

The Story of Public Space in Beirut's Geography of Power

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ABSTRACT

From 1975 until 1990, Lebanon experienced a Civil War that further entrenched sectarian division in its cities. In the country's capital, Beirut, these divisions were most apparent. Today, the fragmentation that resulted from the war persists, and little opportunity exists in Beirut's built environment to facilitate integration. Public spaces in Beirut have been regularly transformed into what Dr. Aseel Sawalha calls "prohibited space," spaces that were formerly inclusive but now exclude the majority of the population. Drawing from existing research on Lebanon's real estate and urban development industries, this article demonstrates how development and reconstruction since the Civil War have shaped Beirut's minimal public space into "prohibited space." This analysis of three formerly public spaces argues that the self-interest of politicians, the legislation catered towards the real estate and development sector, and the prioritization of an internationally attractive cosmopolitan image have transformed Beirut's built environment into privatized space. Public space in a divided city plays a valuable role in unifying fragmented neighborhoods by providing established spaces that produce interaction and communal understanding in a city that needs healing across sectarian divides.

The late British social scientist and geographer Doreen Massey spoke of space as being alive – as being actively part of a collection of stories in which we are all physically living at any given moment. Massey argued that social spaces tell the stories of relationships between various entities. These relationships contain power. Within a certain space, one finds what Massey calls the “geography of power,” that the distribution of those relations mirrors the power relations with the society we have.”¹

From 1975 until 1990, Lebanon experienced a civil war resulting in immense property destruction, internal displacement of one million people, and the death of over 100,000 people.² During this 15-year period, people’s relationships with the once heterogeneous spaces of the city changed. In Beirut, a demarcation line known as the Green Line divided the city along religious lines, forming a Christian East and Muslim West. Secure and controlled spaces, such as shopping centers with guards, became safe havens in the midst of rampant instability and fear. Political parties often controlled these homogenous spaces according to their sects.³ To this day, the fragmentation of Beirut’s neighborhoods and its subdivisions persists.⁴

The spaces of Beirut contain a myriad of stories. Since the Civil War, different authors, including politicians, real estate companies, and civil society actors have fought to construct a dominant narrative for the city. The relationship between power and space is intrinsically linked in these narratives. In the early 1990s, Lebanon’s prime minister Rafik Hariri saw post-war reconstruction as an opportunity to change Beirut’s image to appeal to global investors and compete with other cities internationally as a tourist destination. Hariri tasked joint-stock company Solidere to manage reconstruction of Beirut’s Central District (BCD). While only 30 percent of buildings in BCD were destroyed in the Civil War, 80 percent of those remaining were destroyed by Solidere.⁵

Hariri hoped to attract investors with the creation of a central district comparable with other city centers along the Mediterranean.⁶ This marked the start of political and economic interests converging to produce the real estate and development sector’s dominance in a country that was still reeling from sectarian divisions.

Power is at the forefront of the story of space in Beirut. Real estate development and private interests yield power to work together to maximize profit at the expense of communal spaces for residents of the city. Looking at public space reveals issues of power and exclusion.⁷ In Beirut, public space has consistently transitioned into what Dr. Aseel Sawalha calls “prohibited space:”

Urban sites that were originally ‘public’ and within reach for the majority of the city residents but, because of the war and the various urban renewal projects, had become ‘private,’ that is, inaccessible and out of reach for the majority of the population.⁸

This privatization has been a direct consequence of real estate development and private interests. While politicians and developers profit, the people of Beirut and the country are left without public spaces to be part of a mingling public.

Beirut’s ‘geography of power’ shows the forces shaping three formerly public spaces into prohibited spaces: Beirut Souks, the Daliyeh waterfront, and Ramlet Al-Bayda Beach. The existence of public spaces in a divided city works to unify fragmented neighborhoods. However, the normalization of prohibited spaces in Beirut has actively reduced opportunities for healing across sectarian divides.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT AND PUBLIC SPACES IN BEIRUT

Since the Civil War, construction has targeted public spaces in Beirut with the justification of its potential addition to “the vibrancy of economic liberalism and a booming real estate market.”⁹ The aftermath of the Civil War presented an opportunity to use reconstruction as a way to bring Lebanon’s various communities together; instead, the government allocated time and resources to make way for development. These investments resulted in a series of transformations that made much of Beirut exclusive. Instead of aiding the social cohesion of society, Beirut’s development has created exclusive spaces from those that were heterogeneous and accessible to a majority of the population before the Civil War.

Real estate and construction’s contributions to Lebanon’s gross domestic product (GDP) have risen from roughly 13 percent in 1973 to 21 percent in 2014.¹⁰ State actors and members of political parties across sectarian divisions are directly invested in real estate and construction.¹¹ Layers of investment conceal political actors’ direct connections to developments, a particularly beneficial strategy with controversial developments that have received intense political backlash.

Beirut Souks and two sites on the Mediterranean Coast, the Dalieh Waterfront and Ramlet Al-Bayda Beach, reveal overlaps between the individuals writing the laws and those serving to gain from development. Those in power permit the elite to replace Beirut’s formerly public spaces with real estate development. Before the war, people across class, sectarian, and gender lines frequented Beirut’s public spaces. While divisions exist in every society, space for interaction and moments of unity existed. While these public spaces were once open and accessible, they now prohibit access.

What was once heterogeneous and alive has been reconstructed to cater to the elite, propagating further division.

BEIRUT SOUKS

The reconstruction of Beirut’s historical market area serves as a prime example of economic and state interests converging at the expense of local residents’ public spaces. Prior to the Civil War, Beirut’s city center had a famous market (*suk/souk/suq*) area that consisted of three streets: Ayyas, Tawileh, and Jamil.¹² According to Samir Khalaf, “this old, dense street grid with access gates, open squares, and sheltered water fountains was scaleable, colorful, and accommodated a dazzling variety of outlets, ranging from the little mangy-looking shops with makeshift vending stalls to specialized stores and upmarket fashionable boutiques” (Figure 1).¹³



Figure 1: Beirut Souks in the 1960s (OldTime Beirut, 2018).

In 1991, immediately after the Civil War’s end, the Hariri government passed Law 117, which “involved the erasure of right-holder’s claims to 5,043 homes and apartments, 7,092 shops and businesses, 5,597 offices and 1,368 workshops and 702 warehouses, 343 hotels, 361 restaurants and 45 bars that had animated the pre-war suq.”¹⁴ Prime Minister Hariri appointed the joint stock company, Solidere, to handle reconstruction of BCD in

1994. While Hariri was heavily involved in real estate prior to being prime minister, many people believe that Hariri owned more than 50 percent of Solidere's shares at the time of reconstruction in the 90s.¹⁵ The 200 hectares the company redeveloped was valued at nearly 25 percent of Lebanon's GDP.¹⁶ With the passing of Law 117, Solidere demolished the souk and replaced it with a shopping mall, banking area, and a series of expensive gated communities.¹⁷

In a panel at the Lebanese American University in 2015, Solidere's urban planning manager, Amira Solh, emphasized the dangers of relying on private interests to create public space, saying that "private interests want a return on their goods, so therefore they want it to be public inasmuch as it serves them...so there is kind of a need to say this is controlled."¹⁸ Today, local residents recall the markets with nostalgia and remember them as a space where a diverse group of people could exist and interact in the haphazardness of the souks. The Beirut Souks in BCD are part of a trend in Beirut's urban development that leads to exclusive affordability-based senses of 'belonging.' In other words, it leads to more isolated individuals who engage with different spaces based on what they can afford.



Figure 2: Beirut Souks by N. Karim [Wikipedia Commons, 2011].

Beirut Souks, like much of what Solidere considers public space in BCD, are now under surveillance by security guards who limit their uses. Guards are permitted to

question anyone who may seem suspicious or even forbid entry. In addition, vendors and beggars are forbidden access to keep the space secured, ordered and clean.¹⁹ All of these guidelines establish a 'classy cosmopolitan' urban environment that works to solely permit those who fit a certain image. The surveillance makes people who do not fit into this image, based on their religious sect or income levels, unwelcome and excluded from the space.²⁰

While the BCD and its historical market once served as a public space for the intermingling of all identities, the reduction of affordability and accessibility restricts access to the space. Nagle argues that "the reconstruction of the city center further obscures and even reinforces the contemporary process of postwar ethnic segmentation and territorialization of the city by constructing public space that could be used as a vital meeting point for citizens to meet and interact."²¹ Beirut needs public space to help with post-war healing, but this trend of urbanization seen in BCD privatizes space and perpetuates division, a trend which also exists on the Mediterranean Coast.

THE MEDITERRANEAN COAST: DALIYEH AND RAMLET AL-BAYDA BEACH

Historically, Lebanon's coast served as a place for the public. In 1915, a law declared that "the sea's shore until the farthest area reached by waves during winter, as well as sand and rockshores, belong to the public."²² Additionally, Beirut's 1954 Master Plan banned any construction in Zone 10, an area owned by different families consisting of various seaside plots spanning from the Raouche (Daliyeh waterfront area) to Ramlet Al-Bayda Beach.²³ Inspired by the French style of coastal care, the Lebanese government entrusted the care of the coast to the families who owned plots of land along

it.²⁴ Since the end of the Civil War, however, the Mediterranean coast has grown to hold exclusive spaces like resorts and hotels that are not accessible to a large proportion of the population.²⁵

Through a series of laws passed by the well-connected financial elite and politicians chasing personal and economic interests, real estate developments have transformed public spaces, like the Daliyeh waterfront and Ramlet Al-Bayda Beach, into prohibited spaces no longer accessible to the majority of the population.

Daliyeh Waterfront: Part of a Prohibited Coastline



Figure 3: Daliyeh of Raouche in the 1960s (OldTime Beirut, 2018).

The Daliyeh, also known as Daliyeh of Raouche, is a rocky waterfront area in Beirut. In the midst of the reconstruction frenzy along the coast following the Civil War, the Daliyeh served as an inclusive place where working-class families could picnic and swim. In 2014, however, the area was closed to make way for a development project that would cover the majority of the natural outcrop.²⁶

The legal framework that allowed for developments like those on the Daliyeh and other parts of the coast began with decrees and laws passed in the 1960s. In 1966, the

passing of Decree 4810 allowed "owners of property adjacent to the sea to privately exploit the maritime public domain."²⁷ This was only permitted with the condition that, if any public domain was used, 25 percent of the land must be given to the municipality of Beirut for public use.²⁸

During the Civil War, many developers and financial elites took advantage of the chaos and began building resorts along the coast. Though this was illegal, many of the elite, and often leaders of various militias in the war, became members of parliament and gained the ability to transform legislation.²⁹ In 1989, in the final stretch of the Civil War, Decree 169 shifted the currents in favor of real estate development. The decree not only eliminated the 25 percent requirement mandated in former Decree 4810 (1966), but it also allowed for construction in Zone 10.³⁰ Decree 169 was heavily contested by the civil society and coalitions filing a lawsuit against the Lebanese government for the development project on the Daliyeh. Organizers of the lawsuit claimed the 1989 decree was not publicized nor approved by governmental bodies and argued that "developers held close ties to the politicians who passed it."³¹

Prior to the passage of the decree, a member of the Al-Daher family, a businessman and member of the financial elite, wished to develop the Mövenpick Hotel along the coast. While the development would have violated former decrees, the Al-Daher family had many connections amongst the powerful militias and politicians of the time. They developed the hotel under the name of the Merriland Company. Amir Saksouk-Sasso and Nadine Bekdache argue that "decree number 169 was tailored and issued in 1989 to enable the Merriland Company to build a large hotel project in the bay, contravening existing legislation."³²

The Daliyeh used to be a place that welcomed those who had lost access to the sea due to restrictive entrance fees.³³ Over the years, it "provided sustainable livelihood for many



Figure 4: Daliyeh of Raouche Waterfront Fenced Off (World Monument Fund, 2014).

low-income city dwellers and hosted many cultural activities such as the Kurds' Nawroz [New Year]."³⁴ In 2016, *The Civil Campaign to Protect the Daliyeh of Raouche* added Daliyeh to the World Monument Fund's (WMF) watch list, supporting its heritage preservation. Despite this, a fence continues to surround the Daliyeh, a space that exists as part of the 20 percent of remaining coastline under threat of development.³⁵

Ramlet Al-Bayda Beach: A Shrinking Public Beach

In recent years, laws and regulations leaving much of the coastline at the disposal of real estate and construction have endangered and infringed upon Beirut's last remaining public beach, Ramlet Al-Bayda. In a country with hot summers and unreliable electricity, many low-income residents saw the beach as a refuge and space to socialize.³⁶ And yet, due to neglect by the municipality, the last public beach in Beirut was littered with trash and poorly maintained,³⁷ and sewage disposal contributed to dangerous levels of bacteria in the water.³⁸

In 2017, a five-star resort, Lancaster Eden Bay, opened on the Ramlet Al-Bayda Beach. At over 22,000 square meters, the resort boasts to potential renters "the exclusivity



Figure 5: Ramlet Al-Bayda Beach with Lancaster Eden Bay resort development in the background. (Greg Demarque/Executive).

of your own private community in the city."³⁹ Throughout the resort's development process, residents organized to protest what they considered an infringement on their rights to the beach and sea. In response to the protests, the Lebanese State Council suspended the construction permit. Despite resistance to the resort's development, construction persisted to completion, successfully turning much of the last remaining public beach exclusive.⁴⁰ The creation of the resort and the addition of yet another prohibited space along Beirut's Mediterranean coast shrank an already small public space.

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC SPACE IN A DIVIDED CITY

The cases of Beirut Souks, the Daliyeh waterfront, and Ramlet Al-Bayda Beach exemplify Christine Mady's argument that "social relations and practices that generate heterogeneous public spaces seem to be eradicated not only by immediate conflicts but also by post-conflict narratives."⁴¹ The nature and politics of post-Civil War reconstruction and urban development has created a narrative that excludes and actively reduces access to public spaces. United Nations (UN) Habitat defines public space

as promoting social cohesion and pluralism, serving as spaces where a diverse group of people can come together and interact.⁴² About two-thirds of Lebanese citizens were uprooted from their communities during the Civil War, and these displaced groups integrated themselves into more homogenous and exclusive spaces, creating a stark sectarian redistribution across cities like Beirut. For example, the Muslim population of East Beirut shifted from 40 percent to only five percent.⁴³ Samir Khalaf argues that while this redistribution may have helped certain groups survive the fighting of the war, it is now making it difficult "as [communities] are considering options for rearranging and sharing common spaces and forging unified national identities."⁴⁴

Sectarianism's prevalence in the social and political life of residents has not weakened in the post-war era. Ethnic quotas exist throughout Lebanon's political framework. For example, in 1989, the Taif Agreement established what Hiba Bou Akar calls a "sectarian-based power-sharing system."⁴⁵ This agreement solidified a governmental structure with a quota mandating a Maronite Christian President, Sunni Muslim Prime Minister, and Shiite Muslim Speaker, and set a balance of Christian and Muslim representatives for parliamentary seats.⁴⁶ Not only did the law explicitly mandate sectarian division, but it created a system in which sectarian parties managed welfare services.⁴⁷ These legal structures culminated to create a society that encourages loyalty to one's sectarian identity over a national one.⁴⁸

Public spaces provide an opportunity; they increase chances for interaction amongst all people. When real estate developments infringe upon and destroy public spaces, these chances for interaction decrease. NAHNOO (meaning *we* in Arabic) is a prominent organization working to protect and improve public spaces to support better navigation and opportunities in a sectarian society. NAHNOO believes public spaces play a primary role in bringing different

communities together. They regard the lack of public spaces in Lebanon "as a crucial factor contributing to continuing social tensions within Lebanon's urban agglomerates."⁴⁹ NAHNOO is one of many forces fighting the privatization of Beirut's public spaces and defending Beirut's built environment from being completely altered by real estate development.

The presence or absence of public space sends a clear message about who is deemed valuable by those making decisions regarding the built environment. Hiba Bou Akar is part of a research-oriented art collective, Dictaphone Group, working to reunite Lebanese citizens with public spaces. In 2016, Bou Akar told *Huck Magazine*: "When discussing public space in Beirut, the State talks in terms of an abstract citizen that fits a very specific idea of what an appropriate user should be – someone who looks and behaves as a 'proper' middle-upper class European citizen and that's not based on what the public really is."⁵⁰ This desire to cater to "appropriate users" results in exclusive urban spaces reproducing an urban environment that boosts real estate value and thus creates an economic incentive for private and state interests to continue producing prohibited spaces.

After the Civil War, the policies governing urban development made it easier for real estate to build developments such as resorts and expensive shopping malls at the expense of public space. Profit has been prioritized over the communities' social cohesion.⁵¹ The construction of these 'prohibited' spaces has become so normalized, and the state is making little investment to preserve the continuously shrinking public space of Beirut. This lack of investment has persisted since the 1990s. A government wishing to unify a country after a conflict so focused on religious division should invest not only to protect existing public spaces, but to create more of them – to actively produce genuinely public spaces that increase chances for integration and the construction of a national

identity like “historic buildings, monuments, memorials and landmarks.”⁵²

The practice of investing in public spaces in Beirut could change the lives and behaviors of its people. Public space fosters the practice of being part of a public. Doreen Massey argues that place can change people through encouraging a certain ‘practice’ of place. Place forces people to negotiate constantly – they must operate in relation to the actions and lives of others. Massey believes that place is an “arena where negotiation is forced upon us.”⁵³ Jane Jacobs also echoes this idea in her concept of the intricate street ballet of a city. She believes each person in a city is part of “an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole.”⁵⁴ The conversion of public space in Beirut to prohibited space has actively constricted these negotiations and dances between people of different religious sects and social classes. It has removed opportunities to practice togetherness, a practice the people of Beirut and Lebanon cannot afford to lose.

CONCLUSION

At the forefront of Beirut’s ‘geography of power’ lies the self-interest of politicians, the legislation catered towards the real estate and development sector, and the prioritization of an ‘internationally attractive’ cosmopolitan image. Its social spaces tell the story of uneven power dynamics with the average citizen ignored on its pages. Prohibited spaces subject the citizens of Beirut to a conditional belonging based on affordability and accessibility. Whether replacing diverse markets with upper-class shops or constructing a resort that covers the coast, the end result is the same: formerly inclusive spaces are now exclusive. This exclusivity erases the pluralism that previously existed in the same spaces.

In a country with sectarian division engrained into communities’ memories and daily lived experiences, it is incredibly important to invest in public spaces. While real estate development provides economic benefits, designing spaces for all people provides an equal, if not greater, social value. A city with spaces for the people, not just those who fit the image of a globally competitive city, creates opportunities for interaction that can lessen tension between communities of different religious identities. ■

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