.000 inhabitants. Extreme changes occurred concerning the population figures. More than one half of the population experienced emigration. The city was divided into the Moslem and Christian halves. In the years of major and smaller military encounters, each of the halves further polarised into religious and political enclaves, sometimes down to the level of a neighbourhood. Fragmentation of the city was not a consequence of the war, the war only strengthened latent conditions for urban polarisation and enabled the spatial manifestations of social and religious differences.

The first master plan for Beirut was drawn out in 1986 containing proposals for traffic and communal infrastructure rectification's of metropolitan Beirut. The Schema Directuer was the first plan proposing the layout and spatial organisation of the metropolitan region surrounding Beirut. Emphasis was laid on the road network and plans for new public transportation systems that could reorganise the fragments of postwar Beirut into a metropolitan whole. The basic objective was to improve the post-war condition by equal distribution of development in the whole area. One of the suggestions was, that the traffic nodes should become centres of urban life. Each political and religious entity would establish its own centre and each centre would emerge from a public core containing private enterprises and common interests.

Lack of focus on the city centre was the main reason for the failure of the plan. However, during the time when the Schema Directeur was being prepared, the war was at its peak and such lack of focus wasn't unexpected - hardly anyone could envisage the centre of the city in that time.

The Dar Al-Handasah master plan for the city centre can be interpreted as complementary to the Scheme Directure and its intentions to create a Mediterranean identity for the city.

Reconstruction of the Beirut central city district will be carried out in three phases: rebuilding the infrastructure in the central area, reconstruction of the central city urban structure and construction of a completely new urban area on the embankment by the North coast. The latter was started in 1976

- at first as a refuse dump, because the letnik 9, št. 1/98 existing one was inaccessible in the East part of the city and later for material from demolished buildings and excavation. The area, measuring 600.000 m^2, will be the new financial centre of Beirut [2]

2. Destruction

During the lecture Skin, form and change, dr. Moystad pointed out that infrastructure, streets, were one of the most dangerous places to be in Beirut, as well as Sarajevo and Mo- star (Bosnia and Hercegovina). Control of the infrastructure was an important assignment during the war and a decisive element of successful engagement in war, thus benefiting either of the fighting sides. However, it appears that in Beirut the transformation from a normal street to a demolished street (confrontation line) to a belt of greenery, which happened to the so called area of the Green-Line, is very special.

Between 1975 and 1991 the war changes identities into territories. The driving force behind the process was necessity to obtain identity by annexation of physical space. A necessity to bridge the space between meaning and place. The consequences were destabilisation of a very frail multicultural coexistence and so called geography of fear. The process eliminated the basic societal foundations. War escaped control and became an encounter between street war-lords and self-proc- laimed military leaders. Instead of agglomerations of culturally homogenous 'safe havens' prevailing, the dominant element of local urban geography became the 'Green-line' area.

The name 'Green-line' was coined, when the roads and buildings, continuously destroyed and vacated on 'nobody's land' during the war, where grown over by greenery or more precisely by a green belt. In Arabic, the term for front-line or rather line of confrontation is Khnutut at tammas. Architecture of the 'Green-line' became the typical architecture of Beirut. The same features emerged in Sarajevo, Grozni and even in certain areas of Los Angeles, New York (Bronx), Chicago etc.

3. Iconcity

Structural changes of the city occurring during the war and consequently of the area of the 'Green-line', apparently driven by some invisible forces, which now appear visible. The city is a continuously developing intelligent system, meaning that architecture as the physical expression of a city is in constant transition. War speeds up development processes, common to all architecture, and makes them recognisable - similarly as cancer releases visible growth of cells. In war times, time densen's locally. In Beirut devastation, destruction lasted for twenty-two years - seventeen years of war and five years of demolition. According to expectations, reconstruction will take thirty years. The transition will last for two generations. Such pathology offers the opportunity for studying the logic of how a transitory architecture generally develops and is created.

Analysis of the morphodynamics of the 'Green-line' offers insight into development concepts, especially the theory of developing systems, developed in studies of artificial intelligence and artificial life forms, some catastrophic theories and

theories of dynamic semiotics. For the 'Green-line' one of the main concepts is the theory on development forms of human settlements, i.e. the sacred place. It is a special site, packed with emotional values, a place of prayer, a place of the dead or whatever one wished to associate with it. This sacred place is blessed for the dwelling of the so called asymmetrical different. It is the scene of ritual killings, known to have often taken place when founding the polis. The sacred place evokes emotional excitement, simultaneously attracting and revoking subjects. Architecture of the 'Green-line' has this quality. In Beirut air-conditioned buses with French, British, German and Japanese tourists drove around the ruins soon after the city-centre was made open to the public. Sarajevo accepted its first tourists even before hostilities ended. This perspective allows us to envisage civil, ethical or cultural war as a stimuli or explosion of development energy from the urban system. Whatever the reasons for this explosion we can see, that its effect is attracting particular pieces to the whole. This anxiety, this quality, the so called 'primeval' in the phenomenology of Pierce, can be called an echo. It appears when it transmits on a wave length, in resonance with subjectivity, in the sense of all subjects. In the study of the 'Green-line' in Beirut this energy was named 'Iconcity'.

Theories on human settlements define such a place as a 'vacuum', filling the morphodynamics of human settlements with energy - doing so from a distance. The settlement doesn't surround the sacred place, it develops at a distance. From the perspective of the city as an intelligent system, this viewpoint can be accepted as crucial. If we distinguish it as the residue of difference, the spoke between meaning and rationality, it is completely clear, that it is the basic rarity in a developing, intelligent urban system.

4. Public places

Usually all public places are dangerous during the war. In Sarajevo public places witnessed massive crimes on people. From a far distance and through the filters of media it seems in a simplified sense, that survival was possible if one avoided open urban places, e.g. squares, streets. In Beirut as well.

Towards the end of the war in Beirut there were no friends, no enemies, just soldiers and civilians. Even more, any public place became a dangerous place. Under these conditions, it is not difficult to imagine, that the public place attained the role of the enemy, the different, thus 'public' was stigmatised and sentenced to destructive violence. It seems that what the war left undone, was undone by a private real-estate company, established to reconstruct the city-centre. Solidere was authorised to eliminate all private property by changing the city-centre into a shareholders company under its own control. Solidere in fact destroyed everything that remained of the old city-centre. The city-centre of Beirut was evidently sacrificed and sentenced to collective death. Anyone can imagine that what Rene Thome names 'mimetic desire' or 'sacrificial mechanism', becomes stronger in a multicultural society, where its members don't share places of worship or in a society where they share the places, but not the prayers. In Beirut however, there is no lack of public life. There is a lot of public life, but much more hidden, and along other networks than one would see in a European city. It is somehow paradoxical though, because on the other hand there is tremendous emphasis on showing off, by cars, jewellery (plastic or golden), restaurants, private beach clubs, skiing clubs etc. The problem is in the content we usually associate with 'public'.
Another aspect is of course that a middle eastern public space is not the square or the park. It is the street and the sidewalk. In this sense there are many public places, only of a different shape and use. This publicness was even so strong that when the downtown was erased, the street patterns re-emerged in the "desert" by people bringing their white plastic chairs, installing themselves with waterpipes and coffee along the lines where the streets used to be. This was just for a short period of course, between the demolition and the archaeological excavations and later construction. But it was a weird and very moving sight. Like children, disoriented looking for their parents, somehow. Or like puppies still sniffing and trying to find warmth from the body of their dead mother.

5. The Street, the Infrastructure, the Future

When hostilities ended and Solidere completed its task of removing the ruins one could feel a lessening of grief for the loss. The aesthetic importance, the creative power of the 'Green-line' is astonishing. Its architecture still maintains creativity of new forms, identifiable as transitory. There were some proposals to include certain urban types and spatial practices, which appeared similarly to survival tactics during the war, in the architecture of reconstructed Beirut.

The infrastructure is an important element of the masterplan for the downtown area - with all its European and American ideals. Whether it will be carried through once the city rises above the surface - who knows? There are still a few jokers left in the economy and in the regional politics, that may have a lot of influence on that.

Another issue is the rest of the city, which is already there. Right now the situation is that inside the Beirut central district they will have infrastructure, but no city, and outside there is plenty of city, but very little infrastructure. There is also a very distinct line between the inside and the outside of the Beirut central district. Now there is a lot of rapid development outside the line, acting on its own, distributing power points around the fringes, that will obviously have a lot of influence on what's going to happen inside the central district. Very often they act faster outside, act before Solidere is able to materialise their intentions inside the line. An exciting blend of Top-down large scale planning and bottom-up small scale development is going on.

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Notes
[1] Sarkis, Hashim: Beirut, The Central District and the Waterfront: General Context and Site Conditions. V: Rowe, P. G. in Sarkis, H. (eds.): Open City: Rebuilding Beirut's Waterfront, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1995.
[2] http://www.lebanon.com/construction/beirut/index.htm

Picture 1: *An aerial photo of Beirut Central District*

Picture 2: *The demolished street*

Picture 3: *The 'green-line'*

Picture 4: *TheNew boulevard of Solidere.*