On not being Dubai: Infrastructures of urban cultural policy in Istanbul & Beirut

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Abstract: This paper compares how Istanbul and Beirut both attempt to underline their cultural and developmental uniqueness today in contrast to a metonymic menace — Dubai, standing in for spectacular yet supposedly culture-less Gulf cities. Even amid their own speculative construction frenzies that threaten local heritage, Turkish and Lebanese city-shapers assert theirs are "real" cities because they have "civilization" and "history." By addressing their own efforts to build, defend, or oppose physical infrastructures related to local urban culture, Istanbullus and Beirutis rely on and reassert strategic, phatic discourses that frequently reference Gulf cities as counterpoint. Analysis focuses on how each city crafts a distinctive urban profile via civilizational appeals to historic senses of culture, inflecting infrastructural developments related to bridging (Istanbul) and bordering (Beirut). Historical truisms are deployed with marked flexibility to showcase these cities as "not Dubai." This study offers lessons on the particular worlding of Middle Eastern cities and the role of discourses in the material-symbolic infrastructure of implicit urban cultural policy.

Keywords: Istanbul, Beirut, Dubai, infrastructure, discourse, heritage, development

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1. Introduction

"We'll never have as much money as Dubai, but at least we're a real city. Here in Beirut, we have history. We have culture. We have all the messiness that makes a city actually feel like a city — not like Dubai with all its newness and superficial gestures at urbanism." After no prompting related to the Gulf,[1] these words were spoken to me in 2012 by a European architect who had been working in Lebanon for twenty years on development projects large and small. It was a sentiment echoed over and over in the Lebanese capital by native and expatriate professionals alike, recounted across several rounds of fieldwork in the 2010s. The recurrent, rhetorical contradistinction was paradoxical not only because I had never imagined these Emirati and Lebanese cities as having much in common beyond some linguistic and religious rudiments. It was also surprising because Beirut was undergoing waves of reconstruction frenzy erasing pockets of the city that had managed to survive protracted civil war but were now giving way to sleek new towers — with more than a little resemblance to the fast-paced, sky-high urban development evident in Gulf cities (Krijnen and de Beukalaer 2015; Puzon 2019). A thousand kilometers to the northwest, in Istanbul, similar claims were made time and again by planners, politicians, and architects who mentioned Dubai repeatedly, but scoffed at it as a crass excuse for a city that could simply never compare with the centuries of heritage built up in a former imperial cradle such as Turkey's largest city. Despite this dismissiveness toward Dubai, Doha, and other emerging urban powerhouses in the Gulf, these places haunted conversations among urbanists, and, again, seemed almost referential in much of the appearance of rapid development over the 2010s in Istanbul (see Yigitcanlar and Bulu 2015). What became clear, then, was the particular discursive strategy shared by people who shape the city from privileged positions in both Istanbul and Beirut: these city-shapers wield a range of taken-for-granted references embracing a vision for their city as "not Dubai."

I use the term *city-shapers* to encompass a range of relatively elite individuals involved in designing, projecting, building, funding, or regulating the urban environment: architects,

[1] I use the generic term "the Gulf" in this article to refer to what English speakers usually label with greater geographical specificity as "the Persian Gulf," although there is controversy – at diplomatic levels (Levinson 2011) – over whether it should instead be called "the Arabian Gulf" (الخليج العربي) in English as it is in Arabic. I refer to it simply as "the Gulf" because it was denominated variously by my interlocutors: in Lebanon, most often it was mentioned as just "the Gulf" (or "*le Golfe*" among Francophones). "The Gulf" was also often used by English speakers in Turkey, but when speaking in Turkish the dilemma was obviated with either the Ottoman-era name of "*Basra Körfezi*" (Gulf of Basra), or simply discussing "*Araplar*" (Arabs) in reference to the countries on the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula – especially the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait.

planners, researchers, philanthropists, developers, and politicians. Such shorthand designates the assortment of professions accustomed to talking about urban cultural policy and their city's future as an object in which they see themselves actively intervening. This article draws on fieldwork over several years in Istanbul and Beirut to compare how urbanists and others engaged with the official versions of "urban culture" in each city focus on discourses of "civilization," to contrast with Gulf urban development. Research included interviewing, extended observation, and discourse analysis of hundreds of collected documents — including both policy statements and relevant promotional ephemera.[2] Istanbul (population: 14,751,00) was the former Ottoman imperial capital until the 1920s, and is now Turkey's economic center; Beirut (population: ~2,385,000) was a provincial capital in the Ottoman Empire, then a key administrative locus during the French protectorate era (1920s-1940s), and is now the national capital of Lebanon.[3] Over the last decade, both cities have angled to present themselves as unique, and especially as uniquely historical, within the Middle East region in their self-depictions and urban cultural policies, primarily in order to promote tourism and investment. They each present counter-Gulf urban discourses, emphasizing facets of civilization, imperial residues, and different forms of connection across geographic scales – particularly bridges and borders – to highlight their distinctiveness. These support strategies of urban-cultural intervention, from neighborhood preservation to the establishment of cultural quarters and museums, grounded in infrastructural development.

Recognizing the malleable, often highly politicized nature of civilizational assertions, I treat such invocations not as plain truths but maneuvers in ongoing symbolic efforts to cast each city, and policies pertaining to its culture, as part of forging a particular relationship to the surrounding region and the wider world – what urbanists have termed processes of "worlding cities" (Roy 2009: 824-825; Roy and Ong 2011). Worlding can be a technique of *scale-shifting* in urban cultural policy; that is, going beyond the scope of the city with policies

[2] In total, I made 11 research trips to Istanbul (2008-2020), and three to Beirut (2010-2015), where I also employed a Lebanese research assistant for 3 months in the summer of 2012. I conducted open-ended interviews (in English or Turkish, or a blend of these, in Istanbul; in English or French in Beirut) with local "users" of different ages (n=30), as well as semi-structured interviews with city-shapers (see definition above) based in each city (n=25). In order to protect research participants in the rapidly shifting and politically charged setting of each city, all names are kept confidential — as was originally guaranteed for quotidian city users, but also as decided retrospectively even for experts and public figures who agreed at the time to speak on the record, in recognition of emergent potential threats they may now face.

[3] Population figures for metropolitan Istanbul and Beirut are from the United Nations (2019: 70-77). For Beirut, this is an estimation only, as Lebanon has had no official census since 1932, due to a national political system organized around sectarian divisions with allocations of power distributed in line with the relative population sizes of different sects as of that last census count – and out of concern that any new enumeration would lead to violent wrangling over procedure and power redistribution.

that contemplate and represent its position in more-than-urban geographies, such as regional and global scales. This occurs as "implicit cultural policy" (Ahearne 2009), pertaining to policies, projects, and – especially crucial in these sites – infrastructures that complement or indirectly support promotion of the arts, traditions, and heritage. As Mulcahy (2006: 322-323) notes, implicit cultural policy often underwrites the "glorification" of culture, also evident in the kind of trans-scalar promotion we see in the practice of designating and developing certain cities as "capitals of culture" (Palonen 2014). In Istanbul and Beirut, we find a vibrant if selective celebration of deep-rooted histories that make these cities into ostensibly natural cultural capitals, contrasting the newness of Gulf urbanism. Although the ambit of implicit cultural policy is vast, I focus on the most prominent and spatialized features of scale-shifting in Istanbul and Beirut: symbolic and material infrastructures of transport and cultural celebration. As manifestations of implicit policy, these infrastructures explicitly position these cities as historically cosmopolitan hubs, valuably and ostensibly uniquely enmeshed in Europe, the Middle East, Asia, the Muslim World, the west, the east, and numerous former imperial geographies.

Three further sections make the case about the comparative uses of infrastructure in staging urban culture in Istanbul and Beirut. First, I overview how infrastructures play a key role in the worlding aspirations of cities and their official versions of local culture, highlighting this in the material construction and symbolic narration of Gulf cities, to sketch what the "Dubai model" (Hvidt 2009) actually entails, in comparison to how it is broadly perceived as a metonym for Gulf urbanism. I then turn to the contrasting historical trajectories of Istanbullu and Beiruti urban development, to show how some aspects of their experiences inform current discourses among their city-shapers. Second, I examine how selective civilizational appeals mark material-symbolic infrastructure related to implicit urban cultural policy in each metropolis. Finally, I conclude with a reflection on urban cultural policy in these examples as relying on words, images, and suggestions that perform an almost obsessive anti-Dubainess even while replicating – rather schizophrenically – key features of Gulf urban trajectories.

2. Infrastructures making Middle Eastern "worlds"

Intervening in the influential "global cities" (Sassen 2001) literature, Roy and Ong (2011), argue that cities do not simply seek to compete in a global economy where finance and producer-services rule, but instead engage in "worlding" practices as aspirational development in a variety of fields and networks that comprise "worlds" often consciously cast at a smaller-

than-planetary scale. This can be related to culture, tourism, architecture, and any number of other "worlds," often with more regionalized or imputed "civilizational" purviews. Infrastructure – as "a set of achievements, operations, and platforms" (Graham and McFarlane 2015: 1) supporting social as well as economic connection, functioning, and growth – is a major feature that buttresses this worlding urban development for Roy and Ong (2011; see also Anand et al 2018). Indeed, infrastructure is crucial in recent competition among cities vying as cultural icons and flagships in the Middle Eastern world (Kanna 2013; Kamrava 2016).

What counts as infrastructure for urban cultural policy? Examples include provision of physical venues, such as museums and theaters, or related training and socialization, from buttressing the arts to supporting the creative sector (Hitters 2000; Levitt 2015; De Beukalaer 2019), but infrastructures can be much more than these materializations upholding urban culture (see Smith 2016). Any infrastructure, of course, is fundamentally a structure – one that underpins, or enables, something else. According to Bourdieu,

> "structures lead, as it were, a 'double life.' They exist twice: in the 'objectivity of the first order' constituted by the *distribution* of *material* resources and means of appropriation of socially scarce goods and values … and in the 'objectivity of the second order,' in the form of systems of *classification*, the mental and bodily schemata that function as *symbolic* templates for the practical activities – conduct, thoughts, feelings, and judgments – of social agents (Wacquant 1992: 7; emphasis in original)."

Material aspects essentially are not legible in any particular way without symbolic interventions that frame, encode, represent, highlight, and facilitate what they achieve (e.g., Fourcade 2013). In line with this doubleness of structures, it is useful to consider infrastructures as likewise having both material and symbolic facets. Larkin (2013: 329) advocates analyzing the "poetics" of infrastructures, "understanding what sort of semiotic objects they are, and determining how they address and constitute subjects." If we look not only at theaters and museums but also the transportation that brings people to these venues and the marketing that highlights and frames their appeal within a city's wider offering, then we are getting at symbolic dimensions of infrastructure as part of urban cultural policy. While this may be implicit as policy (Ahearne 2009), it is blatant symbolic maneuvering. Within the symbolic repertoire of infrastructures, discourses – as stories, narratives, and how people talk about a place – are crucial components in shaping the materiality of urban culture (Paulsen 2004; Siemiatycki et al 2020).

To understand the importance of "not being Dubai" among city-shapers in Istanbul and Beirut, it is useful to turn to discourses as facilitating, or channeling, infrastructural action in the urban cultural realm. Roy (2016: 205) asserts the utility of delving into the stories a city

"tells itself about itself" as fundamental to comprehending the materiality of urban infrastructures, as well as the senses – often fantastical yet consequential – with which they are imbued by those who shape them. There is a taken-for-grantedness to the quotidian discourses about these places, and especially their place in the world, which informs the symbolic dimensions of their infrastructures; in effect, these stories create a feeling of common truths, what some researchers call "phatic" constructions of community (see Elyachar 2010), that perform a shared world through words. This article thus turns attention to everyday rhetoric around history and civilization as underpinning Istanbullu and Beiruti infrastructural development in an ostensible contrast to the character of Gulf urban culture.

2.1 Gulf urban development: The metonymic menace of Dubai

Historians document Middle Eastern cities as heterogeneous entrepôts (Abu-Lughod 1987), some stretching back millennia as sites of continuous human settlement. Gulf urbanism, however, is popularly imagined as exactly the opposite of this historical presence (Molotch and Ponzini 2019); although "super-diverse" (Vertovec 2007) in terms of their current population of transnational denizens, these sites of spectacular urban construction are often described as practically instantaneous (Murray 2018), as if there were only the thinnest of local pasts underpinning these fast-growing transnational urban centers. Boodrookas and Keshavarzian (2019: 16) contest this commonplace fallacy in historical detail, pointing to how the land that comprises contemporary Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and the rest of the Gulf littoral, has been a base for vigorous exchanges of goods and complex configurations of culture for centuries:

> "Flattening representations of Gulf cities have persisted with remarkable tenacity, in no small part as a result of their value to the Gulf regimes. Often with singular and instrumental purpose, royal families have sought to reify a binary between 'heritage' and 'modernity', positioning themselves as guardians of the former and vanguards of the latter."

Substantial presence of peoples ethnically linked to parts of the world beyond the Gulf is not new, especially via the incursion of British imperial influence beginning in the 1800s (Coles and Walsh 2010). While the discovery and extraction of oil in the region on the cusp of an era of global petroleum dependency tremendously impacted infrastructure installation and capital accumulation (see Fuccaro 2009; Al-Nakib 2016) – laying some of the groundwork for today's impressive infrastructural development and its emphasis on post-oil bases for Gulf economies – there were also many continuities in politics, culture, and architecture threading between

these earlier eras and the present (Elsheshtawy 2009; Harris 2016; Boodrookas and Keshavarzian 2019).

Certain aspects of Dubai's trajectory are nonetheless novel and unique. Hvidt (2009) dissects the "Dubai model" of spectacular development as a political-economic configuration of autocratic, single-minded leadership bent on combining aspects of extreme economic liberalism with strong, "fast" state directorship to convert the emirate into a hub for transport, finance, and investment (see Portes and Martínez 2019), with a very self-conscious emphasis on urban branding related to physical impressiveness and reliance on highly flexibilized non-citizen labor.[4] Al-Saleh (2018) further hones attention on Dubai's emphasis on "cluster" development in the city as both a spatial and sectoral strategy hinging on special zones, from its "maritime city" to its "studio city" and "knowledge village" districts. Choudary and Paul (2018) detail the contours of Dubai's tourist "paradise" landscapes, largely developed atop disappeared public spaces and "historic" – from the 1970s – quarters (Alawadi 2017; 2018). Elsheshtawy (2010) highlights "Dubaification" as a process of emulation in cities as diverse as Panama City, Belgrade, Nashville, and Nouakchott (Choplin and Franck 2010; Lloyd and Christens 2012; Sigler 2013; Koelemaij 2020), but this is primarily about physical mimesis in the form of stunning construction, not a full replication of institutional configurations or deeper Dubayyan legacies. Material infrastructure thus looms large in this view, at the same time as history and civilization are presumed to be particularly lacking.

Molotch and Ponizini (2019) insist that, across "the new Arab urban" world, there is no single model of development, and that Dubai cannot be accurately taken as representative of its neighbors' trajectories. While they point to an array of new city forms and dynamics in the Gulf, they nonetheless signal the external *perception* that there is something cohesive and different about Gulf urbanism. Despite the inaccuracy of this view from beyond the Gulf, it is nonetheless powerfully formative, orienting action in a range of fields (e.g., Kanna et al 2020) toward this ascribed regional exceptionalism. Casting the Gulf's urbanism as having shallow historical foundations, uniform contemporary manifestations, and as encapsulated by Dubai's example, is thus triply incorrect, but this dramatically simplified narrative is at the heart of what makes Dubai into a metonymic menace: rather than a carefully detailed contrast, the place

[4] Hvidt (2009: 401) lays out nine "parameters of Dubai's development path": (1) "government-led development"; (2) "fast decision-making and 'fast-track' development"; (3) "flexible labor force"; (4) "bypass of industrialization," favoring "creation of a service economy"; (5) "internationalization of service provision"; (6) "creation of investment opportunities"; (7) "supply-generated demand"; (8) "market positioning via branding"; and (9) "development in cooperation with international partners."

is caricatured as a foil, easy to dismiss discursively even while informing development elsewhere.

2.2 Comparative development trajectories and discourses, from Istanbul to Beirut

If Dubai tends to be portrayed without deep roots, Istanbul is replete with depictions as a millenarian stalwart. Recent popular culture and ruling-party politics place great emphasis on the quincentennial Ottoman presence in Istanbul (Fisher-Onar 2018; Karakaya 2018; Amzi-Erdogdular 2019), even though the city and its famed grandeur long pre-date the arrival of Muslim conquerors led by Mehmed II in 1453 (see Hughes 2017). During the lengthy, varied Ottoman era, Istanbul's cosmopolitanism was renowned as both imperial nexus (Çelik 1993; Boyar and Fleet 2010; Keyder 2018) and expatriate locus (e.g., King 2014), but this shifted substantially after the dissolution of empire and the foundation of the Turkish Republic following Ottoman defeat in World War I. The majority of the twentieth century in Istanbul is defined as a period of decline, as the capital shifted to Ankara, sizeable middle-class Istanbullu populations emigrated (especially Jews and ethnic Greeks), poorer rural Turks migrated into the city's interstices or erected precarious self-built neighborhoods (*gecekondu*; literally "built overnight"), as detailed by Keyder (2008). Despite the clear influence of imperial residues on republican Turkey (Meeker 2002; Erdim 2018), from the 1920s to the 1990s there was a general stance by the national state against Ottoman traces as backward and depraved – signaled in the Latinization of the Turkish alphabet, the secularization of institutions and public life, and aggressive efforts to guide development in an ostensibly Western direction (Özyürek 2006; King 2018).

Istanbul's orientation toward its own history and culture changed significantly with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. As leader of the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party), Erdoğan has been at Turkey's helm – alternating between prime-ministerial and presidential roles – for more than 15 years, and served as Istanbul mayor prior to these national posts. In clear contrast to predecessors' efforts to move beyond the Ottoman legacy, Erdoğan has embraced "Ottomanism" and modeled his rule around nostalgia for the empire-building "magnificence" of earlier sultans (Tokdoğan 2018). His tenure is associated with massive construction development in Istanbul, encompassing a number of large-scale demolitions and renovations, plus infrastructure installations of unprecedented size, and often enormous controversy (Çağaptay 2020: 1-8). This included, among others, vast proliferation of the metro rail network, inauguration of a third bridge over the Bosphorus, and establishment of the new Istanbul International Airport that aims to be the busiest in the world (Pérouse 2017). Erdoğan is both

criticized and praised for his nearly unrelenting style of leadership, forging ahead against major challenges, including the 2013 Gezi Park occupations in central Istanbul (Kuymulu, 2013; Tuğal 2013; Erensü and Karaman 2017; Turam 2019), confidently suppressing dissent and highlighting his self-styled character as caretaker of Turkey and Turkishness in a quest to restore national grandeur with a firm hand and hawkish approach (Tuğal 2009; Tuğal 2016; Pérouse 2017; Turam 2017; Çağaptay 2020: 25-40). The incursion of Turkish forces in northern Syria in late 2019 reaffirms what Erdoğan has widely declared as Turkey's rightful borders beyond those established in the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres (see Danforth 2016). In this especially delicate geopolitical situation, Istanbul continues to be a space of ongoing construction and displays of greatness – an urban stage for linking to the past as well as the future, as national-level maneuvers aim to expand territorial influence.

In contrast to Istanbul's intertwining of Ottoman-imperial lore and neo-Ottoman ambition, the narrative emphasis on history in Beirut accentuates the city as a cosmopolitan crossroads at every stage of inhabitation across three millennia, including successive imperial dominations dating back to the Phoenicians. Through the extended period of Ottoman rule (1516-1917), this Levantine port grew as an entrepôt (Hanssen 2005). Despite exercising discipline and repression over their subject peoples, the Ottomans allowed myriad faiths to flourish in Beirut, as in Istanbul (Reilly 2011; Mills 2011). This diversity became the city's hallmark: the population included prominent segments of Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims, Shiite Muslims, Druze, Jews, and Greek Orthodox, among others, through the late 19th-century period of "Westernizing" reforms across the empire (see Hanioğlu 2008), which brought a modernizing, bourgeois approach to urban intervention. This drive to transform drew on Haussmannian inspirations to create lavish boulevards and blocks by Ottoman rulers who were emulating the transformation of Paris (Çelik 2008; Kassir 2010: 139-153). When the Ottomans recoiled from Beirut after defeat in World War I and local rebellions against their reign, Lebanon became a French protectorate (Barr 2011); although French control withered away within just 25 years, officially ending in 1943, its imprint on Beirut remains strong in many neighborhoods and communities (Davie 1996: 71-105; Kassir 2010: 279-326).

With the establishment of an independent Lebanon, a complex, rigid power-sharing agreement structured the country's governance around 18 official "confessions," or religious faiths. Influence was apportioned by the population size of each faith according to the French-administered 1932 census, and has never undergone a substantial revision despite vastly different demographic trajectories and urgent calls for a new national political imagination (Nagle and Clancy 2019). Despite long-evident interethnic tensions the middle-20th century is

often depicted as an especially glorious period of relatively harmonious, cosmopolitan economic advancement in Beirut (Khalaf 2006), when it was regarded as a "Paris of the Orient" in culture and style, and "Switzerland of the Middle East" for its especially diverse and peaceable blend of religions even as conflict wracked neighboring territories, including the influx of tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees after the establishment of Israel (Kassir 2010: 439-467). This ostensible harmony crumbled in 1975 as the country fell into a 15-year civil war among its many religious factions, with American, Syrian, and Israeli forces eventually entering the fray as well. The war devastated the city, leaving much of it in ruins, creating a stark divide along the "Green Line" between a predominantly Muslim west and largely Christian east, dramatically reducing the population through death and exodus (Fregonese 2009; Buccianti-Barakat and Chamussy 2012: 53-66).

When peace was finally achieved following the 1989 Ta'if Agreement, the same interethnic power-sharing arrangement remained, and a long process of reconstruction began. To rebuild the ruined urban center, Prime Minister Rafic Hariri spearheaded the development corporation Solidere (derived from *Société Libanaise pour le Développement et la Reconstruction*). Established in 1994, Solidere is a joint-stock company privately owned by the national state, the prominent Hariri family, and a minority of private stockholders, making for an unusual version of private-public partnership that essentially has state backing but private-sector freedoms of operation. Solidere's mission, enshrined in 1991 Lebanese laws for postwar development, has been to rebuild the central Beirut, following a master plan modified several times since undertaking operations. Solidere projected a bold vision for archaeological preservation, and far more new construction that does not correspond to pre-war presences as part of "the largest worldwide redevelopment project of the 1990s" (Sawalha 2010: 27), aiming "put Beirut on the world map" again (Chamaa 2010: 10). Deeply controversial, with various suits and protests by aggrieved landholders and their sympathizers (Verdeil 2001; 2017; Brones 2020; Sharp 2020), Solidere's vision has nonetheless inspired waves of investment from abroad pouring into Beirut, heralding a construction boom in towers and shopping centers (Krijnen and Fawaz 2010). Through several bouts of political upheaval after the Lebanese civil war – including Hariri's 2005 assassination in Beirut, armed occupation of the center by disputing factions in 2010, and influxes of more than a million Syrian refugees since 2014 – the capital has remained a locus of speculative development (Marot 2018), attracting foreign and diasporic capital even while readying preemptively for "the war yet to come" (Bou Akar 2018) as one of the most expensive centers for real estate in the Middle East (Krijnen 2018), which has spurred deep inequality and growing discontent, as evidenced in widespread protests in late 2019.

These multi-week, multitudinous demonstrations have denounced the “confessional” power-sharing system as outdated, unjust, and particularly ineffective at dealing with the basic needs of Beirutis during ongoing economic crisis.

Across these Turkish and Lebanese cities, the role of infrastructure – in the most common sense of physical supports for development – figures significantly how they are attempting to forge a path forward, including in relation to a unique sense of local urban culture. But also important is the infrastructure of stories that each place “tells itself about itself,” including what city-shapers tell themselves about what their city is not, regardless of accuracy. This, too, is an infrastructure, even if discursive. In referencing what each city is not – that is, not Gulf cities – we can discern specific civilizational appeals in the infrastructures of urban cultural policy within Istanbul and Beirut, as their politicians and urbanists aim position each city vis-à-vis the rest of the urban Middle East.

3. The civilizational appeals of infrastructure

Previous comparative work on cultural policy has demonstrated the usefulness of analyzing the contrasting trajectories of cities within the same regional “world” (Karvelyte 2018), as well as how infrastructural features shape cultural policies in divergent ways across sites that otherwise share substantial similarities (de Beukalaer 2019). Below, detailed analysis of interviews with key city-shapers reveals how they wield certain discursive motifs to underpin their rationales for interventions in the city on behalf of a vision of local culture. Within the same city, they arrive at different conclusions from each other, nonetheless alluding to contrasts with an imagined Dubai as key counter-reference. The metaphor – and often the reality – of bridging is particularly prominent in Istanbul, whereas bordering – as a form of separating – is pivotal in Beirut. These discourses become infrastructures for talking about ideals of “civilizational” uniqueness in each place, and its role in shaping physical infrastructures as part of bolstering the specificities of local culture.

3.1 Istanbul: Of bridges and empires

Talk of bridging is abundant in Istanbul. Situated along major waterways and inlets, crossing between the city’s shores has been an essential, quotidian concern for millennia. While a third major bridge across the Bosphorus Strait was recently completed amid both fanfare and contestation (Erensü and Karaman 2017: 25-28), the construction of fixed overwater bridges

has been but one facet of Istanbul's bridging discourses. Recent work on Turkish cultural policy shifts has illuminated the strengthened, unilateral role of the state (Bonini Baraldi et al 2013; Aksoy and Şeyben 2015; see also Tuğal 2016), but there has been less attention to how physical and discursive come together, or clash, as implicit cultural policy in the current Istanbullu conjuncture. From the official view of the AKP spearheading development campaigns centered on imperial grandeur, to dissenting voices of variously affiliated opposition academics and philanthropists seeking to protect alternative visions of Istanbul's cosmopolitanism, we can understand how the particular appeals to civilization in Istanbul trade on the notion of bridges and crossings as the infrastructure that supports the city a key destination for culture.

"Istanbul is the global city. It has always been a crossroads of Europe and Asia. It is a bridge for the world." These words came from Mert,[5] a government appointee in cultural affairs on the team charged with staging Istanbul as the European Capital of Culture in 2010 (ECC2010). Related activities sprawled across the entire calendar and the city's landscape were marked with the insignia of "*Avrupa Kültür Başkenti 2010*" (the Turkish translation of ECC2010) for at least two years prior, and well into the following years. The logo conveys a sense of bridging between sites via swooping connections above the city's letters that correspond with Mert's portrayal of Istanbul as a point of linkage (see FIGURE 1). ECC2010 was a polyphonic event that included a diversity of Turkish art across media (Göktürk et al 2010), as well as a vast array of artists from elsewhere in Europe (from Irish folk-dancing to Austrian classical music), but it also spotlighted – and reiterated – the everyday sense of Istanbul as a kind of capital because of its bridging role.

Mert went on to exemplify this sense using a common claim expounded among foreign visitors: "In Istanbul, you can have lunch in Europe and dinner in Asia on the same day." Bridges and frequent ferries shuttling commuters in all directions across the Bosphorus were Mert's points of reference here, as the waterway is an ancient, still-invoked cartographic delineation between "Europe" and "Asia." But the time of ECC2010 also marked the beginning of discourses promoting a new era for infrastructure development in Istanbul, which has figured in repositioning the city with an expanded cultural purview.

[5] All interviewees' names are pseudonyms.

Figure 1: Istanbul's European Capital of Culture 2010 logo, with the message "Istanbul meets his European brothers." Photograph and translation by author, 2010.

Following ECC2010, proliferating billboards celebrated the rapid expansion of Istanbul's metro network. These messages, along with other media appearances, always underscored the AKP's provision of this linking force, emphasizing the convenience delivered with specific geographic points of reference. Then-mayor Kadir Topbaş, and close AKP ally of Erdoğan, regularly made public addresses on these matters and would lend his image to related propaganda (see FIGURE 2). The messaging pivots on two different measures of time: first, there is the demonstration of how much rail infrastructure (in distance) has been laid down in short spans of years in contrast to earlier (pre-AKP) eras; second, there are promises of how little time (in minutes) it will take to travel between various pairs of far-flung but well-known Istanbullu locales upon completion of metro expansions. Of course, these are electorally minded messages, but they build directly on the truism of the city as a site of bridging and connection. They also underscore Istanbul as a place of spectacular advancement in support of flourishing yet longstanding culture.

Figure 2: AKP billboard, for city government, spotlighting infrastructure expansion. Across the top, it reads "We are at the service of the people of Istanbul 24 hours a day, 365 days a year," and the two top-left frames show timed achievements, specifically related to the metro network: "We opened the Kadıköy-Kartal Metro Line. [Journey from] Kadıköy to Kartal [a distance of 23km] in [just] 32 minutes!" To the right of that, "It was a dream come true! The 13.5km Marmaray Tube Crossing is at your service. [Travel between] 2 continents in 4 minutes with Marmaray!" Photograph and translation by author, 2017.

In 2013, a freely distributed, full-color campaign pamphlet from the city government comprising more than 300 glossy pages hinged on the theme of "Big changes continuing for 9 years" (*Büyük değişim 9 yıldır devam ediyor*). Emphasis was placed on the numerous infrastructural projects spearheaded by the AKP with Topbaş at the metropolitan helm; the suggestion in the theme, and supporting text, was that the transformation of Istanbul since 2004 under Topbaş's leadership could continue for another 9 years (although he left office in 2017). Out of 25 images checkering the pamphlet's cover, 12 highlight transportation infrastructure, including six that relate directly to spanning Istanbul's waterways. Moreover, the pamphlet's wording repeatedly underlines the development of linkages as positioning Istanbul in its rightful place among "the world's greatest cities" (İBB 2013: 47; author's translation), and how its location at the "intersection of Europe and Asia" (İBB 2013: 5; author's translation) made it an eminent cultural capital for "three great civilizations" over "16 centuries." That positioning, based on bridging, then becomes the motif for reviewing projects accomplished and plans forecasted. We see, then, that bridging is a fundamental story that Istanbul tells itself about itself. Bridges are a material infrastructure, but also symbolic in worlding that it performs to position Istanbul as civilizationally as well as geographically unique.

Despite her staunch opposition to much of Topbaş's politics and his practice of pushing for ever-grander infrastructure, Nur – a decorated Turkish architect and historian in her 40s – used strikingly similar tropes of bridging to discuss the nature of Istanbullu heritage and infrastructure during a series of interviews over 2008-2011.

> "What makes Istanbul such a cultural treasure is not only its deep history but its role in bringing together so many influences from a vast geographic scope into a truly cosmopolitan fabric. New developments, from apartment towers to commercial districts, have sometimes tried to invent splendor by mimicking Dubai with height and sheen, but we architects have always campaigned to prevent this kind of ahistorical tangent. This is a special crossroads, and even with new constructions, it is important to maintain that position in the built environment and the cultures reflected in it."

No stranger to the malleability of history for political ends, Nur has been involved in numerous efforts with Turkish architectural collectives to oppose AKP plans for development, as well as private initiatives endorsed by the ruling party, which she describes as "contorting legacies, especially imperial history, to support its own self-centered vision of grandeur." But Nur also had fierce criticism for foreign starchitects, such as the late Zaha Hadid, whose proposals for remaking the landscape of eastern Istanbul she deemed "atrocious" in their futuristic renderings of projects that, for her, mimicked Gulf prototypes and would "erase the cultural trove of history that is evident in Istanbul's position as the former capital of more than one multiethnic empire, where continents come together."

From a less academic but more privileged position, Ezgi – the mid-20s daughter of a prominent entrepreneurial and philanthropic family, involved in advising their businesses and charities in Istanbul – spoke in stronger terms against the official view of the city as a terrain for development, yet also mobilized the same kinds of tropes of bridging and imperial legacies. "We will continue to fight against this opportunistic and corrupt party," she said in reference to her involvement in the 2013 Gezi Park protests that were brutally dispersed on Erdoğan's orders.

> "But it's not to reject everything done by this government; the point is to defend the diversity that makes Istanbul, and Turkey, and many former Ottoman lands, a crossroads of cultures. We must protect – with our bodies and our lives, if we must – what has made this city into such a culturally rich place."

As she leaned in to light a cigarette from a flickering candle at our table in the fashionable Cihangir district in early 2014, Ezgi lowered her voice to say:

> "My generation may have been politicized by Gezi, but it's not just a matter of protest, or youth awakening. What's even more important is what my family and others in our circle [of wealthy Istanbullus] can do with our economic power and our social influence. Many of us are not Muslim, but we are Turkish. And very proud of Turkey. Our lineages are here in Istanbul because of what the Ottoman Empire once was. While it will never return to that, and I don't want it to, it's the reason I feel so much more at home in Athens or even Cairo than in, European capitals like London or Paris,

> or the gleaming newness practically built by slave labor in all those Gulf cities. I love to travel and I can enjoy each place, but this vibe of being a crossroads of the Mediterranean world is what the Ottomans instilled, and what we work to safeguard in our funding of museums and cultural archives here in Istanbul. No egotistical construction will eclipse that."

In Ezgi's commitment to buck any singular vision for Turkish civilization, she is grounded in the idea of Ottoman bridges between cultures, coming together in a culturally heterogeneous Istanbullu crossroads which must be protected. For her, the infrastructure for flourishing cultural pluralism is as much about historical framing as it is about institutional robustness, and can be complemented by actual bridges but not substituted by them.

In their plain rejection of Topbaş's mayoral agenda that prioritized grand physical infrastructure, and their deeper sense of politicization than Mert, both Ezgi and Nur nonetheless rely on the same tropes of bridging to underpin their visions for urban cultural flourishing that safeguards and bolsters a diverse, rich civilizational heritage in Istanbul.

3.2 Beirut: Diversity via, and against, borderlines

The day after I made a comparative presentation about heritage preservation in Istanbul and Beirut at a conference in southern Europe during early 2019, a designee of Beirut's mayor made a cameo appearance and brief speech at the same event. When he heard that of all the talks there was one – mine – that addressed Beiruti conditions, and that this had been done as a kind of contrast with Istanbul, the official mentioned this to the entire audience with momentary honor and then terse dismissal, lumping the Turkish city together with Gulf peers, after no prompting in this direction:

> "With all due respect, there is simply no comparison between Beirut and Istanbul when it comes to heritage. … Neither Istanbul nor Dubai can replace Beirut because they lack [our] sort of social capital, based on the fact that [we have] an actual diversity. Many times this diversity has been blamed for problems we have [in Beirut], but at the same time, this diversity has enhanced us."

Setting aside the misunderstanding that comparison somehow requires putting cities into competition, where one might supersede or "replace" another, it is noteworthy that this Beiruti official zeroed in on "diversity" as an area in which the Lebanese capital excels, and that he presumes to be lacking in Istanbul and Dubai. For him, diversity meant religious and ethnic difference within a single national frame, among co-citizens. Moreover, the way he argued for diversity to be preserved was through a recognition of boundaries between groups and their identities. He went on to praise the Lebanese constitution and its multiethnic power-sharing

system, dating from 1926, as a model for managing diverse cultures with "dignity." In a joint interview with one of his municipal colleagues after the event, these two officials (one Maronite, one Sunni) spoke more specifically about how this diversity, and its management, were key in safeguarding the cultural uniqueness of Beirut, particularly in its post-war built environment and heritage. They spoke glowingly about the achievements of Solidere and its ongoing struggle to redevelop the city's core while maintaining a "special position in the Arab world" as a center of nightlife, art, and tolerance. This kind of discourse echoes the work of Lebanese scholars who document how Beirutis narrate their own city's cosmopolitanism by reciting imaginative geographies of civilizational hierarchy both within the city and in relation to other Middle Eastern cities (Moussawi 2020: 6-15). But this discourse also chimes with work by Beiruti urbanists about the way "diversity" becomes an ensemble of borderlines within the city (Bou Akar and Hafeda 2011; Bou Akar 2018; Hafeda 2019), as spatialized bounds that delimit interactions and expectations across Lebanon's confessions and political parties. Indeed, researchers have shown Beirut's "sectarian infrastructures" in divisive developments of basic supports for everyday urban life after the war as constructions of ethnicized separation across confessional diversity (Nucho 2017).

In a 2012 interview with a Christian member of Beirut's elected governing council, the relationship between borders and the promotion of cultural diversity was discussed in reference to how it endowed Beirut with a genuine "urban" quality beyond other Middle Eastern cities. This politician, when initially explaining transportation policies within the capital, staked a strong claim about the importance of recognizing yet crossing borders to further Beirut's cultural development and preserve its built heritage. He argued the continued referentiality of the war-era "Green Line" [mostly following the Rue de Damas, as erstwhile frontline between Muslim west and Christian east] – more than twenty years after formal armistice – was crucial, as exemplified by the Beit Beirut [House of Beirut] museum project (see Brones 2012; Reder 2020) very near its route. Originally known as the Barakat Building, this structure was devastated by warfare, yet its barest skeleton remained standing in the aftermath (see Figure 3). Taken as symbolic of resilience in the wake of destruction, a lengthy effort began with expropriation by the municipal government in 2003 to convert the ruins into a memorial of tolerance and the power of diversity while maintaining historic architecture. Although the building was constructed less than a century prior, the city councilor extrapolated its Ottoman revivalist aesthetic as indicative of Beirut's centuries of persistence against threats, and its significance as an entrepôt. Rather than promoting a homogenizing or intermixed sense of Beirutness, he asserted how Lebanon's 18 distinct confessions each needed separate

recognition, and would find it within this space of memory. The councilor also extolled the ongoing feeling of militarized precarity along the Green Line – as if the war had just ended and might reignite at any point – as a functional infrastructure to remind residents of factions during the war. He added that the legacy of war was not a wound, but a mark of strength and permanence that "other Arab cities, built fast, on shifting sands, with no historic foundation" cannot replicate, "even if they have the whole world passing through them, and money to waste on creating outposts of the Louvre on the Arabian Peninsula."

Figure 3: Beit Beirut (House of Beirut), early in reconstruction phase as memorial museum project. Photograph by author, 2012.

While not praising war itself, the municipal figures above essentially praise the factionality that gave rise to war, and could do so again. Beirut's diversity and its compositional borders are thus a key story that the city tells itself about itself. That diversity is furthermore storied as richer and deeper than anything present in the Gulf cities presented as interchangeably shallow, importing museum templates for a globally recognized, branded cultural infrastructure rather than being to craft their own, as in postwar Beirut.

In dramatic opposition to this praise of war's legacy, yet recognizing its divisive remnants, one of Lebanon's leading architects animatedly diagnosed the situation with his view on countering it. During an especially graphic interview in his Beirut studio in mid-2012, Ramzi claimed that Beiruti constructions since the 1970s consistently evinced a securitized,

inward focus, marking a stark border between the safety of home and the hostility of the outside, of any and all beyond the family or clan. After the war years, the architect claimed "the concept of 'public' never took hold in Lebanon again," which he saw as the fault of the war carrying on in people's minds, everyday practices, and in architecture itself. These fault lines – as borders, policed both literally and metaphorically – were war in a different guise, and could only be countered with an equally aggressive response that embraced alternative priorities. Ramzi illustrated his point by drawing on a paper at his desk, sketching what he called a Lebanese building prototype post-1970: "the elevator and stairs are in the middle. You walk out, and here is the kitchen, then the living room, bedrooms, or offices, event space, etc.," drawing Xs in each room as he narrated.

> "People care about their interior, but they want to be totally insulated from the city around them, the streets and their neighbors. … This is the model, and I seek to hang it by the balls."

On the page's reverse, he then drew the kind of design he integrates into his buildings, with as much content as possible outwardly accessible: "it's a situation that encourages social contact both within and with the outside world, especially adjacent neighbors. This is culture." Flipping the paper back again, he tapped the first drawing with his middle finger, bluntly professing "we fucked them," with a wry smile. Through the problematic yet vivid idiom of sexualized, masculinist aggression, we can discern a priority on overcoming borders – effectively an ode to penetration, in the service of "culture" where there is little coherent sense of publicness.

During an early-2015 interview in the western Hamra district, a local urban planner – involved in research and teaching as much as practice – explained how the lack of public orientation in Beirut was an historic anomaly. Maha argued that the heart of Beirut, now under the administration of Solidere in its ongoing reconstruction, was a place of all different faiths coming together, without clear dividing lines. She went on to highlight the area around us, in Hamra, with its cosmopolitanism, relative physical openness, and visible social mixing across varied religions, as what had "temporarily" become an anomaly in the city, even though it used to be the norm. Maha lamented that

> "in most of Beirut, there is no public today. We have few public spaces, and most other neighborhoods have a strong feeling of definition by insiders. Even in rebuilding, the borders marking 'this religion' versus 'that religion' are made painfully clear. But this is not what Beirut was, and the city will, someday, come back to this more seamless reality. It is not easy; there is no obvious solution. But many of us are always pushing in our work and in our conversations to focus less on lines between us and more on the links that can bring us together, for the sake of Beirut's

future as a great city – a beacon for the Middle East, and the world."

For her, this kind of orientation was fundamental in planning to help the city rekindle its public urban culture, informing her placement of a premium on crafting more space for parks, pedestrians, and everyday interaction wherever possible.

Maha's hopeful tone builds upon much the same civilizational discourse as the other influential Beirutis quoted above. Despite their discrepant imagery and political views, all of these city-shapers share a view that Beirut's cultural diversity marks its history as a resource worth preserving. Whether reaffirming the borders of diversity, or attempting to dissolve them, all speak of this variety as what makes Beirut culturally unique – and aim to build this, literally, into the city and its material-symbolic infrastructures.

4. Conclusion: Urban cultural policy as incantation?

This study brings to light how shared civilizational discourses inform infrastructural development in Istanbul and Beirut, with an emphasis on how the material-symbolic assemblages that result are part of an implicit policy of scale-shifting in urban culture. Such a focus has enabled analysis of the role a metonymic "Dubai" plays in the way differently situated city-shapers talk about, and thus conceive grounds for engagement, in these two former Ottoman centers. In their varying turns to "civilization" – particularly the idea of Ottoman-era bridging and connection in Istanbul, and a notion of categorical borderlines of ethnic diversity in Beirut's trans-imperial history – these city-shapers reveal the formative stories that each place "tells itself about itself" (Roy 2016: 205), even as some narrators take these accounts toward markedly divergent conclusions. Despite significant differences between Beirut and Istanbul, it is important to note that in fact both are multicultural, and have been for centuries, with both serve as a kind of east/west bridge or frontier in large part due to shared Ottoman civilizational legacies (e.g., Mills 2011). But city-shapers do not tell themselves the same stories about themselves across these cities. We therefore gain an understanding of the importance of specific truisms and motifs as part of both official and oppositional strategies of placemaking in each city. Rather than dismiss these as trite, which they often are, we should take them as seriously as the formative infrastructure they tend to engage as their points of local reference in elaborating narratives and counter-narratives for the city and cultural policy. By reiterating – in almost chantlike fashion – the same truisms about bridging and diversity, a

vision for each city is repeatedly, performatively, called into form as a singular platform for discussion, policy, action – and contestation.

By keeping in juxtaposition the fanciful if derisive representations of Gulf urbanism that both Istanbullus and Beirutis conjure as examples of what they are not, we also learn what city-shapers in these cities are attempting to avoid in their developmental quests. Even if much of the physical infrastructure they foster, or would like to create, bears ironically noticeable resemblance to features of Gulf urban development, these heterogeneous city-shapers are dedicated to signaling an appreciation of history – stylized and objectionable as it may be – and staking claims on local "civilizational" greatness through specific tropes: bridging and bordering. While Dubai and its Gulf peers may focus very much on serving as hubs – a kind of functional bridge/frontier – for global flows, and on setting up clear categorical borders for both their entitlement-segmented denizens and their pristinely functionalist urban master plans (Kamrava 2016), Istanbul and Beirut argue that they are fundamentally different kinds of cities, "worlding" themselves as millenarian centers of culture and promise in the Middle East. In the view of politicians, their sense of historic urban culture grants them legitimacy in their efforts to propel development; in the eyes of oppositional urbanists, there is a subtext that urban culture under threat and it is their mission to protect it against the specter of Dubai-like development. Both groups use similar discourses to support their efforts; both groups aim to render a city that is a fundamentally different kind of Middle Eastern metropolis – physically, historically, culturally – than what they claim to see in the Gulf. What this fixation on not being Dubai misses, however, are the malleable discursive underpinnings that form the basis of developmental legitimacy struggles in all of these sites, from Istanbul to Gulf cities to Beirut. Moreover, these kinds of struggles are certainly not limited to the Middle East, as we can witness similar scale-shifting related to urban culture with, for example, Cape Town (Bickford-Smith 2009; Rink 2016; Pollio 2019) and Johannesburg (Sihlongonyane 2016; Myambo 2017) redefining their relationships to the African continent via cultural amenities and infrastructure. What is regionally unique, however, is the rise of new centers of power and wealth in the Gulf that recompose the geographies or "worlds" that we have known for a very long time, leading to this discursive scale-shifting where practically no one among city-shapers in Beirut and Istanbul claims to be emulating "Dubai," but its metonymic sway becomes undeniable as a reference point – even if vilified – in the material-symbolic infrastructures of urban culture across the Middle East.

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