

Confusing Political, Social and Cultural Urban Changes in Beirut

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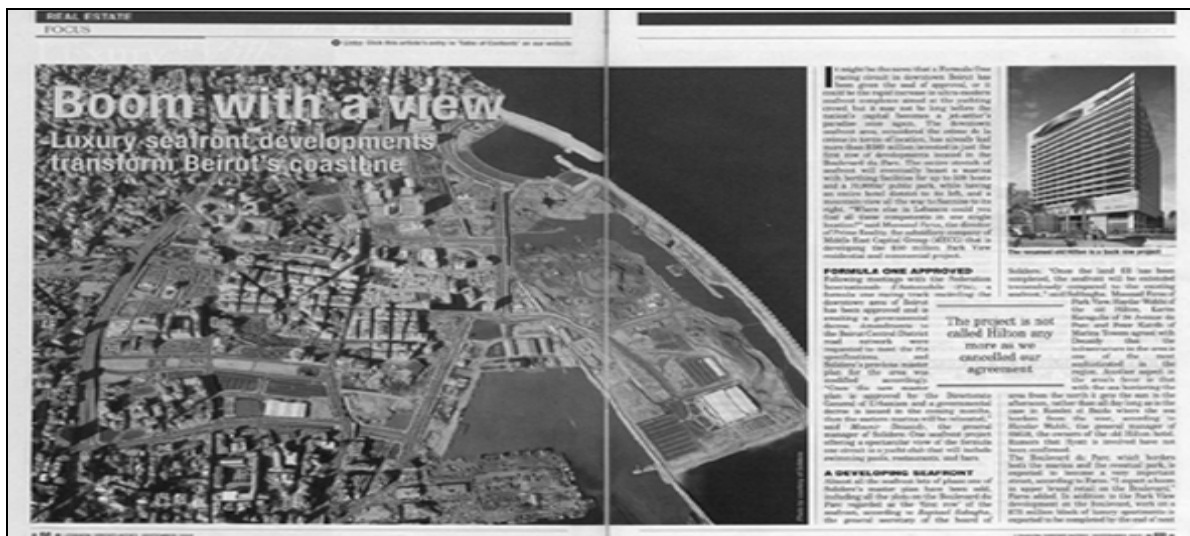
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Abstract

The urban growth of Beirut and Lebanon has been shaped more by the forces of local politics and rapid economics as opposed to sustainable planning strategies. The citizens of Beirut are confused, they are seeking the preservation of a particular pre-war public image, space and character; in particular they are attempting to physically live an urban memory. Beirut is a city that has been removed from the proximities of memory and finds itself motivated by intense political and economical machines and lacks the contribution of cultural and urban infrastructure.

Beirut is being reconstituted in the fashion of an elaborate stage set with a particular theme; the city looks old and eclectic but its reality is much more brutal. The citizens of Beirut realize that simply combining new and old buildings along with archaeological digs creates a false sense of diversity since they are all catering to a particular upper class bracket of society. This research aims "to explore the process of transition of urban technical infrastructure" and detect the urban transformation of the city in a historical perspective. Furthermore this study aims at promoting Urbanization as a Tool of Development for Lebanon.

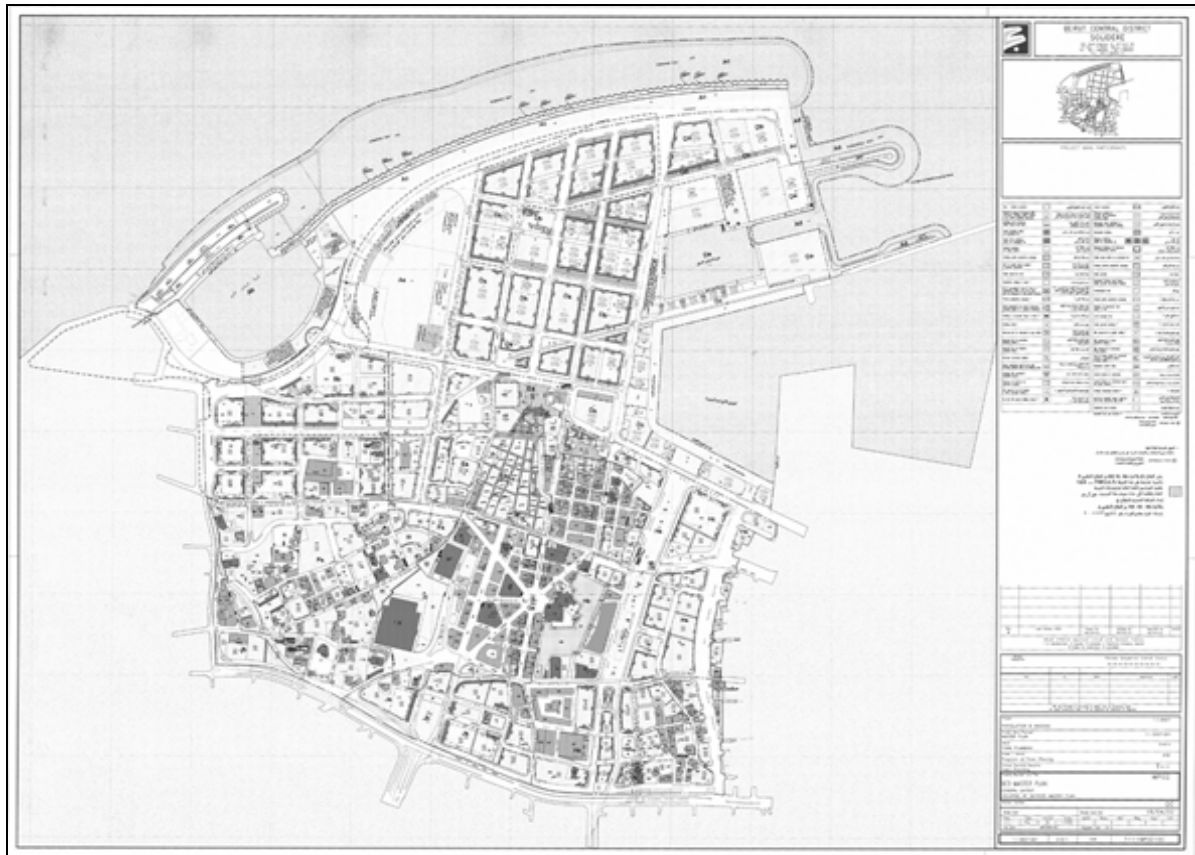


Lebanon through Layers of Time

Place and culture are persistently intertwined with one another, for any given place... is always a locus of dense human inter-relationships (out of which culture in part grows) and culture is a phenomenon that tends to have intensely local characteristics thereby helping to differentiate places from one another. (Scott, 2000:30). Lebanon¹ has a heritage almost as old as the earliest evidence of mankind. Its geographic position as a crossroads linking the Mediterranean Basin with the great Asian hinterland has conferred on it a cosmopolitan character and a multicultural legacy. Lebanon has an Arab culture coloured by Western influences. Its coastline is about 225 km (150 miles) in length and is, on average, 45 km (30 miles) wide. The total area of the country amounts to 10,452 square km (4,500 square miles). Along the coast are the five famous cities of Beirut, Byblos, Sidon, Tripoli, and Tyre. It is bordered in the north and east by Syria and, in the south, by Israel. Throughout the centuries, a strip of land on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, with its mountains and its plains, has attracted conquerors and harbored minorities.”(De Freige, N. and Maria Saad, 1987: 57)

1. Birth of the City- State Gubla (Jbayl) Byblos today: -2800
2. Canaanites& Amorites: -2300
3. Egyptians-Hittites: -1350
4. Phoenicians: -1100
5. Assyrians-Babylonian Empire: -877
6. Persian Empire: -539
7. Roman Empire: -64
8. Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire: 395
9. The Islamic World: 635
10. The Umayyad: 661
11. A New Dynasty: The Abbasids: 750
12. The Rein of the Fatimids: 969
13. The Seljuks and the First Crusades: 1090
14. Latin Crusader States: 1150
15. The Mameluke States 1291
16. The Ottoman Empire 1516
17. Countries of the Middle East
18. The French Mandate 1920
19. The Independent State 1943

At different periods of its history, Lebanon has come under the domination of foreign rulers, including Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, and Ottomans... Although often conquered, the Lebanese take pride in their rebellions against despotic and repressive rulers. Moreover, despite foreign domination, Lebanon's mountainous terrain has provided it with a certain protective isolation, enabling it to survive with an identity all its own.

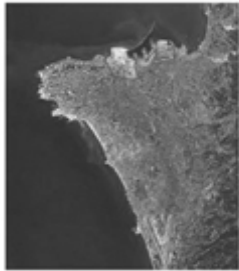


The project indicating the BCD Boundary and eradicating its urban context, 2003.

Ironically speaking


With the return to peace and stability, Lebanon's economy re-emerged in 1990, sustained by an ambitious national development program. Massive privatized public investment was coupled with macro-economic policies designed to stimulate private local and foreign investment. The BCD reconstruction and development project benefited from this favourable environment and causing harsh Inequality between hard and soft infrastructure within and beyond the city urban and suburban fringes. Ironically, the development of Beirut Central District² into the finest city centre in the Middle East is one of the most ambitious post war reconstruction and urban regeneration ventures of our time.

Beirut Planning Through the Ages




1990s Beirut


Head of Oger Liban in Beirut is appointed head of CDR. New master plan for C.B.D. designed by Henri Eddé of Dar Al-Handasah group. Decree law for the creation of a private real estate holding company to administ the reconstruction of C.B.D. Public protest voiced against the holding company and the proposed plan. Signs of dissatisfaction within HCUP and CDR about new project.




Beirut Central District
1990




Beirut Central District
1977




The Shihabs Last Emirate
1841



The Ottoman Empire Beirut
1876



Independent Lebanon Beirut
1944



Beirut Central District
1970

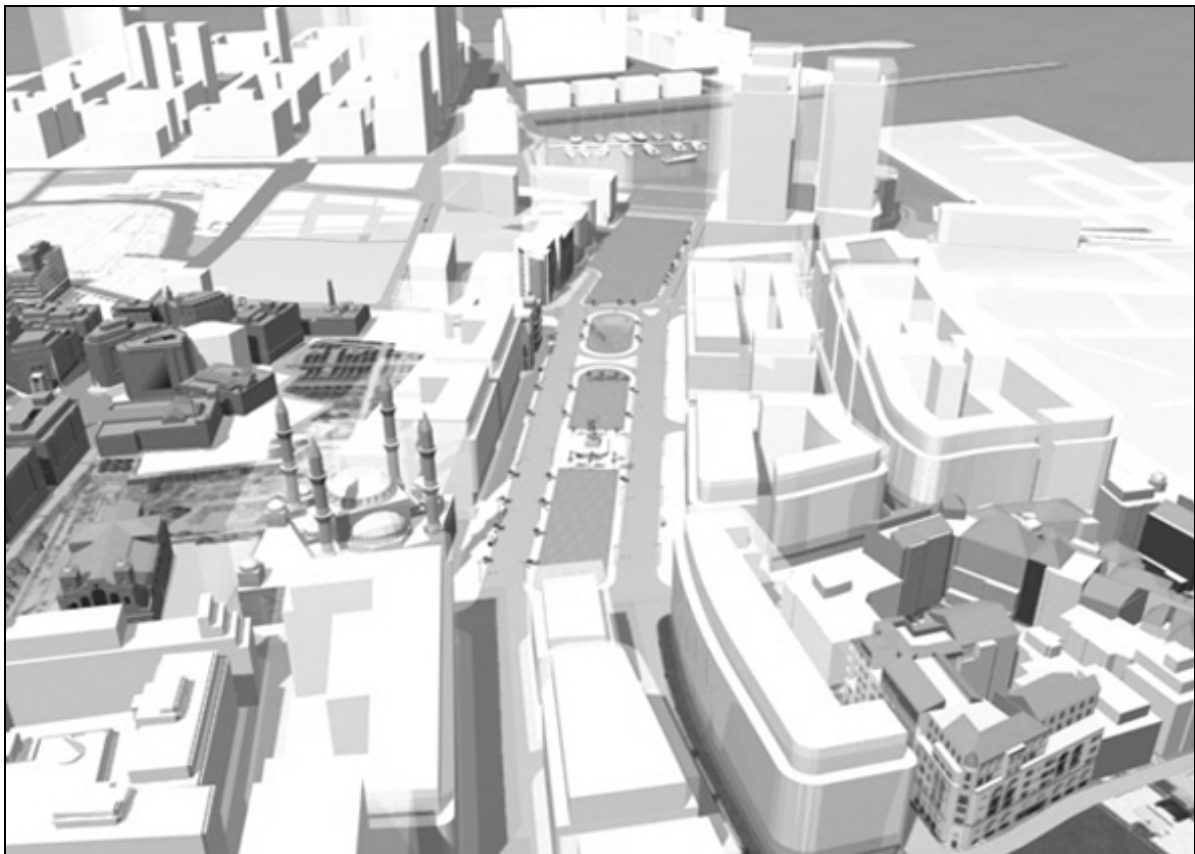
Based on a Master Plan which optimizes the site’s natural assets and draws on its rich heritage, the project aims at creating a modern district spreading over 108 million sq m of land, one- third reclaimed from the sea, and offering a mix of facilities totalling 4.69 million sq m of floor space. The development company promotes that the plan respected the main natural feature and typography of the site by maximizing views of the see and surrounding landscape, on the contrary it devastated the urban morphology of the coastal line and archaeological findings.

“Since November 1994 the Lebanese press has reported, on a nearly weekly basis, the wrecking of mosaics, walls, columns, and other archaeological monuments in Beirut. Working around the clock for more than a year, bulldozers dug into the city, filling dump trucks that promptly emptied their loads into the Mediterranean Sea. More than 7 million cubic feet of ancient Beirut have been lost forever. The digging is for sewers that will not be operative until they are linked to a purification plant that will not be built for a few years; two parallel boulevards, separated by only a hundred yards that will not be linked to the metropolitan road network for many years; and an underground parking lot for 2,700 cars. These are the altars on which were sacrificed the old markets, which preserved Beirut's 2,500-year-old urban grid, and the ancient tell with its unique treasures. The bulldozers were still digging in January 1996 when it was announced that the “archaeological excavations were nearly completed. In a span of 14 months the bulldozers had utterly destroyed much ancient Beirut. Soon nothing will be left of it. No provision has yet been made for the archaeological study of the private lots, which are already being sold, and the Lebanese Antiquity Law is still being circumvented.” (Naccache (1996)³ . furthermore, this planning trend negated the adjacent communities to suffer from urban imbalance. Hence, pragmatic political and private economical strategies and gains were targeted. “A key component of such pro-growth economic development strategies has been the formulation, development and promotion of prestige

projects...These prestige physical, development projects are largely geared at facilitating the physical economic and cultural restructuring of the city center or downtown areas.” Loftman and Nevin, 2003: 76)⁴.

This study⁵ draws upon the confusion and declares the various problematic issues which derive mainly from the lack of a proper physical frame that regulates the distribution of people and economic activities. The development company, SOLIDER was established within the framework of Law 117 of 1991 which regulates Lebanese real estate companies aiming at the reconstruction of war-damaged areas, in accordance with an officially approved master plan, “SCHÉMA DIRECTEUR”⁶ catering to the private upper class which is 5% of the population and negating the rest of the Lebanese population. “More than half of Lebanon’s 3 million people live below the poverty level. The minimum wage amounts to \$127 per month, with food prices as high as Paris’s and energy prices as high as Tokyo’s. A Lebanese architect fears that the renovated heart of the city will belong only to foreign firms, rich Lebanese returned from exile, then, we will have a Beirut without Beiruters!”⁷

The “SCHÉMA DIRECTEUR” of the Metropolitan Region of Beirut and the interlocking relationship of the various forces that have shaped the planning process and lead to the present segregated quality of urban life, as a result of the SDRMB capitalistic approach and the “clientelistic politics and other forms of patronage” that underlie the current urban development resulting in cultural voids and segregated communities, denouncing the various pluralistic values which were the founding principles of such a diverse community damaging the entire strata of urban socio-economic values. The city has become a bourgeois ghetto catering to only 5% of the Lebanese population



Inequality between hard and soft infrastructure

Lebanon's Pre war urban dogmas continue thru Post war Urban-tactics. The reconstruction process continues to involve confusing political, social and cultural urban changes and stretches over a tensile line of two fundamental magnitudes: the physical or hard infrastructure, and the social or soft' infrastructure. The physical infrastructure providers detained the initiative in privatizing, getting hold of a large amount of control over the form and timing of development. In contrast, the social service coalition is a reluctant heir of privatization while the lower and middle income suburban fringe developments are still waiting. (McIntosh, A. 1997). This inequality between hard and soft infrastructure have reflected more than the privatization process itself and have led to the present urban and social segregation where social planning and social reform have been marginalized. Compared with economic issues and in the context of interest in privatization and new development, images of society were quite faintly articulated. This confusion leaves us with a question on how vital is hard infrastructure is in the rebuilding of Beirut?!

Lebanon through time provided an excellent example of a country the problems of which derive mainly from the lack of a proper physical frame that regulates the distribution of people and economic activities. By many criteria Lebanon may be considered advanced. It has a high standard of literacy, a high degree of social mobility, well established tradition in exercising a democratic system, a high degree of tolerance among its different sectors of population, a very active private sector, a growing industrial movement, a great diversity in its economic activities, and yet Lebanon is facing very precarious and puzzling internal problems, mainly because its growth did not take place within a proper frame.

As the private sector in Lebanon is very strong, and as it is ambitious and displays a great entrepreneurial spirit, the task of the government would be just to channel the dynamic activities of the private sector, define the broad lines of its policy for the future of national growth and provide an attractive alternative for the dislocated people in the region that tend now to move to or out of Beirut by implementing the general state outline policy with a provisional infrastructure for a successful take-off.

The problems that emerge from the continuation of the present trend can be divided into two groups:

- Those that result from the rapid expansion of Beirut and;
- Those that result from the draining of distant regions.

1. The problems that results from the rapid expansion of Beirut may be classified under three main headings: the structural, the managerial and the socio-political problems.

The structural problems

It may not be a serious problem to plan for a city of the size of Beirut or to provide for the expansion at the rate at which Beirut is expanding. Yet, since Beirut had gone a long way before any planning for its growth and expansion was thought of, the problem of this expansion have become enormous. It would be extremely difficult at this point to synchronize all sectors of the infrastructure that serve Beirut to expand them all at the same rate. Consequently, we find that the capacity of the different services in Beirut within and beyond the Beirut Central District differs greatly and that there is a constant shortage, beyond the central district designated line, of various degrees, in all services- water supply, electrical supply and street cleaning facilities.

For a long time the Beirut authorities have been constantly trying to expand one service or the other at the expense of the convenience of Beirut inhabitants. As things stand, this process of readjusting and re-expanding have excluded the adjacent communities to the central district and must go on indefinitely unless by a miracle it become possible to enlarge all the services at one time and for a high new level of capacity, this amounts to remodelling greater Beirut in one stroke.

Moreover the expansion of facilities in an already crowded city is highly expensive. From this structural point of view only, it is very important to regulate the growth- rate of Beirut to make it possible technically and financially, to control this process of expansion and to lessen the inconveniences that result from it to the inhabitants.

Managerial problems

The managerial capacity of the city may be considered a structural problem, yet, it is important enough to be discussed under a separate heading. The managerial fabric of Beirut is the continuation of that managerial set up that was barely adequate for small Beirut before it exploded in rapid growth. The personnel structure of management, the budgeting structure and the mentality that governs the functioning of this apparatus all date back to the pre-explosion period. Definitely they did not develop and grow at the same pace with which Beirut grew. In fact the difference in pace is very huge. It is very difficult to calculate a ratio between the existing managerial facilities and the required ones. The population of Beirut was in 1930 around 150,000 in the early seventies it was close to one million and today it is around 1,500,000. No one familiar with the actual process of development within the Lebanese administration would expect to find that the municipality of Beirut was able to expand its managerial facilities and its budget to keep up with this growth. Moreover, the mentality prevailing in the administrative structure of the municipality of Beirut is much behind the administrative needs of running a modern city.

The administrative structure of Beirut needs revolutionary improvements and expansion to become adequate for controlling the growth of the city. This sort of revolutionary improvement would meet enormous resistance from vested economic and political interests and from a prevailing traditional mentality. The problems that face such improvement make them very close to impossible. This would mean that the growth of Beirut would continue untamed on the pace started within the last fourteen years and would ultimately lead to changing Beirut from a city that thirty years ago had liveability index as tops to a city with a liveability index of a slum by scientific definition on its peripheral and immediate urban fringes.

The socio-political disadvantages

The socio-political disadvantages that derive from the over concentration in Beirut can be serious enough even if the growth of Beirut was planned and placed under control. These disadvantages become more pronounced in the existing situation because it is not just a matter of draining the regions from their dwellers and economic vitality but it is rather a matter of spoiling the human and material assets that get attracted to Beirut.

When our basic theme is to explore the possibility of relocating uprooted communities spiritually, culturally and physically we should become very aware of the danger of crowding people chaotically in a slum of concrete structures with the least amount of greenery, space, privacy, calm, parking space, sanitary

measures and cleanliness. Besides, one of Lebanon's political sore-points is the unequal attention given to different sectors of the population and to different regions.

This analysis of the problems of Beirut brings in the question of unequal distribution among the different sectors. The rapid unplanned clustering of emigrating people would only accentuate the difference in the distribution of wealth and in the standard of living. It is not an easy task to provide for absorbing all this inflow into Beirut and to resettle the people in a decent life with adequate job opportunities and health environment. This would mean that the sense of stability on which the Lebanese democratic political atmosphere in the surrounding Arab world constitutes a serious challenge to the Lebanese political system.

From this point of view alone one should consider the declaration of a sort of emergency to halt the present trend in which Beirut is growing.

2. The disadvantages of draining the distant parts in the region can be divided into economic and socio-political framework.

Urbanization and the economic disadvantages

It is obvious that a densely populated country has to make the best of its scarce land. "Urbanization is also having a dramatic impact on the world's resources. It is estimated that cities currently occupy 2% of the world's land surface yet use some 75% of the world resources and release similar percentage of waste. It is further estimated that the demand for energy in the next 25 years will have increased to 88% higher than the 1990 level." (McIntosh 1997: 8).

To be able to exploit its special agricultural characteristics Lebanon has to modernize the agricultural sector. Modernizing the agricultural sector means to modernize the agricultural population. The present trend of affairs does not take care of this problem in this comprehensive fashion and, therefore, it causes the people in the distant regions to desert the land and deprive the Lebanese economy from developing the potentials of the agricultural sector.

From a touristic point of view (and tourism is an important factor in the Lebanese economy) Lebanon must make the best of its scenic beauty. The best way to develop scenic beauty is through development of the land and the human settlements. One has only to make a tour in the undeveloped areas of the south, the north and the Beqaa to realize how important proper development is for creating an attractive atmosphere for tourism and promote cultural tourism via world heritage, archaeological and historical preservation sites. Furthermore, "we should not underestimate the possibility of finding pleasing new uses for old infrastructure...the Gare d'Orsay in Paris, a monumental infrastructure achievement of the railway era, has become France's museum of the nineteenth century. (Herman and Ausubel, 1988: 6). The development of tourism in Lebanon, therefore, dictates the need for proper development of the distant regions and the revival of old infrastructure in the inner cities of Lebanon.

The socio-political disadvantages

The socio-political disadvantages of the present trend touch upon the sociological and political structure of Lebanon.

1. From the sociological point of view the Lebanese community structure has been severely hit since the decline of the silk industry in the late twenties. The silk production had governed the distribution of population in Lebanon and provided a basis for the distribution of settlements that was very appropriate for the special climatic conditions in Lebanon and which is now very difficult to replace. It may be appropriate to outline the special characteristics of the silk industry in order to project the organic relation that was created between the requirements of that industry and the settlement structure in Lebanon.

- a. The silk industry is a mixed agricultural and industrial activity.
- b. The second characteristic is that the mulberry tree on which this industry depended is suitable for Lebanon terrain and climate.
- c. The third characteristic is that the silk production depended on the leaves of the mulberry tree and not on its fruits.
- d. The fourth characteristic is that the end product was semi-finished, durable goods and had a foreign market. It also helped the balance of the trade for the Lebanese economy.

These four characteristics provided a large sector of the Lebanese population with a valid mixed economic activity. Thus the decline of the silk industry undermined the whole structure of human settlements and caused the population in most villages with dry agriculture to emigrate.

All Lebanese government efforts since independence have been geared towards restoring the previous silk pattern distribution, as it was felt, from the beginning, that the destruction of that structure caused serious sociological problems. The silk at the present time is a fairytale and the silk factories are deteriorated waiting for a monumental infrastructural achievement such as the Gare d'Orsay in Paris.

2. From the political point of view the rapid destruction of the social structure would definitely lead to a state of psychological unrest that does not tolerate the type of political democratic system of which Lebanon is very proud. Democracy in itself pre-supposes a sort of natural evolution within traditional moral values. It has been the greatest achievement of Lebanon to maintain its democratic system in spite of the strong revolutionary currents in the area and almost all over the third world. Yet, the continuance of the over- concentration in Beirut and the irritating atmosphere that results from this trend, and the increasing drainage and urban poverty and the poverty of the distant regions make it more and more difficult for Lebanon to keep its grounds and preserve its political system. The present trend, therefore, constitutes a very serious confusion and danger to the Lebanese political system and to all the values for which Lebanon is supposed to stand.

Conclusion

”predators used Lebanon as a proxy battleground and age-old feuds were resurrected, reviving element of tribalism and feudalism” (O’balance, 1998)

We the, architects, artists, planners, urban designers, historians and urban sociologist are confronted with peevisish-politicized resolutions and emperor decision-making. We must realize that we have had partners imposed on us, who are constantly mapping and re-mapping human settlements, shaping and reshaping the urban-morphology⁸ and cultural geography of cities, ironically, in the discourse of advanced socio-political-economics gain; deplaning, reframing and remapping nations’ geographical and geopolitical boundaries. Furthermore, our fanatic partners are ripping-apart, de-planning planned cities and reaping world-heritage.

Notes

- ¹ Embassy of Lebanon, Washington DC. 2002.
- ² From the Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of the Beirut Central District (SOLIDER annual report 2000).
- ³ Archaeological Institute of America, 1996, www.archaeology.org/9607/abstracts/beirut.html Albert F.H. Naccache (1996), in his article "The Price of Progress" projects his ethical concerns about the destruction of the archaeological sites in the rebuilding process of the city.
- ⁴ From their article in *Urban Futures*, page 76.
- ⁵ In the face of these urban changes this study is part of "Controlled Urbanization as a Tool of Development for Lebanon", which was initially composed as the foundation principles and declaration of the New Towns Association for Modernizing Lebanon (1996) which I serve as a founding member and in affiliation with Mr. Hilmi A. Malouf and former parliament member and minister of communication and information technology Dr. Issam Namaan; Some of their words and thoughts and some of mine.
- ⁶ LE SCHÉMA DIRECTEUR DE LA RÉGION MÉTROPOLITAINE DE BYEROUTH (SDRMB, 1986): The SDRMB plan is considered the reference for the reconstruction of the Beirut metropolitan region today.
- ⁷ Dachs, Gisela. *World Press Review*, v. 41 (Nov. 1994) p. 42.
- ⁸ Refers the negative environmental degrading of the urban landfill in Beirut, and other local, regional and global cities, in reshaping the waterfront for rapid-economical land development.

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