



## NOSTALGIA FOR A PAST: BEIRUT'S SHARED OPEN SPACES

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### ABSTRACT

Beirut's urban fabric is a palimpsest reflecting different historical periods with their natural growths, deformations and happenings. Traces of urban open spaces including streets and some squares persist and feed collective memories in this city. Other open spaces emerge through the post-war layer and inform about the everyday practices of Beirut's coexisting societies. This paper provides an overview of the state of open urban spaces in Beirut, and focuses on the ethics of the aesthetics of Beirut's post-war open urban spaces. The aim is to establish an understanding of the role of those spaces in relation to memory, identity and everyday urban life in present-time Beirut.

**Keywords:** Beirut, public space, memory, aesthetic experience, integration

### RESUMEN

El tejido urbano de Beirut es un palimpsesto que refleja diferentes períodos históricos con sus crecimientos naturales, deformaciones y acontecimientos. Las huellas de los espacios urbanos abiertos incluyendo calles y algunas plazas persisten y alimentan memorias colectivas en esta ciudad. Otros espacios abiertos emergen a través de la capa de la posguerra e informan acerca de las prácticas cotidianas de las sociedades coexistentes de Beirut. Este documento ofrece una visión general del estado de los espacios urbanos abiertos en Beirut, y se centra en la ética de la estética de los espacios urbanos abiertos de posguerra en Beirut. El objetivo es establecer una comprensión del papel de los espacios en relación con la memoria, la identidad y la vida urbana cotidiana en tiempo presente Beirut.

**Palabras clave:** Beirut, espacio público, memoria, experiencia estética, integración

### RESUM

El teixit urbà de Beirut és un palimpsest que reflecteix diferents períodes històrics amb els seus creixements naturals, deformacions i esdeveniments. Les petjades dels espais urbans oberts incloent carrers i algunes places persisteixen i alimenten memòries col·lectives en aquesta ciutat. Altres espais oberts emergeixen a través de la capa de la postguerra i informen sobre les pràctiques quotidianes de les societats coexistents de Beirut. Aquest document ofereix una visió general de l'estat dels espais urbans oberts a Beirut, i se centra en l'ètica de l'estètica dels espais urbans oberts de postguerra a Beirut. L'objectiu és establir una comprensió del paper dels espais en relació amb la memòria, la identitat i la vida urbana quotidiana en temps present Beirut.

**Paraules clau:** Beirut, espai públic, memòria, experiència estètica, integració

## **INTRODUCTION: THE SCHISM IN THE MEMORY OF BEIRUT'S PAST AND CURRENT PUBLIC SPACES<sup>1</sup>**

What if a city loses its memory? If memory is lost, everyday life disrupted, and habits altered, what are the implications for urban public spaces? Perhaps, attempts of reconstruction, documentation, and if possible, preservation would take place. Perhaps a replacement of one memory with another would occur. What scars or traces are left after these operations?

This paper interprets Beirut's open public spaces, and their role in the city's memory bridging across pre-war and post-war generations. The emphasis on public spaces is due to their role in generating positive experiences, and encounters with a high degree of diversity within the city (Watson, 2006). The paper tries to distinguish between public spaces that generate a memorable, lasting aesthetic experience, versus those spaces that leave no impression. Furthermore, the paper identifies the ethics of public space supply, in the sense that public spaces should provide a common good that in turn nurtures individual growth (Caspary, 2003: in reference to Dewey). The ethically supplied public space is based on shared values, and is conducive of an aesthetic experience on a rhythmic basis (everyday, seasonal, occasional). The aesthetic experience is a channel that could span across time. Such a channel occurs in a public, which is an intrinsic urban component, and leaves a positive effect on people within the space, integrating them with the urban environment in the present moment, retrieving the past, and giving the possibility of a repeated experience in the future. Public spaces providing an aesthetic experience are imprinted in memory and being public, a shared collective memory away from exclusion, alienation and segregation. In this manner, these spaces are a beacon of hope for social integration in a divided society.

After this brief introduction, the paper first presents the framework on public spaces in everyday urban life, their aesthetic experiences, ethical production, and memory generation. In the following two sections, Beirut's public spaces before and after the war are explored. The relation between the current post memory generation and the transmission of memory from the war-time generation regarding public spaces is also examined. The implications on aesthetics, ethics, and memory in Beirut's present day public spaces are then examined within the set framework. The conclusion then draws some possibilities and predictions on Beirut's public spaces, and their roles in people's everyday lives.

## **PUBLIC SPACES, SOCIAL PRACTICES AND THE FLOW OF EVERYDAY URBAN LIFE EXPERIENCES**

Public spaces are experienced and affect people's everyday urban lives through their various social practices (Lefebvre, 1991). Social practices are based on customs, values, traditions and trends. The experiences in public spaces vary from impressive

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<sup>1</sup> This is a working paper presented within the track on public spaces memory, ethics and aesthetics, and any comments are much appreciated towards further elaborating the presented ideas.

to enjoyable to unpleasant, to traumatic. On a temporal scale, they could be repetitive and rhythmic (Lefebvre, 2004), or sporadic. Repetitive and rhythmic experiences lead to habits in using, inhabiting, and further anticipating experiences in public spaces.

Dewey's (1980) reference to the aesthetic experience, which relates the everyday and mundane to that which is introduced through artistic endeavour and sophistication, is well suited to interpret the aesthetics of public spaces generally. In a later section, I explain this reference in the case of Beirut's public spaces. This is explained in the following quotation:

*'In his [Dewey's] concern for continuity, for reconnecting 'normal' and aesthetic experience, craft-workers and artists, and producers and consumers, Dewey calls on us "to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience." Before we can achieve this, however, it will be necessary to be clearer about who we are as creatures, and why we make, enjoy and need art.'* (Hickman et al., 2011: 29)

In parallel to this, I will outline what makes, characterizes, and constitutes the *public*, why *urban public spaces* are needed, and what their *role* within the *urban context* is in relation to *memory*, forgetting, collective memory and post memory.

## **PUBLIC SPACE AND THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE**

Literature on the public, the public realm and the public domain is abundant and provides perspectives from numerous disciplines starting with- among others- philosophy (Arendt, 1958), history (Kostof, 1992; 1994), sociology (Lofland, 1998; Low et al., 2005; Low and Smith, 2006; Sennett, 2002a; 2002b), politics, law (Kohn, 2004), and environmental psychology, to architecture, urban design, landscaping, and urban planning (Madanipour, 2003). It is outside the scope of this paper to revisit the various definitions and references to public space. Rather, the adopted term 'public space' and for the purpose of this research, refers to the physical open urban spaces, which allow free and equitable access without discrimination to their diverse users. These spaces could be streets, squares or parks, but also other open spaces where collective activities take place, spaces that are unplanned or 'invisible' as Watson (2006: 18) refers to them. They are the urban spaces where strangers directly or indirectly encounter each other, where people meet and socialise (Lofland, 1998). Temporally, their activities vary from the ephemeral such as a festival (Kostof, 1992, 1994), to the permanent, such as commuting from home to work persistently on a daily or regular basis. Functionally, public spaces could act as political spaces for demonstrations, commercial spaces with shopping activities, spaces of consumption and recreation, social spaces for encounter and interaction (Gehl and Gemzøe, 1996), or purely as spaces for staying idle and doing nothing (Kostof, 1992, 1994). In the latter, public spaces merely generate an aesthetic experience due to the absorption of users in their environment (Stroud, in press: in reference to Dewey), it is the 'sensory delight' experienced in public space (Watson, 2006: 1); this public is not a homogeneous mass of people but rather a combination of diverse and different users (Watson, 2006).

Searching for the aesthetic in public spaces does not necessarily stem from the design and composition of the space, its ornaments or objects, though the aesthetics of urban space are widely covered in the literature (for example, Krier, 1979). Following Dewey's terms on the aesthetic experience, the aesthetic in public space could rather come from the interaction one has with the space and in the space, and the positive, enjoyable or interesting experience that is generated thereupon (Stroud, in press: in reference to Dewey). These experiences are based on the people, the activities, and the spatial quality in all its sensory dimensions, and these unfold and are experienced through time. A related argument is raised in Lefebvre's (1991) production of space, whereby space is not only the designed plan designating land occupation, but rather the collection of meanings and activities associated with people's social practices in the space. Authors including Gehl (1987, 1996), Watson (2006), Carr et al. (1992) indicate the importance of public spaces for social interaction and exchange. The aesthetic in public space is an 'experience of enjoyment occasioned by certain (mostly) visual qualities of the built environment' (Lofland, 1998: 68); a sensation that could be experienced through exploring a space, the unexpected, the eccentric, historical layering, juxtaposition, diversity and related experiential qualities (Lofland, 1998: 80-87). Other authors refer to such aesthetic experiences that occur due to encounter, exchange and surprise (Gehl, 1987, 1996; Watson, 2006). 'The aesthetic combines the future and the past in the present' (Stroud, in press: 44: in reference to Dewey), while the present holds values and meanings that are shared within society, both collectively and individually. Thus the aesthetic is memorable (Stroud, in press: in reference to Dewey), and also helps in anticipating the future; it persists, in contrast to the unaesthetic or 'ugly', which tends to be forgotten or dismissed as a backdrop. Two issues are discussed and explained in the following sections: the first related to values, and the second to memory.

#### **THE ETHICS IN PUBLIC SPACE SUPPLY**

If public spaces should be supplied in a manner that they provide a public good, and since public spaces are generally conducive to participation –be it active or passive– even when one is surrounded by strangers or a plurality of publics in those spaces (Kostoff, 1992, 1994; Gehl, 1987, 1996; Whyte, 1988; 1995), this participation could be described as being part of the positive experience, a sense of enjoying, which in Dewey's terms is one form of a Good. 'Participation itself becomes a Good' (Casparly, 2003: 509). However, 'As Dewey notes, it is not enough to be good; we need to be good for something' (Adair Breault, 2003: 197). This good in public spaces is embedded in facilitating and allowing for the acceptance and coexistence of differences, allowing for diversity, heterogeneity, and encounter (Watson, 2006). Bringing those aspects together, allows for reconciling with the idea or notion of sharing the space with strangers, and having the means to communicate about 'aesthetic experiences' in such spaces.

Within an urban context, providing for such experiences is one tool that could mitigate schisms, and divides caused by conflicts. It is a means based on values for honing social justice within urban life, and supporting or even building social networks. Ethically, suppliers of public space, be they public or private, then have the obligation to secure this right to conviviality and social justice. By securing such

rights, this experience in public spaces could become repetitive, and habitual, not for a selected group but for diverse groups, by allowing different habits to manifest themselves equally and simultaneously in those spaces. Habits in turn are related to ethics through customs, values, beliefs, and the right of personal choice or decision:

*'Habitual dispositions are the product of both socialisation into the customs of one's society, and the stable adoption of decisions first made through reflection'* (Caspary, 2003: 510).

This stable adoption collectively or by individuals refers to repetition or practice over time, and the building of memories depends to some extent on the situation of that individual or group, in the present context. This implies that habits are based on values, the understanding of rights and virtues, and their application over time. Note that to Dewey, rights are related to groups before individuals, and referred to common good and social welfare (Caspary, 2003: 510), which in turn support individual growth. Moreover, the role of habits is significant in shaping the present and influencing the future:

*'Our habits direct our attention, and our attention affects our present experience and the chances for success in the future experience.'* (Stroud, in press: 44)

Shared habits lead to acceptance, and the possibility of exploring and learning despite differences. Culturally, traditions and habits anchored in the past are used as benchmarks to direct present life (Bollens, 2012), and a common culture with its reference to the past could establish a shared basis to formulate memories, which are important in reconciling differences and supporting a convivial urban life at present. In reference to the built environment, and 'according to Dewey, architecture more than any form of art, expresses the values of our collective human life' (Adair Breault, 2003: 186). This collective human life refers to that of the public. Similar to architecture, public space aesthetics could be better understood:

*'even when the concern of design professionals are not with the public domain per se, they are invariably concerned with the construction of social space in ways that align ethical considerations with aesthetic ones.'* (Taylor and Levine, 2011: 45)

While architectural artefacts pertain to the public and the private domain, public spaces are inclusive, common, and shared by all; they form the tissue that binds architecture together. Ethics in public spaces is about the right, the just, the impartial in enabling the experiencing urban spaces, in a manner that leaves a mental impression of that experience, and eventually a shared memory of that experience. In contrast, 'ugliness indicates a distortion of human values' (Adair Breault, 2003:189), and hence is not accepted but rather dismissed or even forgotten. Ugliness in this sense disrupts, severs, and fragments.

## MEMORY AND PUBLIC SPACES

Returning to the question of a city's memory loss: how are urban social practices and their rhythms particularly altered when an anomaly, such as a war, disrupts these rhythms, turning the urban experience from polyrhythmic to arrhythmic (Lefebvre, 2004) where the priority for safety predominates? What replaces the memory of

these social practices and their rhythms? The use of the term memory within this research does not refer to a monolithic, and static mass of previously acquired knowledge:

*'Memory is understood in this context as "multiple, multivocal, and mutually conflicting" (Makdisi and Silverstein, 2006:11) (Larkin, 2012: 3)*

*Memory is 'subject to change and reconstruction over time, and intimately related to our sense of identity and present context' (Larkin, 2012: 12)*

Memories are transplanted, transferred, displaced and replaced in a process of embossing or forgetting experiences and practices that are not desirable within the framework of one or another construct (cultural, social, political, religious or other) (Larkin, 20015). Remembering and forgetting are two mutually present and interdependent processes. These memory dynamics take place in space, which is the container allowing for these transformations and transactions. Spaces provide the mnemonic tool for the images, narratives, and sensations preserved through memories.

*'Adults recall memories by thinking of associative spaces and places (de Certeau, 1990: 163). Human memory and identity are rooted in bodily experiences of being and moving in material space (Fried, 1963).'* (Hebbert, 2005: 581)

Everyday life rhythms also change over time, and in space, generating different memories, which are influenced both by the people in the spaces as well as the spaces themselves:

*'Human memory is spatial. The shaping of space is an instrument for the shaping of memory. A shared space such as a street can be a locus of collective memory in a double sense. It can express group identity from above, through architectural order, monuments and symbols, commemorative sites, street names, civic spaces, and historic conservation; and it can express the accumulation of memories from below, through the physical and associative traces left by interweaving patterns of everyday life.'* (Hebbert, 2005: 592)

In between the city and the social practices, habits persisting over time are imprinted in individual and collective memories, similar to sporadic experiences that could leave traces or scars. Memory is constructed over time, both individually and collectively, in which case it could also be influenced by the memory of other individuals, or eventually could be shaped as a collective memory. The question is whether public spaces could be supplied to provide for multiple, and changing memories:

*'Christine Boyer set out in The City of Collective Memory (1996) to discover the basis of a public realm for a fractured and pluralist society, one that allows "the play of oppositions, the existence of randomness, disturbances, dispersions and accidents"' (page 68).'* (Hebbert, 2005: 592)

Collective memory is formed within urban spaces and the experiences of their public, yet there are collective memories constructed by different social groups rather than one homogeneous collective memory referring to one mass (Larkin, 2012). In a context that has undergone disruption such as a war, it is essential to

address various generations, their memories, collective memories, but also post-memories. Here:

*'Postmemory forges both mnemonic bonds to the past through "imaginative investment, projection, and creation" and repressive binds within the present' (Larkin, 2012: 2) endangering the displacement of present time stories by histories. Postmemory is a form of memory that is 'not personally experienced but socially felt', a memory often used to affirm identities, traditions or even assert continuity (Larkin, 2012: 10).*

These memory forms could be used as a healing tool, if allowed to coexist, and if present-time activities are part of the everyday urban life of diverse yet coexisting groups, forming an amalgam to bond beyond past divides.

### **A GLIMPSE THROUGH TIME AT BEIRUT'S PUBLIC SPACES**

Having explored aesthetics, ethics and memory as a framework for studying the role of public spaces, this section presents Beirut's public spaces in three broadly defined periods: before the civil war, during the war, and after the war. The war as a reference period becomes the historical marker, which helps in the production of a past, pre-war context through lenses used in the present (Hutt, 2013: 30). This process is then a selective making and a specific finding of the past related to the public spaces (Hutt, 2013: 27) within a specific socio-political context, based in the present.

#### ***The Pre-War Public Spaces***

Excavating Beirut's past reveals that the public spaces were often 'associated with exogenous interventions' (Mady, 2012b: 36), starting for example with the currently visible traces of the Roman baths, or the street grid with its *Cardo* and *Decumanos* within Beirut, or formerly *Berytus*.

Beirut during the Ottoman period was subjected to operations of modernization following the example of Istanbul 'to reinforce the reign of the Empire' (Hanssen, 1998). During this period, *Sahat al Hamidiyah* (currently Martyrs Square), *Sahat al Sur* (currently *Riadh Solh Square*), the coastal *corniche* or seaside promenade, the *Sanayeh Park* and the *Serail* with its gardens were among the city's public spaces. Some spaces planned in the Ottoman period were further embellished and upgraded to reflect the European public lifestyle during the French mandate period, and others were newly established, adding onto the already existing palimpsest of Beirut. The café culture, voyeurism, and the habit of frequenting cinemas were thus abundantly introduced to form part of the urban everyday life. Equally, monumental architecture starting with the planning of the star-shaped *Etoile Square*, was introduced in preparation and in setting up the newly established independent Republic (Tabet, 1996). The role of streets was elevated from merely transportation corridors to pedestrian strolls, while street names mainly reflected the importance of the French mandate and its heroes.

As the emerging Republic put its hands on developing the newly born country of Lebanon, 'the public space factor was slowly diluted at the expense of private

development interests' (Salam, 1998 in Mady 2012b), which marked the beginning of a dense urban fabric with few open spaces, even before the outbreak of the war-time chaos.

### ***A Voyage into the Vacuum: War-Time Public Spaces***

A succinct summary of the state of public spaces during the war appears in the following:

*'During the 1975 war period, with the evacuation of the city centre, social and physical fragmentation along the Damascus Road demarcation line [starting and ending with two public spaces, Martyrs Square and the pine forest] came the annihilation of public spaces including major squares, and transportation hubs (Khalaf, 2002) and their conversion to militia spaces. This eradication caused a distortion in the sociocultural Beirutee framework and a huge gap in people's everyday public lives.'* (Mady, 2012b: 37)

Simultaneously, social and shared values were lost. Ruins, destruction, and ugliness reigned together with amnesia and forgetfulness. Also persisting anger, traumas and an aversion towards the now formulated 'other' accumulated. During the war, a sanitization of spaces, making them almost exclusively for one group with its slogans, signs, symbols, customs and beliefs, was another declaration of the death of public spaces, terminating the presence of tolerated diversity and announcing 'the end of the common world' (Arendt, 1958: 12 in Watson, 2006:11). Public spaces became ghosts to be avoided, they haunted people with the thoughts of fear, anxiety and feelings of unsafety and danger:

*'This is where they blind-folded him... this is where I ran carrying the computer...'* (from a personal interview on experiences of one woman who was in her late 40s in the early 1990s).

The quotation is from a woman who was crossing the National Museum demarcation line, with a neutral zone between the east and the west of Beirut. It signifies how even at present, the location refers to a traumatic war-time experience, which is difficult to forget, or its remembrance is rather avoided. The way people perceived the city 'was radically altered as the city turned into an "arena of conflict" ceasing to be everyone's domain' (Yahya, 1993: 129).

### ***Reintroducing Public Life: Post-War Public Spaces***

Post-war public spaces comprise the re-introduced existing spaces, a limited supply of new spaces, the spaces of consumerism, and some temporary spaces.

Once reconstruction started, there was the process of opening blocked roads as a first sign or stage of re-introducing public spaces, in this case the streets. Some pre-war monuments were restored such as the clock tower in the Etoile or the statue of Martyrs Square with the subtraction of the square itself, and statues of national figures were introduced into the city, along with the renaming of some streets by the names of Lebanese figures. The re-insertion of other public spaces such as parks and squares took longer, and was coupled with a high level of direct control mechanisms: limited opening times and permissible activities, security patrols, and



CCTVs or closure to the public as in the case of the pine forest. The Beirut pine forest is a gap in the minds of many people since it was sealed off and inaccessible for the duration of 40 years until 2015, and hence not present in their everyday lives. The Horsh finally and gradually reopened on 5 September 2015 on Saturdays, then weekends, and eventually on a continuous basis, following pressure by civil activists.

The post-war urban context was characterised by changes in the density of the urban fabric related to the loss of open spaces through the enclosure of some or defensive design of others as in the case of high security along specific streets (Németh, and Hollander, 2010); change in housing and commercial typologies related to real estate dynamics, security and control requirements in open spaces, but also disparities in economic and social classes.

*'The post-war efforts to rejoin the divided city and reinstate its public spaces were limited to unrealised intentions. Beirut's few public spaces struggled to regenerate or else changed their publicness according to their disposition in the city. In the city centre, urban planners in Solidere have emphasized their efforts to reintroduce public spaces at various urban scales Kabbani (1998) as the bonding agent for the war-torn population.'* (Mady, 2012b: 37)

Another type of spaces are the spaces of consumerism or global spaces that have lost their local identity such as the shopping mall, the street cafés, and chain shops, which became part of the urban landscape. Moreover, high security measures in shopping centres meant that they were also attractive to people, especially with festive settings in the indoor atria during celebrations.

In parallel to the neoliberal 'small aesthetics' of the mall came the sporadic and temporary public spaces spread across Beirut, which do not conform to the conventional, municipal definition of a public space. This other form post-war supply of public spaces includes those spaces popping out temporarily within Beirut's few vacant open spaces, where harmony, conviviality and nostalgia for the past materialise (Mady, 2012a, 2013). In addressing everyday needs, these spaces do not surrender to consumerism, even though mercantile activities are part of the social interactions in those spaces. Their purpose is the reinstatement of meeting place and a collective experience of the city (Mady, 2013).

The power of these temporary spaces lies in their ability to generate urban experiences of conviviality, familiarity, and the sense of sharing, experiences which became invisible during the war, with their everyday life simplicity (Mady, 2013) and 'heterogeneity' (Watson, 2006:13).

In conclusion, to this overview on Beirut's public spaces, it is important to distinguish between public spaces that are traces of the past, and those that are resultants of a vivid present, in an attempt to understand the aesthetic urban experience and its impact on future memory formations. The focus in the next section will be on those spaces, which are time-markers that are collecting and to a certain extent preserving and forwarding Beirut's collective memories, as constructed by different user groups and as defined earlier within the section on memory. This investigation on public spaces is an attempt to explore the extent to which it is possible to create or recreate a common and shared aesthetic everyday urban experience in Beirut's public spaces, knowing that a rift disrupted Beirut not only spatially, and socially but

also mentally. Beirut is one example of a divided city, which could inform other cases:

*'Polarized cities are inhabited by urban fault-lines that are physical markers or invisible lines, either way behaviour shaping and limiting.'* (Bollens, 2012: 16)

Could public spaces support the formation of an accepted, shared memory to consolidate across divides?

### RE-READING BEIRUT'S PUBLIC SPACES

How can the timeline of Beirut's public spaces, bench marked against the war's disruption, be explained within the framework of aesthetics, ethics and memory? A three stage dismantling of public spaces could be traced in Beirut. The first, trying to replace one set of customs with another imported one. The second, trying to erase the mnemonic tools and aesthetic experiences that lead to memories, limiting them to exclusive user groups, or promoting the ugly with its distorted values. Lastly, the third with its neglect for public spaces and the introduction of commodified spaces, which were nevertheless counterbalanced by bottom up attempts to revive and reclaim public spaces; hence, the interest in the opportunity for social reconciliation through the use of public spaces as a tool.

'Beirut Our Memory, An Illustrated Tour in the Old City from 1880 to 1930' (Debbas, 1986) is an illustrative title of a book compiled during the civil war period, reflecting a nostalgia for a city that had been, that tried to be, and that survived a brutal 15 years long war period. Peculiar about this book, and what some Lebanese refer to as *their memory of their capital city*, are specifically the periods characterised by foreign reign. These are the Ottoman period, and the French mandate period. I would refer to the foreign reign in these periods as positive externalities in relation to the introduction and import of public space models, namely the urban park (Sanayeh Garden, Jesuit Garden, and later the Sioufi Garden), the promenade (namely the Corniche), and the square for parades, manifestations, and leisure activities (in this case, the prime example is Martyrs Square, but also Riad el Solh, Debbas, Etoile, and others). The urban park (in some cases still referred to as a garden in Beirut: 'hadiqa' as opposed to 'muntazah'), and the square or the Arabic 'saha' were introduced during the Ottoman and French periods. Simultaneously, the profile of streets changed from the meandering medieval ones, to hygienic, modern, straight and ornamented streets in a movement of modernisation and sanitation, and the introduction of the vehicle and later the automobile. These spaces are reminiscent of those in the capital cities of their invaders (Yahya, 2004), be it Istanbul or Paris. As a negative externality, foreign reign caused a schism with the cultural heritage that was present in Beirut. The imported models of public spaces and their documentation, and their consequent records and memories slowly wiped out the endogenous forms of collective life and memories pertaining to them even before the civil war. The foreign imported models were considered 'better' than the local and familiar or popular ones (something that is still prominent in the present day Lebanese mentality). Even the old souq typology and commercial streets are gradually being replaced by shopping centres with the persisting power of private development over the public good. The foreign models led to imported lifestyles,

which affected food, drink, dress code as well as nomenclature of streets, shops and places. Memories of collective life in Beirut's spaces preceding the foreign reign were slowly wiped out, were not recorded or documented. Stories about life in the streets, at street intersections, or around 'sabeels' or water fountains, the stories of the 'hakawati', news transmitted in the alleys of the souqs or in front of mosques and churches, at the court or garden of a house and the 'majles' that took place are dispersed. It is difficult to obtain and formulate an understanding of these open spaces and their social practices. The parade, errand, cafés, and cinemas were introduced, while, shops, and souqs shrunk, already in the pre-war period.

During the war there was a total disruption of daily life that was shared all over the city: splintered identities dominated (Bollens, 2012). The un-aesthetic values of militia spaces were used to decide who belongs and who has access to a space or not, what is good or bad, based on the militia's ideology. There was an annihilation of public spaces and their replacement with militia spaces during the war, and those streets that remained accessible, were reduced to spaces for commuting, spaces reduced to streets for vehicles rather than having public spaces for communicating.

After the war, and as less public spaces were planned than in the reign of external authorities, more public-less spaces emerged, along with isolated monuments (Yahya, 2004), showcasing reconstruction in the centre that was devoid of the people. Within the reconstructed city centre, everything that did not pertain to a global and cosmopolitan image such as unsuitable small businesses including popular markets, 'Souq el Fashkha' and 'Souq el Bale' but also barber shops and small grocery shops were removed from the projections of the reinserted centre, wiping away the aesthetic experiences accompanying such ordinary activities (Yahya, 2004). Some remaining or re-instated spaces, the making-up (for example, a private company Azadea, remodelled Sanayeh Park, face lifting the neglected space, yes making it more exclusive) or enclosure (pine forest) thus contributed to forgetting the spaces. Martyrs Square was left as a void yet with sporadic demonstrations, which retrieved it from memory as a public space in contrast to highly controlled space, not only in the city centre but also beyond its premises (Shwayri, 2008).

One of the challenges for public space supply, at least within the reconstructed city centre after the war included '... creating public space that is not coloured by sectarian and religious hues' (Bollens, 2012: 190). Yahya (2004) states how Beirut's re-entry into the global network, with an image away from war and destruction, required repositioning its centre in a politico-ethnic free area (a difficult mission for Solidere<sup>2</sup> as mentioned by Bollens (2012)) that was detached from its past or present struggles and conflicts. Instead, economic concerns and the focus on consumerism reigned to provide this 'neutral' identity (Bollens, 2012).

At least in the city centre, the so called 'memory project' focused on the 'replacement and displacement' of the past, rather than facing or completely forgetting it (Yahya, 2004). This approach meant a new construct for a new population. It could be noted that an awakening about the role and right to public spaces emerged in 2005, 2006, and now in 2015 for the right to public space. However, markers of public life emerged in other open urban spaces, and recent

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<sup>2</sup> The acronym of the real estate company for the reconstruction and development of Beirut's historical centre.

collective social practices- particularly those related to national manifestations in 2005 and 2015 reclaiming public spaces, with the Lebanese identity at the core of these manifestations.

Public spaces become stages for performing contextual practices (Larkin, 2012), and collective memories generated in those spaces are based on history, affected by cultures, and transformed through time (Larkin, 2012). The question on memory, collective memory, and post memory resurfaces here: who has memories of the pre-war spaces? Understanding what these spaces mean for different age cohorts, and what memories they might have of those spaces, might inform us about what memories as opposed to public space experiences are present. The generation born in 1925 and if alive, are currently in their 90s, and they hold memories of Beirut's remaining public spaces before the interventions of foreign forces. Those who are now in the retirement age (born in 1945 to 1955) have witnessed transformations to public spaces during the period of the republic. Part of this generation witnessed the outbreak of the civil war, and could have probably participated in it. Their memories of public spaces include an eradication and creation of no-man's land. Their memories include the beginning of schisms across the Lebanese society, which is sometimes transmitted to the younger generations. The 40 years age cohort is the war-time generation. They do not recall public spaces, as these were already absent. They rather feed their 'memory' on nostalgia of the past transmitted to them through older generations. The 20 year age cohort is already the post-war generation, which has grown up using the post-war public spaces, or not knowing those that have been enclosed. Finally, the generation born after 2005 have witnessed attempts at reclaiming public spaces, and are brought up with an awareness regarding their right to the city. One can now refer to a memory palimpsest of Beirut's public spaces, with the presence of the various age groups.

This wave or sequence of states of public spaces would of course affect the memory of such spaces. An example is presented by Saliba (1997) using mind maps of population and memory gap of the downtown area. A similar case exists for the pine forest, Sanayeh with the image of a garden for the outcast, while the Corniche remaining in memory as it is linked to the sea, rather than the city and its fabric around it. According to Larkin (2012: 2) young Lebanese people are 'caught between the contradictory forces of collective memory and social forgetting'. They are trapped in a 'moral obligation' to fear remembering, and its awakening of past evils, and hence are gradually detaching from the 'past'. Even postmemory in the Lebanese case 'is produced and reconstructed, erased and subverted, transformed and transmitted, to fit shifting social contexts, political circumstances, spatial boundaries and personal experiences' (Larkin, 2012: 2).

What is one aim to be achieved through the public spaces after the war? One would be to allow for an aesthetic experience for different users and accommodate various memories of spaces that could help heal splintered identities, acknowledging the co-presence of differences, reassemble fragments and stitch across divides. For example, an attempt should be done to dismantle the contrast of east-west, or 'sharqiye-gharbiye', which has also expanded to include, the southern suburbs versus the administrative capital boundaries or the northern suburbs.

## CONCLUSION

This paper sets the scene for revisiting Beirut's few public spaces, be they conventional in design and definition or unconventional in their temporariness, and the opportunities they offer towards a reconciliation in a war-torn society. It hence raises questions rather than provides answers, and focuses on collective memory and 'post-memory' (Hirsch, 2008; Larkin, 2015) in the state of post-war reconstruction. The paper capitalizes on public spaces as vessels of social practices and associated meanings, but also shows that these spaces are equally formed by these practices, meanings and past memories, which could in turn offer future opportunities.

Some of the limitations of this research include further research on the role of memory in its various and diverse forms within life in public spaces in Beirut not only through the physical space as a mnemonic tool, but also through the tools of the narrative, songs, documentation and so on. Also, further scrutinising the post-war supply of public spaces and their distribution across the city could inform this research. In addition, ethnographic investigation of post-war everyday lifestyles and social practices outside the realms of the home and work place and in different parts of Beirut could inform this exploration on the potentials of public spaces for social integration. In the absence of sufficiently provided accessible open public spaces, which could provide for the aesthetic experience, the 'small aesthetics' of the synthetic experience within malls and commodified spaces stands a high chance of formulating part of the new public memory in Beirut.

There is no denial that consumerism spaces have become part of the aesthetic experience of the present time population in Beirut. If this aesthetic persists, which is tied to consumerism rather than an identity linked to a place and a sense of belonging to it, then the commodified might eventually replace the 'public' open space, and lead to a further segregation along economic divides, and lifestyle preferences and loss of a sense of belonging or even a common Lebanese identity. The relation of identity and memory becomes another open question merely highlighted in this research on public spaces.

This paper argues that the social practices rather than the physical spaces matter at present, and give meaning, which in turn generates memory, as well as interest in the space and a feeling of enjoyment, in this case referred to as aesthetic experience of the space.

Despite this bleak image of the state of public spaces in Beirut, which is based on the domination of the consumer spaces and the neglect of municipal open spaces, there remains hope for the 'resurrection' of public spaces, namely through the endeavours of activists, and the efforts of public spaces entrepreneurs, and their supply of temporary public spaces (Mady, 2012a). These spaces work on reviving social practices, reinstating daily life rhythms, and in turn generating urban, collective habits. These spaces offer 'the possibility of social transformation, of a process of public learning that results in permanent shifts in values and institutions', and hence the ethics (Sandercock, 2004: 139). In addition to the social and entrepreneurial layer, another layer is required for these spaces to succeed in their re-emergence. This is the layer of memory and more so collective memory.

Sandercock gives examples of cities that were revived through employing memory: 'there are many interesting examples of the need to deal with memory in order for reconciliation, healing, or social transformation to occur' (Sandercock, 2004: 140). Furthermore, Sandercock states that other operations or catalysts are then required: community mobilisation, fighting discrimination, and the spatial implementation of a program that bridges divides through telling past stories (Sandercock, 2004). Therefore, the right processes should be available for a 'healing process' to occur, and it does not suffice to reconstruct the physical urban fabric. This fabric should simultaneously be impregnated with encounter, sharing and collective memory (Hebbert, 2005).

Finally, the balance between memory, forgetting, collective and post memory is a very sensitive one. There is a fine line between 'the pleasure and displeasure of association and connection' (Watson, 2006: 19), and it could revolve around the possibility of enabling palpable, real time aesthetic experiences in Beirut's current open spaces, rather than nurturing imaginary, war-generated divides.

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