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Ruins and the Void. Spaces of Imagination and Contestation in Post-War and Contemporary Beirut

I Introduction

The *(re)construction* of the Lebanese capital Beirut shortly after the civil war (1975–1990) has been hotly debated and contested among scholars, writers, architects, city planners, artists, and the public. Politicians, together with a few private interests, had a vision for development which would cut the city off from its past, replacing it with a sort of *pastiche.* This was advocated by political and economic interests, which aimed to integrate Lebanon into the flows of a global economy following the fall of the Iron Curtain and the proclaimed end of history.[1] The present intensity of global capitalism and speculation in Beirut can be traced back to a progressive and hence, repressive culture of memory in the post-war period.

Following these developments, this essay investigates how outlooks and imaginations in Beirut's public sphere have changed, starting from «the Age of Physical Reconstruction»[2] in the 1990s up to the present day. It focuses on both artistic practices and scholarly accounts, which expose the power structures governing how ruins and empty spaces are organized, used, and mobilized. One motif in this analysis are posters. These were either put up in the city center to envision future developments or, as shown in contemporary artist Helene Kazan's work, used to visually close off construction sites, displaying buildings yet-to-come and, at the same time, covering the ruins of destruction. Vacant and empty spaces, here in the form of politicized locales inscribed with both political and financial interests, have twofold meanings. Firstly, they connect to a sectarian past and, secondly, they are imagined spaces pointing towards the future and a future public. Inevitably, this leads us to the question, whose past, present, and future is at stake?

II Historical Trials

In his seminal 1935 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,* Walter Benjamin described photographer Eugène Atget's depictions of the deserted streets of Paris as a crime scene devoid of human beings. Benjamin emphasized the political potential of these documents, as they became pieces of «evidence in the historical trial *[Prozess]*».[3] Here, the German word *Prozess,* in tandem with the word *evidence* suggests that Atget's photographs allow for an interrogation or examination; a sort of trial held in the *court of history.* Expanding upon this notion, the phrase insinuates a historical process, a series or run of events. This implies that Atget's photographs bear a historical index to a past that although materially lost, is present and can be made relevant again for a future beholder.

In a later text, his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940), Benjamin introduces the figure of the chronicler, which he compares to that of the historian. He argues that the former «recites events without distinguishing between major and minor

ones» and hence «acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history».[4] As such, Atget's Paris is not lost for history. Benjamin goes on to assert that his photographs were not merely objects of «[f]ree-floating contemplation».[5] Rather, he thinks of them as irritating documents that become a means to access what Siegfried Kracauer called a given epoch's unconscious, «surface-level expressions», which, in conjunction with their interpretation, would allow to reveal the «fundamental substance of the state of things».[6]

Recalling the fashion of Benjamin's and Kracauer's historical materialism, Lebanese artist Walid Raad's piece, *The Beirut Al-Hadath Archive* is (as the artist purports), a project started by a group of researchers to document public space in Beirut still during the wars. Together with a mission statement, a foreword and a section of a Beirut city map, the work features nine pages with each two black-and-white images of deserted storefronts in the city (Fig. 1). It was first published as an article in the journal *Rethinking Marxism* in 1999 and later partially integrated into other bodies of work.[7] Raad claims that the imagery dates to the year 1977. The material has however all been produced post-war in the 1990s. Confounding temporalities by mixing the before and after, *The Beirut Al-Hadath Archive* depicts scenes of emptiness comparable to Atget's Paris.

1 Walid Raad, *The Beirut Al-Hadath Archive*, 1999.

Occupying the fissures between official and public discourse, Raad's experimental cultural record spins imaginary narratives around both archival and produced documents. In fictionalizing authorship, images, and narratives, his work is emblematic for Lebanese artistic practice in the 1990s. Artists, architects, and writers including but not limited to Tony Chakar, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Walid Raad, Marwan Rechmaoui, Jalal Toufic, Paola Yacoub and Michel Lasserre, or Akram Zaatari, produce works in which mapping space is a central motif. Often condensed in the form of empty spaces and ruins, this can be understood as attempts to reappropriate the ravaged public space.

III Reconstructing Beirut

The so-called post-war generation (a group of artists that gathered in Beirut in the early 1990s), were alerted by the destruction of the city's fabric caused by a lack of public discourse, memory, and historicity. Some in this group received their education outside of Lebanon and thus share an expatriate perspective and it is notable that most left the country during the war and temporarily returned to Beirut in the 1990s. Hence, while not physically present during the war, they bore witness to the destruction of the country's fabric post-conflict. As a result, their artistic focus is on the ongoing effects and problems connected to the *(re)construction;* its ongoing destruction and gradual violence, rather than depictions of the violence of war.

Early scholarly accounts located the work of Raad and his contemporaries in the «traumatic experiences of the Lebanese civil wars.»[8] Later, Mark Jarzombek

amongst others, proclaimed a *traumatic turn* which supposedly stood at the core of these practices.[9] We can, however, understand this situation as a paradigmatic example of both a lack of memory (a deliberate, politically motivated erasure of history and historicity) and an intensification of global capitalism. In this respect, scholar Saree Makdisi goes so far as to assume a «postmodern Lebanon».[10] In his understanding and deflection of the term, this means a combination of both waning memory and liberalism. Against this backdrop, artistic practices dealing with memory and singular perspectives, not only express war-related trauma, but also react to politically and financially motivated erasures of a traumatic past. These practitioners question post-conflict representation and a public sphere, which is yet-to-come, as opposed to presenting digestible narratives of traumatic events. Lebanon was shaken by numerous armed conflicts from the mid-1970s until the late 1980s and the Ta'if Agreement marked an official end in 1989. Disarmament of the militias followed in 1991 with the exception of the Hezbollah, which emerged during the 1982 Israeli invasion of the country. Despite the proclaimed end of the war, Lebanon remains in a state of tension. An ongoing series of armed conflicts make the term *post-war* difficult to apply. In light of the 2006 Israel–Hezbollah War, it would be more accurate to speak of interrupted periods of peace. Over the history of war, *ends* were proclaimed and imagined at multiple points in time.

IV Wars on the Traces of War

The ruins referred to in this section can be categorized as ancient, modern, or *post-conflict.* The first have been marketed as indexes of history and the second are products of the perennial series of conflicts. The third category however, exist as a result of post-war destruction attributed to the real estate and building industry (both linked to political forces). These industries wished to create a *tabula rasa* and the resulting destruction can be easily mistaken for war ruins.[11] This section focuses on the violence of the latter, which are somehow a repetition of the conflict itself. Lebanese writer Jalal Toufic has called this ongoing destruction of an already punctuated urban fabric «the war on the traces of the war.»[12] Toufic further reckons that this belated, second destruction, «signals that the war is continuing».[13] While the destruction after the destruction is grounded in a different, politically motivated idea, it alters the present to a precarious state of ongoing conflict. Toufic and others highlight that one of the grounds for erasing «recent ruins»[14] (as he calls the post-war destruction) is grounded in the desire for an image of Beirut as *Ancient City of the Future,* that only understood ancient ruins as marketable products and historical indexes.

Laying bare the political entanglements in the post-war building industry in the Lebanese capital, literary critic and scholar Saree Makdisi shows how the city center had then morphed into a space of «pure appearance» that was «ostensibly hardwired to the global circuits of transnational capital.»[15] The visual appearance of the center, as the nexus for both transport and leisure, crucially determined the city's public sphere. As the Green Line which had divided the city along sectarian lines vanished, the possibility to reinstall a shared, common center was neglected and a different narrative was adopted instead: that of a modern or, rather, *contemporary* Beirut, creating discontinuity between the city center and its surroundings. Makdisi's lucid analysis circles around a private firm, Solidere, which was in charge of reconstructing Beirut's city center. The company's role in this project (which

included an area of more than four million square meters), was to execute government plans, run financing, planning and supervision, as well as manage and sell property. The company has close connections to businessman and politician Rafiq al-Hariri, who was the Prime Minister of Lebanon from 1992–1998 and from 2000–2004. Solidere emerged out of OGER Liban, a private firm of al-Hariri's that was granted contracts to clear Beirut from its rubble during the 1980's war. In the 1990s, Solidere presented itself as a «healing agency»[16] that would reinstall a modern Beirut. As there were multiple points during the war where an *end* was predicted, there were also several and varied reconstruction plans. These mostly foresaw the retention of the initial function of the city-center as a meeting place and space of transit, connecting the various parts of the city. This idea was discarded in favor of a «space of flows».[17]

Another factor hindering an official written history of the war was the progressive and future oriented (understood in this case as *repressive*) culture of memory pursued by al-Hariri. In reference to a mixing of interests and control, Makdisi speaks of a «colonization»[18] of public spheres by private interests. This involves a waning of state control on the one hand, and a paradoxical, concomitant intensification of it on the other at the cost of the public. Makdisi understood, in 1997, that liberalization and concomitant waves of privatization in Lebanon paved the way for present-day global capitalism. Beirut was becoming a «laboratory» for its «current and future elaborations.»[19] Further expanding, al-Hariri's neoliberal politics (perhaps comparable to Thatcher and Reagan in the 1980s) has given way to the current intensification of speculation in the building industry.

Lebanon's post-war politics shifted fundamentally. Neoliberal politics and economics were embedded and blended with what had been described as the final win of capitalism over other forms of political organization. Al-Hariri, who built his contracting wealth in Saudi Arabia during the civil war, arguably enabled Lebanon's integration into contemporary flows of capital by removing a politics of memory. This, instead of instigating debate, *produced* an image of the country disconnected from the heterogeneity of its manifold historical vectors. Makdisi analyzes various advertising posters, including one put up on central Beirut's Martyrs Square (Fig. 2). The poster, positioned in the midst of rubble and ruins, functions as a window to a future and materializes (in image form) Solidere's and al-Hariri's vision for a global city.

2 Advertising poster on Beirut's Martyrs Square, photograph by Saree Makdisi, 1997.

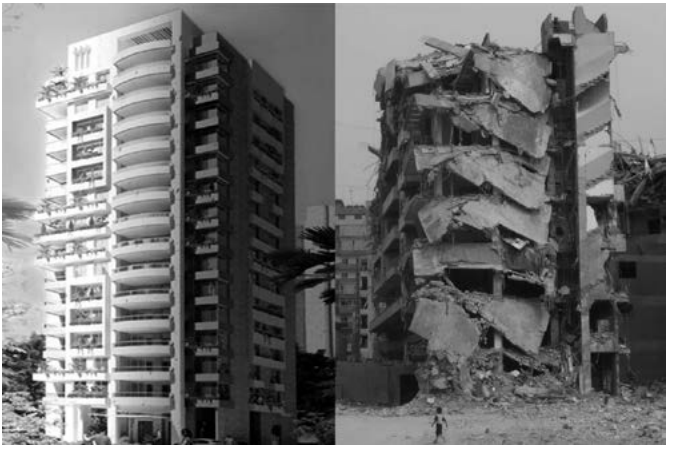
V Erosion of the Present

A caesura in the reconstruction plans (following Solidere's post-war plans), came shortly after the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war. Here development work advocated by the Hezbollah were presented. This militant Shi'a political organization, although part of the Lebanese Parliament, has been classified as a terrorist organization in international politics and media. These plans do not interfere with the city center, but instead focus on redevelopment of the suburbs in southern Beirut.[20] While the Solidere plan had fostered the convergence of private and state capital with a shift towards a neoliberal economy, the Hezbollah's focused on developing and sustaining its political influence and proving its ability to manage pivotal construction projects.[21] It seems however, that the foundations laid by Solidere still dominate the city's public space. If anything, two decades later one sees an intensification of representational strategies and underlying economic transformation achieved by projecting visions of the future, and by disconnecting and striping down both a modernist and traumatic past.

From this moment of local, political nepotism in the 1990s up to the present day, we can trace a shift towards an era of speculation. The literary critic Joseph Vogl posits that this has led to an «erosion of the present».[22] Vogl reasons in his 2010 book *The Specter of Capital,* that «an indeterminate future can be assimilated into the present since it is offset by determinable expectations about the future.»[23] This means that possible approaching threats are not simply based on the past, but conversely, that representations of the future effect the present. For instance, since the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, it becomes understandable that war is continuing and it has been predicted that a military conflict might erupt at any point. This acts to change the status of the here and now to a potentially (if not determinably) violent present.

«The real estate market in Lebanon has consistently been regarded as its most dynamic area of investment»[24], explains artist Helene Kazan in her 2015 piece, *(De) constructing Risk: A Domestic Image of the Future.* Both public and private space (the city and the home) are still contested spaces in Beirut and are a locale in which financial, political, and historical interests converge and materialize. Distributed through multiple outlets ranging from video, lecture performance,[25] and a journal publication,[26] Kazan's artistic research on the visual strategies employed in both risk assessment and the building industry draws on both archival imagery and onsite investigation. In this piece, Kazan juxtaposes two kinds of images, each conceptualizing a possible future (Fig. 3). The first image shows an advertisement on a construction site depicting a contemporary home to be built. The other is of ruins as featured on the front page of a risk assessment paper. Kazan exposes the representational strategies employed in Beirut's construction and real estate industry and questions how risk is assessed using images. While the first image shows life-size posters of forthcoming structures predicting a contemporary Lebanon, the second draws on depictions of past conflicts to conceptualize a possible violent future. In both depictions, ruins and empty, void spaces play a central role as a material substrate onto which an image is *projected.*

Kazan's research was undertaken as part of Forensic Architecture, a commissioned research group that provides spatial evidence to help monitor and shed light on conflicts. The research group was founded by Eyal Weizman in 2010 and is today based at Goldsmiths, University of London.[27] Understanding aesthetics as



3 Helene Kazan, *A Cartography of Risk*, 2015.

the form of presentation and translation of data into registers of the sensible, then the aesthetics of this group can be located in a lineage of artistic research practices. The Lebanese post-war generation has paved the way in this genealogy, to dominant, post-conceptual forms of representation. By examining the geo-political forces that alter both the surface and the material substrate of the built environment, Forensic Architecture deflects established notions of architecture and architectural praxis. Centrally, it redefines the role of an architect or researcher as that of an active agent to counteract the stranglehold the state and global corporations have on interpretation (for instance in armed conflicts, dispossession cases, and human rights violations). Knowing the group's self-proclaimed heritage of historical materialism,[28] Walter Benjamin's urge to «brush history against the grain»[29] becomes central to understanding the political agency of such artistic and architectural research. Expanding upon this, Weizman and his peers understand that representation (for instance in the form of images) is not external to contemporary conflicts but, on the contrary, internal, partaking in today's affective economies.

VI Conclusions

The advertisement posters that featured in Makdisi's essay display a rather collective view, that aims to produce a modern narrative and public. In contrast, Kazan's imagery focuses on individual representations and their entanglement with contemporary risk assessment. She opposes two distinct (and seemingly contradictory) images which are nonetheless connected on a «semiotic axis.»[30] Both change the status of the present, drawing on either past events or future potentials. Pictured as a threat (whether imminent or not), the ruin offers up a possible scenario thus creating a state of danger and uncertainty in the present. Kazan's images of ruins fiercely connect to risk modelling, a type of forecast that mobilizes representations of the past for future, yet-to-come events. However, not based on merely statistical means, the imagery builds on a language affect.

Artist Walid Raad's *The Beirut Al-Hadath Archive* explained how empty spaces and deserted streets were post-conflict *evidence* for negotiating a traumatic past. Helene Kazan's work expands to the question, how both the geopolitical situation and the phenomenological, perceived present are shaped by speculation within global economic flows. Saree Makdisi's analysis contributed to this understanding

by grounding a lack of memory and public discourse in the political entanglements of the early 1990s era of reconstruction. Both recent Lebanese history (for instance the Israel-Hezbollah war) and the representational strategies of risk assessment and the building industry, point to the fragility of political arrangements and show how easily military conflicts can erupt. Summarizing, Kazan's work also opens up toward the question, how images and conflicts affect and produce each other. As opposed to Eugène Atget's Paris and Raad's Beirut, Kazan's imagery broadens the understanding of images as documentations of a surface reality, suggesting that images and conflicts partake in the same regime of truth.

Anmerkungen

1 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man,* New York 1992.
2 Peter Rowe and Hakim Sarkis, «The Age of Physical Reconstruction», in: *Projecting Beirut. Episodes in the Construction and Reconstruction of a Modern City,* ed. by Peter Rowe and Hakim Sarkis, Munich / New York 1998, p. 275–284, here p. 282.
3 Walter Benjamin, «The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version», in: *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and other Writings on Media.* ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, translated by Edmund Jephcott et al., Cambridge / London 2008, p. 19–55, here p. 27. Emphasis in original.
4 Walter Benjamin, «Theses on the Philosophy of History», in: *IlluminationS.* Ed. by and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt. Transl. by Harry Zohn, New York 1969, p. 253–264, here p. 254.
5 Benjamin 2008 (as note 3), p. 27.
6 Siegfried Kracauer, «The Mass Ornament», in: *The Mass Ornament.* transl., ed. and with an introduction by Thomas Y. Levin, Cambridge / Mass 1995, p. 75–86, here p. 75.
7 Walid Ra'ad, «The Beirut Al-Hadath Archive», in: *Rethinking Marxism,* 1999, Vol. 11, No. 1, p. 15–29. This work is a prelude or formative precursor to the artist's best-known project *The Atlas Group* (1999–2004), an imaginary foundation and collective. Raad produces ostensible documents that counteract official accounts and thus building on memory to contest its passive counterpart, history.
8 Sarah Rogers, «Forging History, Performing Memory: Walid Ra'ad's The Atlas Project», in: *Parachute,* 2002, Vol. 108, p. 68–79, here p. 78.
9 Mark Jarzombek, «The Post-traumatic Turn and the Art of Walid Ra'ad and Krysztof Wodiczko. From Theory to Trope and Beyond», in: *Trauma and Visuality,* ed. by Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg, Lebanon (US) 2006, p. 249–271.
10 Saree Makdisi, «Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidere», in *Critical Inquiry,* 1997, Vol. 23, No. 3, p. 660–705, here p. 699. See also from the same author: «Beirut, a City without History?», in: *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa,* ed. by Ussama Makdisi and Paul A. Silverstein, Bloomington (US) 2006, p. 201–214.
11 Rowe / Sarkis 1998 (as note 2), here p. 282.
12 Jalal Toufic, «Ruins», in: *Thinking: The Ruin,* ed. by Matthew Gumpert and Jalal Toufic, Istanbul 2010, p. 35–39, here p. 37.
13 Toufic 2010 (as note 12), here p. 37.
14 Toufic 2010 (as note 12), here p. 37. Emphasis in original.
15 Makdisi 1997 (as note 10), here p. 704.
16 Makdisi 1997 (as note 10), here p. 675.
17 Makdisi 1997 (as note 10), here p. 703–704. Makdisi refers to Manuel Castells's term, coined in his seminal book *The Rise of the Network Society.* As Castells theorizes, the emergence of spaces that connect to the global economy blurs «the meaningful relationship between architecture and society.» Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol. I.,* Cambridge (US) / Oxford (UK) 1996, here p. 449.
18 Makdisi 1997 (as note 10), here p. 672.
19 Makdisi 1997 (as note 10), here p. 695.
20 Mona Fawaz, «Hezbollah as Urban Planner? Questions to and from Planning Theory», in: *Planning Theory,* 2009, Vol. 8, No. 4, p. 323–334.
21 Fawaz 2009 (as note 20), here p. 329.
22 Philipp Ekardt and Joseph Vogl, «In the Pull of Time. A Conversation between Joseph Vogl and Philipp Ekardt on Speculation», in: *Texte zur Kunst,* 2014, Vol. 93, p. 108–126.
23 Joseph Vogl, *The Specter of Capital* [2010]. translated by Joachim Redner and Robert Savage, Stanford (US) 2015, here p. 78.
24 Among other venues, Kazan's work was shown in the exhibition *Frames of War* during Momenta Art, New York, 2015.
25 Lecture Performance held at Universität für angewandte Kunst, Vienna on April 21, 2015.
26 Helene Kazan, «(De)constructing Risk: A Domestic Image of the Future», in: *Scroope Cambridge Architectural Journal,* 2015, No. 24, p. 190–210.
27 Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability,* New York 2017, here p. 9.
28 Weizman 2017 (as note 27), p. 54.
29 Benjamin 1969 (as note 4), p. 257.
30 Kazan 2015 (as note 26), here: p. 207.