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**'CONTEMPORARY' BORDERS AS THE OUTCOME
OF LIVED, PERCEIVED & CONCEIVED
DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL SPACE, THE EXAMPLE
OF MARTYRS SQUARE IN BEIRUT CENTRAL
DISTRICT**

ABSTRACT

This paper aims at presenting the topic of contemporary borders in Beirut that underlay complexities of lived, perceived, and conceived dimensions of social space (Lefebvre, 1974). In the light of the latest events —the 17th October Revolution, Covid-19, and the August 4th Port Explosion— observing Martyr's square in Beirut Central District (BCD) accentuates the concept of 'border-in-flux' as related to time and the 'triad'¹ of social space. It is also a brief overview of the decisions made for the post-war reconstruction of BCD and its development since then.

¹ Lefebvre's triad of social space is the lived, perceived and conceived dimension

BEIRUT

Biparted for 15 years, the Demarcation line was the physical border (Damascus Road) bisecting the city's geography, reducing and homogenizing its residents into 'West-Muslims' and 'East-Christians'. Officially reunited since the start of the 1990s, the borders of contemporary Beirut are rather intangible than tangible underlying complexities of lived, perceived, and conceived dimensions of social space. "Beirut is [...] a city divided by many boundaries, demarcation lines, internal frontiers, some visible others not, some felt subconsciously, other glaringly perceptible, some short-lived, other nearly a century old. (...) The various territories thus demarcated add up to a very fragmented city, struggling to function as an urban entity, its population trying to cope or come to terms with the many obstacles limiting its freedom of movement" (M.F.Davie, 1997:35).

THE CONCEIVED DIMENSION OF THE CENTRAL DISTRICT SOLIDERE & THE RECONSTRUCTION OF BCD

As part of the demarcation line for 15 years, the End of the civil war indicated the reconstruction of Beirut's Central District² (BCD) —a 140ha mega project, referred to as 'the most important development project of the 1990's' (Nasr,2015).

The plan perused the vision of a modern yet 'Utopian Beirut'. In its double function as port-city and capital, the new BCD shall become an international business and financial Centre, linked to offices, luxury hotels, upmarket living, commercial, and white-collar activities (Davie, 1993). The characteristic narrow streets of pre-war BCD replaces by motorways, the traditional souks (Arabic markets) redeemed by luxury shopping malls —generating a modern center for Beirut's upper- class population. The

² See Saliba (2004). 'Beirut city center recovery: the Foch-Allenby and Etoile conservation area.

culture of remembrance manifested in the cityscape— a focus on Roman archeological excavations—reminds authentic pre-war Beirut. The reconstruction, an attempt to create new collective memories, designed to represent a 'national space' —forward-looking— while deleting all signs of war.

In contrast to pre-war laissez-faire policies, the reconstruction shall be centrally and monopoly controlled. In 1994 Solidere, a private joint-stock company of property right holders and investors was founded, commissioned to plan the reconstruction and development of BCD. The private and public land —exchanged for bonds in the event— was turned into investments, concentrated in one company.

THE PERCEIVED – DIMENSION OF THE CENTRAL DISTRICTS: UPPER CLASS & CULTURAL TOURISM

The determination of a modern and exclusive BCD, indicating 'limited' access, is manifested in deluxe developments as well as insufficient plans for public transport, leaving the connection of Beirut with the outskirts to private transportation.

Thereby the reconstruction plan strategically excludes parts of its population as well as activities. "White-collar cadres commuting during working hours, with the area closed off at night: no shops, no entertainment, limited housing" (Davie,1993:6)— the Centre is planned to be an exclusive and almost 'extra-territorial piece of property'.

THE LIVED URBAN SYMBOLISM³ OF THE MARTYR'S SQUARE EMOTIONAL - ICONIC – DISCURSIVE – MATERIAL & BEHAVIORAL SYMBOL BEARERS

Known as the 'Paris of the middle east'⁴, Beirut's post-war identity has been referred to 'a sensitized middle east theme park for upper class'⁵ (Mermier, 2013).

Located in the former Green Line, for many Beiruties, the Central District is *emotionally* still connected to a border between East– and West-Beirut, dominating their mental-map⁶ and spatial decisions.



Abb.1: Martyr's square (source: Solidere.com)

The iconic Martyrs square is named to commemorate the martyrs executed under Ottoman rule at this very place. Represented as a tourist attraction yet landmark in literature and web pages, the square receives its discursive frame and meaning through the narratives of its history long before the civil war. Located in the heart of Central District, the square is surrounded by four-lane motorways, up market living developments under

3 See Nas, (2011). Cities Full of Symbols: As a sub-discipline of urban anthropology, *urban symbolism ecology* explores the symbolic side in urban space. Nas separated five types of symbol bearers –material, discursive, iconic, behavioral and emotional.

4 See Rowe, P. (1989) Projecting Beirut

5 See Mermier, F.(2013).The Frontiers of Beirut

6 Cognitive map

construction, and the Mohammed Al-Amin Mosque. But besides that, the only material symbol bearer within Martyr's square is a memorial statue. Thus transformed into a venue for cinemas and coffee-houses in the mid 20th century, today's square offers neither leisure locations nor spots for social meetings, limiting the dominant observed *behavior* to people entering the famous Mosque and tourists.

However, a chain of external circumstances changed the intrinsic logic⁷ of Martyr's square — from dominated by conceived structures — to a prominent place characterized by signs and symbols of the lived, rebutting the visions of its planners [conceived] and changing spatial — usage as well as -routines [perceived].



Abb.2: Protest Dezember-19 at Marty's square (source: own photography)

Since October -19, the Martyr square is the venue for protests as part of the Lebanese Revolution. Inducted by planned taxes on What's App, gasoline

7 Term coined by Martina Löw (2012)

and tobacco, the series of civil protests, is the outcome of frustration and resistance against longstanding unemployment, stagnating economy and the extreme corruption in the public sector. The Revolution against misguidance of governance unites people all ages, yet across religious, political as well as social affiliation. NGO's building up tents, groups camping outside, and thousands of people during the protests—the square in the middle of BCD gained a new identity.

Abb.3: Symbols of the Revolution

(Source: own photography)

The protests became permanently manifested on the square by a phoenix statue constructed of burnt down tents, in front of a six-meter high statue—a fist, stating the word < ثَوْرَة >



(Revolution). First erupted on October 17th, the mostly peaceful protests came to a sudden interruption when in March-20, the security forces imposed countrywide lockdown measurements due to the globally spreading coronavirus.

Interrupted by a three-month home-stay ban, the public protests return to the streets on June 6th, revitalizing Martyr's square setting for the Revolution. The additional economic damage due to the lockdown and missing financial aid from the government impaired the financial crisis of the country and the situation of its people. The announced protests— loud gatherings of symbols and signs— leave marks of destruction. Embodied by burned objects, sprayed houses, and broken windows, the Revolution manifests itself in the cityscape.

On August 4th-20, a tragedy shatters the capital once more, when an explosion at the Port, caused by 2750tonnes of ammonium nitrate, destroyed property worth 10-15 billion US-Dollar in the Centre and surrounding districts, adding more than 170 deaths and thousands injured.



Abb.4: Occupied constructions at Martyr's square August-20 (Source: own photography)

In its aftermath and in light of the government's failure to prevent the lethal accident, protests erupted anew. As the Explosion destroyed almost all windows within a radius of 11km— implicating the area of BCD and the luxury developments surrounding the Martyr's square — the empty frames became doors to occupy the constructions, covering openings and balconies with banners, expanding the place of the Revolution into the vertical layer of the square.



Abb.5: Violent protests at Martyr's square August-20 (Source: own photography)

State property and symbols of capitalism that survived past protests got either demolished through the Explosion or in the act of vandalism afterward —the difference is hard to tell when walking through the Central District in recent weeks.

The glamorous — from '*conceived*' dimension dominated —Central District of Beirut does not exist anymore. Banks got destroyed, offices are inaccessible — COVID-19, financial crisis, and the Explosion— stopped commercial activities, tourism and changed daily practices of '*the perceived*'. The Revolution converted the intrinsic logic, yet image of the Centre— manifested in Martyr's square the symbolized place of '*the lived*' its people, protests, and resistance. How the BCD is going to develop from here is unpredictable as the End of events is not in sight.

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