

Space and Violence. Critical geographical imagination in face of Syria's reconstruction

João Sarmiento

Geography Department & Society and Communication Research Centre

University of Minho

j.sarmiento@geografia.uminho.pt

Introduction

This text closely follows the keynote talk given at the Summer School *Rebuilding Syria from Within*, which took place between 18-28 July 2018, in the Architecture School of the University of Minho, Guimarães, Portugal. At the time, various sources of information pointed to an imminent end to the open armed conflict. Twenty months later, however, violence and instability are still rampant in Syria. As I write in early March 2020, Russia and Turkey are fighting, mostly through proxies - the former backing the Syrian leader, the latter supporting the Syrian opposition - in Idlib, in northern Syria. On the one hand, Moscow would like to have a foothold in the Middle East, and has gas and oil interests in the country. Ankara, on the other hand, has motives that are less clear. It certainly wishes to contain the Kurds to the west of the Euphrates and wants to repatriate the 3,6 million Syrian refugees living in the country. Yet, after suffering various casualties, instead of invoking NATO's article 5 (principle of common defense), possibly since it evaluates as unlikely the involvement of member states in the conflict, went from threatening Europe with a flow of Syrian refugees, who so far have been contained by a border wall along the country's southern frontier, to letting them go towards Greece and Bulgaria on 29th February 2020. People are here once more being used as a weapon in a long-lasting conflict.

Despite the continuing developments of the horrific situation in Syria, which all have in common instability, cruelty and misery, I have made only minor changes to what was presented in the 2018 talk. The principal aim was, and is, to illustrate how a critical

which terror, fear, brutality and violence develop and exist. In this context, it is important to start by affirming that aggression and violence are all simply constants of human life, part of the human condition. Violence is everywhere, in multiple forms, *Urbi et Orbi*. Yet this does not mean that violence should be accepted and legitimised. Violence is simultaneously a very simple concept but a difficult one to grasp. This text brings no solutions, no programmatic ideas, but mere reflections on violence and space, with an emphasis on the Syrian situation.

The paper starts by reviewing multiple dimensions of violence, covering systemic, structural, epistemic, and slow violence. This discussion progresses to a brief presentation of forensic architecture and military urbanism, exploring the idea of urbicide, in an attempt to connect space, architecture and urbanism with violence, and aiming at highlighting the importance of the increasing militarization of urban life. I then proceed to illustrate some post-war reconstructions, from Berlin and Warsaw after World War II, to Beirut, more recently. I conclude with some notes on the Syrian case.

Symbolic and Epistemic Violence

According to the French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1998), the State not only has the monopoly of legitimate violence, in Max Weber's terms, but also the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence. The latter, we should bear in mind, legitimatizes physical violence. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence refers to the subordinating effects on people of hidden structures that reproduce and maintain social domination in covert ways. This involves the numerous mechanisms through which overall social domination is achieved, from institutions to ideologies. Symbolic control may involve the moral imposition of irrational beliefs on others that work against their own capacity for freedom of thought, as in the ideologies of a group, a religion or a cult as extreme examples. It includes the normal dissemination of ideologies that is required for 'the reproduction of the conditions of production'. Legal activities that disrupt or influence the democratic flow of civil life in favour of 'higher powers', in opposition to the well-being or rights of citizens or workers, can also be understood as forms of symbolic violence. Acts of symbolic violence would thus include the coercive/persuasive political actions that generate social policy against the public interest, such as corporate lobbying, which disrupts the integrity of democratic processes and selectively victimizes certain members of the population.

For Žižek (2007: 1), symbolic violence refers to the 'violence embodied in language and its forms'. In various institutional structures, from state agencies and universities to religious organizations, symbolic violence plays a major role in securing the consent of subjects to accord with the dictates of operational practices. Connected with symbolic violence is the idea of systemic or structural violence, two other closely related terms. While they not only mean direct physical violence, they also refer to the subtler forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence. Systemic and structural violence is needed to achieve the levels of global inequality we experience these days. As Galtung (1969: 173) wrote, 'structural violence is silent... [and] may be seen as about as natural as the air around us'.

Edward Said (1992: 7) noted that struggles over geography are never reducible to armed struggle but have a profound symbolic and narrative component as well. Humans have long relied on a combination of verbal, geographical, technological, and temporal distance to protect themselves from the enormity of what Walt Whitman called war's 'red business'. In other words, warfare and violence are often dissimulated in very sophisticated ways (Sarmiento & Linehan, 2019), taking on multiple forms. These are revealed in the various types of physical, 'concrete' violent crimes such as murder, rape, assault, and the varieties of organized violence more generally, from state sanctioned killings and torture, to war and genocide. There are also covert forms of soft violence, which include the 'emotional control' people exercise over other people at the interpersonal level. Another area of covert forms of violence includes the multiple representations of violence – or the mediated violence of the entertainment spectacle as depicted in action movies and violent video games. Violence insinuates itself into virtually every sphere of social life from law, to gender relations, to practices of racialization, to class domination, and with no exception, all have a profound spatial dimension and impact.

Epistemic Violence, a violence related to knowledge, to the cognitive, has been studied mostly in the context of colonial and postcolonial studies. Gayatri Spivak (1985) uses the term 'epistemic violence' in her text 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. Spivak highlights this type of violence as a form of silencing marginalized groups. For her, general, non-specialists, 'the illiterate peasantry', 'the tribals', and the 'lowest strata of the urban sub - proletariat', are groups of people who are consistently silenced or subjected to epistemic violence (Spivak, 1985). Epistemic violence has a devastating effect in the 'disappearing' of knowledge. Often local or so called provincial knowledge is constructed as irrelevant due to privileging alternative, most often Western, epistemic practices. As Spivak highlights, one method of executing epistemic violence is to weaken a given group's ability to speak and to be heard. The harms of epistemic violence are hardly ever confined to epistemic matters, and often have enduring consequences in the organization of space.

In my research, I have been looking at colonial settlement in Africa and at processes of violence and land dispossession, and at the ways in which events and places are remembered, forgotten and memorialised (Sarmiento, 2011; Sarmiento & Linehan, 2019). Colonialism, as Valentin Mudimbe (1988) argues, is closely tied to the 'formal and elaborate ceremony of appropriation of a *terra nullius*'. The concept of 'no man's land', was applied to pagans' lands, and western settlers could just dispossess non-Christians (later a view of primitive versus civilized) of all their mobile and immobile goods. Spatial organization, from hunting grounds and game reserves, to mining complexes,

plantations, urban plans, transport infrastructures, and even contemporary conservation areas, were, and still are, part of large-scale processes of dispossession. In many cases, we can clearly identify the intersection between colonialism and slow violence, that is, processes that at a slow pace over time, help to construct social and spatial divisions (Sarmiento & Linehan, 2019). Working with this concept of slow violence, Rob Nixon's work (2011) contributes to our understanding of how deforestation and the denuding of vegetation, for example, can be understood as violence. Also, Davies (2018) explores the necropolitical terror of slow environmental pollution. Nixon also illustrates how presently, owing to the technological sophistication of war, it is difficult to prove slow violence. In his words, 'war deaths from environmental toxicity demand patient, elaborate proof. Spikes in renal collapse; infertility; leukemia; (...) cancers' and so on, are harder to link to war's technologies than a bullet through the head' (Nixon, 2011: 211).

Forensic Architecture

Israeli architect Eyal Weizman, argues that architecture is central to the Israeli occupation of Palestine, as it is creating a landscape where everything, from walls and roads to sewage, from settlements to surveillance, is designed to warrant a territorial separation, while simultaneously maintaining control (Weizman, 2012). This architecture of occupation is deeply connected to modern urban warfare. Lately, Weizman has devoted his energy to 'forensic architecture', an independent research agency established in 2010 at the University of London. In his words: 'Our investigations took place mainly in zones outside the effective control of states. These 'frontier zones' are the lawless battlefields of our colonial present. They are zones outside established state jurisdiction and established frames of criminal justice, where sovereign jurisdiction is unclear' (Weizman, 2014: 11). Weizman points to places like the Mediterranean Sea, where migrants are abandoned, parts of Somalia or Yemen, where drone assassinations take place, or Gaza and the West Bank, where powerful states inflict violence and deny they have done so. In his work Weizman highlights the key role of the building surveyor as an essential figure for understanding the present condition of urban life as well as that of urban warfare.

Understood in this light, violence, which can be eruptive as in cases of armed conflict, or dormant, in perpetual architectural acts of securitization, transforms both the metropolis, or the Western city, and the megacity, where Western armies chase their enemies. Its materialization can be recognized in the tangled acts of construction, fortification, destruction, and reconstruction (Weizman, 2014). In a time when most people dying in armed conflicts die inside buildings, the city can no longer be considered

merely the location of war, but rather should be understood as the apparatus with which warfare is conducted (Weizman, 2014).

For Weizman, it is when the dust of destruction finally settles, that the way it settles can become evidence. Yet a ruin is rarely a piece of evidence in and by itself. Cities are complex systems and the targeting of buildings, bridges, roads, and other nexuses of infrastructure can exercise a relational effect well beyond the site of impact. For forensic architecture, buildings are thus not just passive elements, receptive sensors on which events are registered. In this sense Weizman's approach mirrors that of Bernard Tschumi (1996: 100) when he argues that 'architecture is defined by the action it witnesses as much as by the enclosure of its walls'. Weizman's buildings are not just the scenes of a crime, the locations in which violence takes place. Rather, built environments are composite assemblies of structures, spaces, infrastructure, services, and technologies, which have the capacity to act and interact with their surroundings and shape events around them. They structure and condition rather than simply frame human action. They actively, and often violently, shape incidents and events.

Military Urbanism

The geographer Stephen Graham (2010) has developed the idea of a New Military Urbanism, in which military ideologies of permanent and boundless war are radically intensifying the militarization of urban life. In a sense this is not a new process. After all, we should always remember that cities are defensive entities. They are a logistical system embedded in a culture of war, and in this view, war is not an anomaly, the opposite of civilization, but rather it lies at its very origins. Today more than ever, Graham (2010) argues, this military urbanism merges and blurs civilian and military applications and technologies for control, surveillance, communications, simulation and targeting. Control technologies originally intended for military use have become central to urban life and consumption practices in contemporary cities. In turn, commercial modifications of such technologies, are being widely re-appropriated by militaries. While old urban military fortifications are demolished, overlooked, or become part of the heritage and tourism sphere, contemporary cities, in the words of Paul Virilio (1997) are 'overexposed' to a wide range of security threats. No longer governed by physical boundaries but by electronic surveillance, the city is open to mobile and trans-national pressures such as Coronavirus, malaria or dengue, harmful computer code, financial crashes, migration, terrorism, state infrastructural warfare, and the environmental extremes triggered by climate change (Graham, 2010).

The confined architectures or 'disciplinary spaces' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which Michel Foucault discussed are now overtaken by a networked urban life. Currently, we increasingly see how a computerised matrix of interlinked devices such as sensors built into homes, streets, cars, various infrastructures and even bodies, ATM cards and financial databases, GPS information, biometric identifiers, mobile phones and web browsing, permit a tight control across both temporal and geographical dimensions. In the Indian city of Chandigarh, Patrick Geddes's ideas were overtaken, and more recently replaced by new forms of military urbanism. Here, residents of the slums must now 'furnish details of their fingerprints, photographs, face recognition, voice recognition, signature, shape of the hand' for a biometric ID system which will not cover the rest of the city's population' (Graham, 2010: 113).

Another important aspect of military urbanism is the use of the powers of the state to violently reconfigure or erase urban space, as a means to alleviate supposed threats. This clearing of space for the demands of city formation, neo-liberal production, or the "creation of an urban tabula rasa capable of generating profitable bubbles of real-estate speculation" (Graham, 2010: 83) is common in the global north and south. Recent journalist investigation into Luanda Leaks has exposed how the 2013 evictions in Areia Branca Luanda, Angola, expelled 3000 people and made room for urban redevelopment. This process of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2013) was led by a combination of actors, using arms, excavators, diplomas, legislation and plans. Nothing of this is new, Already in 2005 Robert Mugabe bulldozed hundreds of thousands of shanty dwellings on the edge of Harare, Zimbabwe, as part of a widespread erasure of informal settlements across the globe, as city authorities entrepreneurially reorganize urban spaces. It is also partially in this context that we can look at the systematic Israeli bulldozing of homes and towns in Palestine, or the erasure of Fallujah and other places of Iraqi resistance. Often, to justify such violent assaults, to counter supposedly urban, racial or class enemies, invocations of exception and emergency are used (Agamben, 2005). The erasure of cities and urban space is also tacked by Stefan Kipfer and Kanishka Goonewardena (2007), who developed the idea of Urbicide, a type of political violence intentionally designed to erase or 'kill' cities.

It is interesting to see how cities feed on experiments of targeting and technology in warzones and violent spaces, and on security operations at international sports events or political summits. The principle according to which only a single road connects black townships to the white cities, among other aspects of the Apartheid system in South Africa, is used as a model for contemporary cities. Urban lockdowns pursued by US forces in Baghdad and by Israeli forces in the occupied territories, or strategies of 'punitive containment' towards informal cities, return and spread in other cities.

Processes of urban pacification in the capitalist heartland of the North, are inspired by militarization and control experiences in the Global South. The incarceration growth in the US is paralleled by the construction of a global system of incarceration and torture of 'Others', with both systems using similar techniques, private security corporations, means of abuse, and legal suspensions. Increasingly, there is a global market for homeland security and for a global surveillance system. Graham (2010) resorts to the idea of Foucault's Boomerang to indicate the multi-directional mobilities of techniques and learnings.

The physicality of the image of a wall, a fence, an almost impenetrable border clashes with the e-Borders utopia/dream programme to control everyone. It is the dream of technological omniscience, where 'target lists', 'screening', 'biometric visas', bring pacification to space and cities. Thus, the massive global proliferation of deeply technophilic state surveillance projects like the e-Border programme signals the startling militarization of civil society. But here we must think of a clear shift that derives from transformations in the nature of nation-states which are moving away from their role as guardians of a community of citizens within a territorial unit, charged with the policing of links between 'inside' and 'outside'. Instead, these states are becoming internationally organized systems geared towards trying to separate people and circulations deemed risky or harmful from those deemed risk-free or worthy of protection. Furthermore, this process increasingly occurs both inside and outside territorial boundaries between nation-states, resulting in a blurring between international borders and urban/local borders. A trend which is also emerging, is the growth of citizens mobilized as citizens-soldiers, people who are always on the look-out for the ever-elusive and ill-defined 'unusual'.

Learning from...

There are multiple examples of post-war reconstruction that can shed some light on future initiatives, observing contexts and conditionalities in place and different temporalities. Germany, for instance, faced an enormous reconstruction challenge after WW II. There were more than 400 million cubic meters of rubble alone in what would become West Germany. Across Germany, cities assembled *trümmerberg*, or rubble hills, to stow bombing debris. With so many men killed in the war, the Allies relied on women between the ages of 15 and 50 to do the hard work of clean-up. *Trümmerfrauen*, or rubble women, were key in building a new urban topography, disguised as leisure hills. At the same time as this new landscapes emerged from war, debate broke out over whether to rebuild exact copies of old buildings or to radically depart from pre-war Germany. Some German cities have gone to great lengths to rebuild exactly as they were

before the war, Dresden first among them. The rebuilding of the Dresden Frauenkirche for example, was completed only in 2005. Several other architectural monuments in the city have likewise been rebuilt. Yet many people felt that exact copies were synonymous with acting as if the war had never happened. Others felt that radical modernism ignored centuries of pre-war German history. For many modernist city planners, the destruction in Germany was an opportunity to depart from the tight and old chaotic inner cities, in favour of wide boulevards, airy apartment blocks and modern shopping streets. In both East and West Germany, planners set about creating a radical break from the past. Many in Germany found the country's post-reconstruction cities difficult to love, and indeed, pressure has grown to get rid of some of the most 'horrendously ugly postwar buildings'.

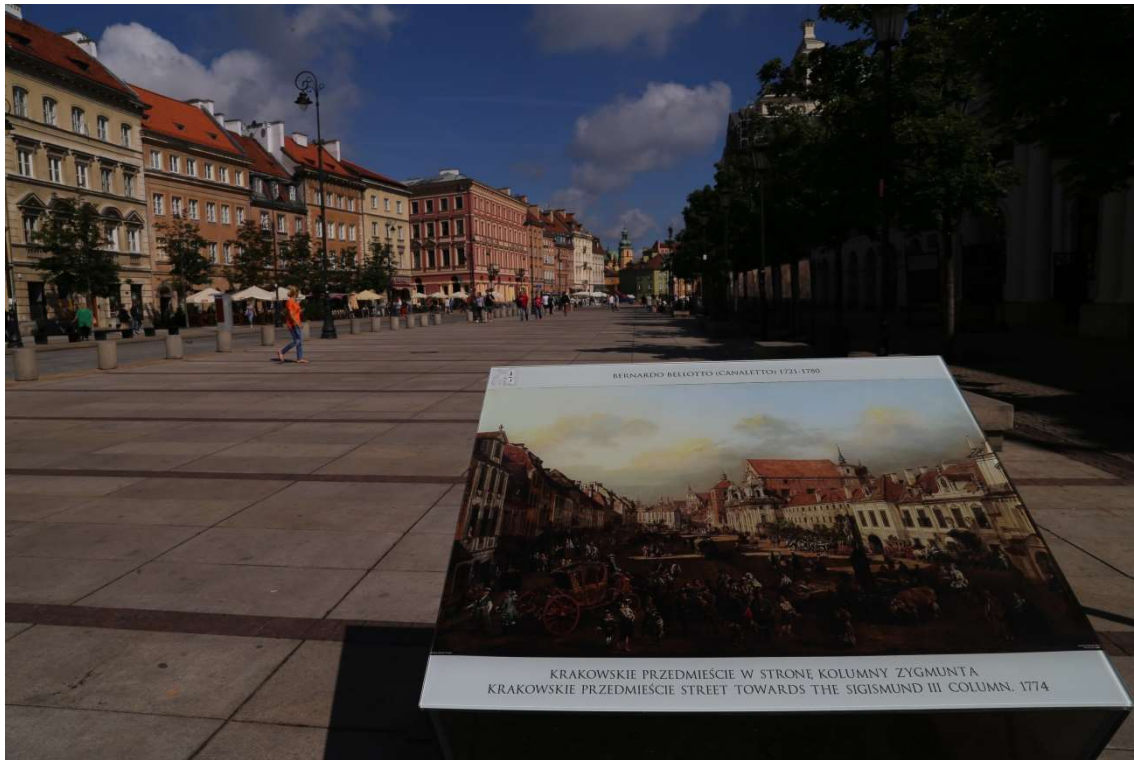
Interestingly, in the US, and about at the same time, along with the 'white flight' to the suburbs, early Cold War urban planning envisioned American cities 'through the bombardier's eye', and actively tried to stimulate decentralization and sprawl as a means of reducing the nation's vulnerability to a pre-emptive Soviet nuclear attack (Gallison in Graham, 2010). It is important to recall here that the US interstate highway system proposed in the 1950s by Dwight D. Eisenhower, was initially named 'Interstate System of Interstate and Defense Highways' and was partly designed to move large numbers of military personnel, huge quantities of military equipment and supplies, and to support evacuation in the event of global nuclear war.

In Warsaw, Poland, about 85-90% of buildings were damaged or destroyed during WW II. To facilitate the reconstruction, in October 1945, the Communist regime passed a decree allowing the nationalisation of property within the city's pre-war borders. In theory, those expropriated could claim compensation, but in reality, only a fraction of the roughly 17,000 claims were accepted. The old city centre reconstruction was carried out on the basis of a number of paintings by the Italian painter Bernardo Bellotto (also known as Canaletto because of his uncle). Bellotto had visited the city 200 years before, and for Polish politicians, planners and architects, it seemed like a good idea to reconstruct the old city from these landscape views of the eighteenth century (Fig.1). Today, more than 70 years after the first interventions, while tourists happily experience the fully Disneyfied 'old city', the Association of Warsaw Property Owners is dealing with processes of restitution claims, which in some cases are leading to home eviction. In 2020, processes of re-privatisation are taking place when the restitution claims of the heirs of pre-war owners of some building are successful, constituting historical justice for some, but raising doubts for many. Re-privatisation after all this time is seen as a scheme between city authorities and private developers, to serve particular interests. What is now public space can be re-privatized following the existence of pre-war land

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plots, and heirs of pre-war owners present compensation for wartime losses is difficult to understand in the context of the country's overall scale of death and destruction in the 1940s.

Figure 1. Warsaw renewed centre



Source: the author, 2017.

At the same time, the total destruction of the Jewish Ghetto by 1943, opened up an opportunity for planners and engineers to modernise the city, and to build modern infrastructure such as highways. Today, the quarters that used to be the ghetto are dotted with luxury hotels such as the Hilton, apartment blocks, highways, roundabouts, and offices. Only in some small sections it is possible to see the remnants of the ghetto's walls, and recently (2008 and 2010), 22 boundary markers were put in place to memorialise the place.

Beirut's reconstruction in post-civil war period (1975 to 1990) is also an interesting case. The state abdicated authority for reconstruction under Law 117 of 1991 allowing *Solidère* - the Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut Central District S.A. (1994-2029?) - to acquire the ownership rights of property owners. The Central District, both open shared space and private space, is owned and managed by *Solidère*. To a large degree, all space became private space. Those with a historic stake in the district became shareholders in an impersonal corporate structure, and the reconstruction effort was realised with huge Gulf investment. *Solidère* focused on the occupation of public space and commodification of that space for elite consumption and investment. The influx of Gulf finance has elevated property prices in Beirut to unaffordable levels – a rise of 400% between 2000 and 2010.

Public spaces in central Beirut, together with the re-created souks and renovated commercial and residential districts, are seen by some as the revival of a genuine Beirut, where Muslims and Christians mix. These spaces, *Solidère* suggests, capture a uniquely Lebanese ethos of openness and diversity, and are a material representation of Lebanese identity. Yet what *Solidère* has created so far is an enclave for corporate tenants, and spotless refurbished streets boast Gucci, Louis Vuitton and Prada stores. The old St George Hotel in Zaitunay Bay, a faded 1930s shell of what was once a luxurious hotel, is now an idiosyncratic relic, with an enormous banner draped across its lifeless facade, printed with a three-story no-entry sign saying: 'STOP *Solidère*' (Fig.2). *Solidère* can be understood as a hybrid corporate entity, neither private nor public, which is stripping public property at a high speed. But what we may name 'predatory planning', makes us think is that discrimination predates disaster. Thus, the causes and conditions and not only the consequences are critical.

Figure 2. *Solidère* Building, Beirut

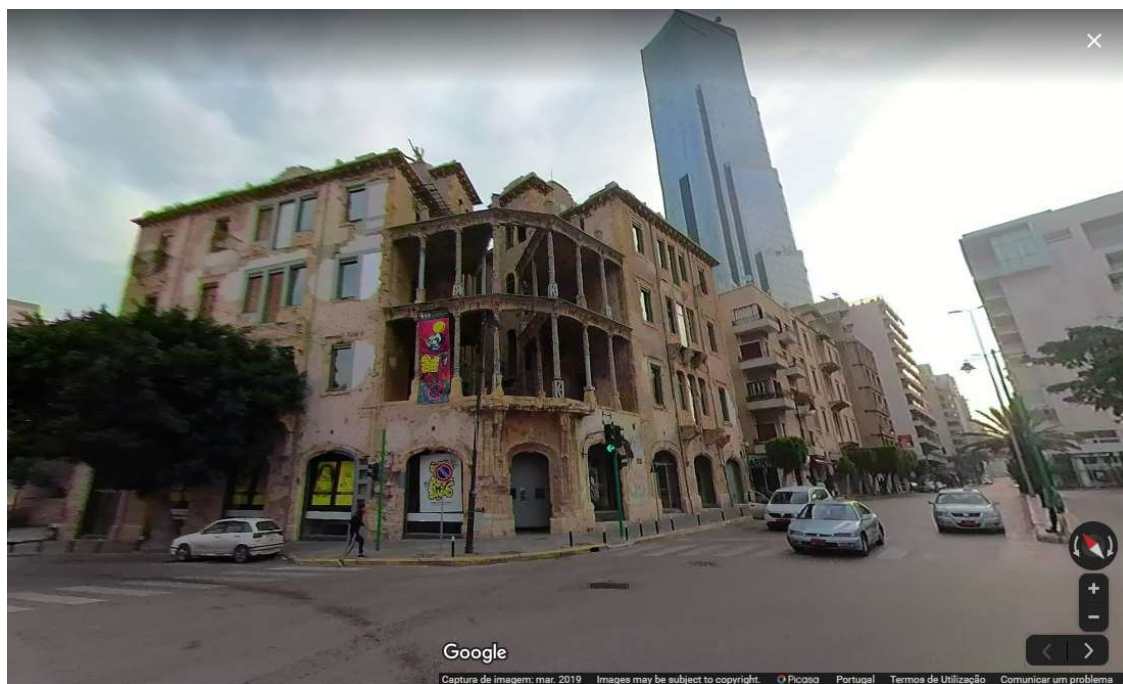


Source: the author, 2009.

More cynically, *Solidère's* recovery and preservation of Lebanon's ancient monuments signifies a concerted effort to bury and to deny the country's more recent past. A striking feature of the rebuilt downtown is the lack of a substantial public memorial to the civil war or to its victims. Neither the state nor its private sector partner seems willing to

address openly the memories that undoubtedly loom largest in the minds of Beirut's citizens. On the shoulders of Henri Lefebvre, the geographer Don Mitchell (2003) poses several critical questions related with how the 'public' is defined and contested: who can inhabit the city? Whom should it serve? And by whom should it be governed? Mitchell argues that attacks on public space, through 'privatization' and 'alienation', are also attacks on the *right to the city*. In Beirut's forgotten landscape, the yellow house appears as a restatement of Ottoman elegance, its high arches and elevated terraces overlooking a district of tower blocks (Fig.3). Some say it is ugly, and that it should be demolished. Yet others argue it has to stay, since the Lebanese need to see it every day, as a way to remember. Beit Beirut, or the house of Beirut, the Barakat building, housed several families before it was turned into a snipers' nest. Today the Yellow House is the first memorial of its kind. It is a museum, an archive and a visitor center, to commemorate the country's civil war.

Figure 3. Beit Beirut, Beirut, Lebanon



Source: Googleearth, image from March 2019, accessed 17.2.2020.

Beit Beirut is one of the few buildings that still shows the scars of war, and delays in the museum's opening reflect the unwillingness of the political establishment to interrogate painful memories. Buildings, often infused with a deceptive sense of permanence and ruination, whether in conflict or as part of reconstruction, may involve a perplexing loss of memory and collective identity (Bevan, 2006). In fact, physical environment reconstruction can be as symbolic and moving as its destruction. Post-war reconstruction involves having to choose which buildings to restore, how, and for what

purposes. Reconstruction encompasses adopting particular historical narratives and making choices according to different associations with the memory of destruction. Reconstruction assigns new identities onto the physical and mental environment and promotes the construction of an 'urban imaginary' in those living collectively in urban spaces: cognitive images formed by the association between the imagination and urban encounters (Larkin, 2010). Perhaps now is a good time to recall Spivak's words: we should let the subaltern speak.

Syria's civil war

Syria has been engaged in civil war for about 9 years now (March 2011-March 2020). This civil war has involved several groups: armed forces which support the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, which are backed by Russia and Iran; fighters known as rebels who are entirely against Bashar al-Assad's being in power, and who are backed by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United States, and to a minor degree by France, the United Kingdom and other western countries and the Islamic State, which by March 2019 has lost all territory under its control. During 2019, a withdrawal from northeast Syria by the United States has given way to attacks by Turkey on Kurdish forces.

The initial uprising in the country took place in rural peripheries, in small and medium sized cities such as Dar'a (pop.100,000) or Banyas (pop.40,000), but also in the popular urban quarters of Homs (pop.770,000), Hama (pop.460,000), and Damascus (pop.1,600,000). These places all became the forefront of protests. The countryside and the urban landscape were directly linked by recent rural in-migration. Dar'a, for example, is a peripheral city the income of which resulted mainly from agricultural production, border trade with neighbouring Jordan, and migration to Lebanon. All of these sources of revenue were damaged in the 2000s by various factors. Firstly, an agricultural crisis of multiple causes; secondly, the construction of a new highway circumventing the town; thirdly, the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005. Furthermore, a severe drought in the region after 2003, and especially during 2008-2009, affected Syria's countryside and dramatically reduced the production of its vital wheat crop, forcing the country to increase imports, partially causing the rural exodus. About 1.2–1.5 million people migrated to large cities, and this movement coincided with and was exacerbated by large waves of Iraqi and Palestinian refugees fleeing civil war after 2003. In the 2000s, people in search of a better life flooded small cities in the Hauran region (parts of the Syrian governorates of Quneitra, As Suwayda, and Dar'a, parts of the Jordanian governorates of Irbid, Ajloun and Jerash), and western cities such as Latakia, Homs or Hama.

The new migrant population weakened the social and economic absorption capabilities of overstretched cities and towns. The result was the growth of poverty and exclusion in urban areas, and the existence of hundreds of thousands of uprooted rural people, often lacking occupational skills. The town of Douma, for example, a center of small manufacturing north of Damascus, was totally marginalized by the harmful effects of economic liberalization, and stood in clear contrast with the capital's extravagant development. Unsurprisingly, it was in some of the neighbourhoods of Damascus which have incorporated migrants from Hauran (Kafr Susa, Shaghur, and Bab Saruja), that initial protests were more significant. Unrest also began in Homs in the sprawling suburbs that had absorbed rural migrants or displaced people from the northeastern region. The large crowds of the 2011 Syrian uprising were full of the young and unemployed living in suburbs with little stake in the status quo. In the context of modernization reforms, the country has distanced itself from its rural base. Naturally, political, ethnic and religious fractures construct a much more complex picture than the one I am providing here.

Developing a consistent, transparent and effective policy on matters relating to housing, land and property rights issues in post-conflict settings is critical. In fact, post-conflict property restitution is a recognised right under international law. In Syria, the New Urban Renewal Law (No.10, 2nd April 2018), extends the reach of Decree 66 from 2012, which served to seize property and displace residents, and allows for the creation of re-development zones across the country, which will be designated for reconstruction. Re-development zones are to be designated by decree. Those who succeed in proving property ownership will get shares in the zone. Yet several of the Syrian local land registries have been destroyed during the conflict, and only 50 percent of Syrian land was officially registered even before the war. In June 2018, the law was amended, and instead of 30 days, property owners have one year to prove ownership. Yet, Syrian property law has always been heavily influenced by the Ottoman system of land administration and many informal land usage rights exist which are different in each locality and are based on historical practices. The underlying tenure system is governed by a range of statutory, customary, Islamic and informal systems.

Closing remarks

Allepo's citadel, an awesome example of medieval architecture as seen in figure 4 in 2009, has endured several damages throughout the civil war, always remaining in the hands of the regime. Opened for visitors again since 2017, from its part-Mamluke, part-Ayyubid, part-Ottoman ruins, it is possible to observe a tiny fraction of the mammoth task of rebuilding Syria. It is still premature to call Syria a 'post-conflict state', but if we

can imagine an end to the open conflict, ahead lies the rebuilding of entire systems of infrastructure and technology. Yet rebuilding infrastructure is only part of rebuilding a society. Lessons from Iraq should be important, as the massive rebuilding of infrastructures (roads, hospitals, schools, and so on) while neglecting the rebuilding of society, paved way to the founding and growth of the Islamic State. Two issues related to some ideas developed in this paper come to the fore: the restitution processes and the reconstruction itself. With large population displacements in the last 8-9 years, traditional property restitution mechanisms, for example, are unsuitable to facilitate the return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their pre-war homes in the aftermath of urbicidal wars. Without a careful, participatory and consensual process of restitution, the basis for a strong civic society will never be in place. Law no. 10 of 2018 is certainly a liability, contributing to a fractured, disenfranchised and unequal society, precisely the kind of formulation rebel groups require to flourish.

Physical reconstruction poses many challenges. Before technical decisions and deciding on methods of reconstruction, the fundamental issue of who funds it is paramount. At the moment, a European unwillingness to recognise the Damascus regime will prevent formal funds for reconstruction. Thus, the EU and its member states could engage in small projects without regime involvement, aiming at exchanging aid for political and social reforms. The EU will certainly continue to enable funding to progress towards political transition, yet the humanitarian crisis and fears of increasing migration could see rehabilitation projects funding without regime intervention. While Russia aims for minimal EU interference in the reforms the country needs, and will allow only marginal changes that could provide a re-legitimization of the regime, it is interested in the EU's contribution to reconstruction to reduce the costs of its intervention. On a collision course with Russia and Iran are the Arab countries, US allies, which have the financial power to fund reconstruction. More than lucrative contracts, Syria reconstruction could limit Iran's growing influence in the region.

Before closing I would like to go back to the idea of a dispersed concept of violence. Violence is a mutable process, it moves over and in-between epistemic, embodied, physical and symbolic domains, and over heterogeneous zonalities and temporalities. It is a social and spatial process which goes beyond a sudden damaging occurrence, and is capable of being expressed more slowly over time and space and dissimulated in seemingly benevolent practices. Dacrema (2019: 34) argues that 'Syria's reconstruction process is likely to become another way of perpetuating the conflict's divisive and repressive dynamics in the future', so there is a need to go back to the causes of violence and inequality. If the causes of spatial and social inequalities are not addressed and

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tackled, there will be more difficulty in going through the always present violence and space nexus.

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Figure 4. Aleppo Citadel, Syria



Source: the author, 2009.

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