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CONTESTING REALITY IN BEIRUT

Meriam Soltan

Narratives fabricated to promote the legitimacy of the Beirut Digital District mask a reality of hostile, exclusionary spatial strategies. This contention between vision and lived reality is explored through an understanding of the built environment as a product of fictions actively working to reformulate life across the city.

A nationwide outcry against corruption in Lebanon sent thousands to the streets to protest in October 2019. With the government's failure to properly manage various environmental and economic crises, the average citizen is challenged by an unforgiving political climate that continues to manifest largely inhospitable living conditions. The right to a fair wage, rent law reform, reliable water and electricity distribution as well as reasonable loans policies are among the numerous demands driving these protests. This sudden defiance can be arguably attributed to a recognition and rejection of the sectarian constructs that have constrained political and economic activity in the country for decades. A collective desire to challenge the status quo has encouraged the conditions necessary for the contestation of the present reality enforced by those in control.

Such contestation becomes relevant to design when it recognizes the agency of dwellers as creators of the urban. Relationships can be drawn between the people and the constructs meant to govern them to highlight the real and lasting agency that continues to be exercised by locals negotiating life within the contexts of inherently corrupt power structures. Aggressive corporate and state-led planning and policy can arguably become the basis for explorations tracing the tenacity of inhabitants in their everyday navigations of the system.

The Beirut Digital District (BDD) and its forceful reconfiguration of one of the city's oldest neighborhoods, Bachoura, is one such development through which such instances of resiliency might be traced. The aggressive nature of the development is justified through narratives of technological innovation and heritage-based nostalgia that work to frame Bachoura as a dilapidated, underperforming urban center urgently in need of revival. Marketed as



A Protestors passing by Bachoura on their way to Martyr's Square. Photography: Meriam Soltan, 2019
 C Proposal for rehabilitation of apartments along Tyane Street. Collage: Meriam Soltan, 2019

B Sandwiched between two mid-rise towers, the Saint George Church on Tyane Street is dwarfed in both size and scale. Photography: Meriam Soltan, 2019

an extension of postwar reconstruction efforts and an answer to Beirut's «brain drain», BDD projects a narrative of growth and inclusivity very different than the reality of social and economic disparity it perpetuates across the neighborhood. With entire blocks acquired, demolished, and consolidated into massive plots of land capable of hosting the entirety of BDD's proposed masterplan, the vernacular urban fabric of the neighborhood is challenged by the lucrative nature of a project completely alien to the working-class context within which it has situated itself. Parking lots, concrete blocks, and security infrastructure challenge a strong history of social interaction at street level by restricting pedestrian activity, while courtyards and public green space monitored by security personnel create an overwhelming sense of exclusivity both within and around the development.

The progressiveness and inclusivity promoted by BDD is thus arguably at odds with the reality of gentrification promoted by a largely exclusionary spatial strategy. This contradiction is made most clear across the six-meter wide divide that is Tyane Street. Acting as the border between these two communities, the street materializes mounting tensions by juxtaposing towering BDD construction with a low row of abandoned apartment blocks that now serve as the debilitated outermost edge of Bachoura. Tyane Street is an exceptionally concentrated manifestation of inequality and is telling of the extreme socio-economic disparity that has long since strained the nation. The new developments have inevitably caused the displacement of many working-class families due to skyrocketing rent, perpetuating the conditions necessary for any future acquisition of land by BDD. It is this very contention between vision and lived reality that emphasizes the necessity of understanding narrative as a legitimate means of analysis and design.

BDD has shown that fictions can actively shape the nature of the built environment and—through the social constructs they perpetuate—both engender and enforce tangible change. In recognizing the ability of narrative to facilitate spatial aggression, it thus becomes imperative to identify instances in which it can be employed in resistance. While protest can mobilize the masses against the state in defiance of the present circumstances, it can also be understood in the subtle resiliency exercised by those who have learned to live within and beyond the system. Therein lie the counter-narratives manifested by dwellers in defiance of injustice. Recognizing this agency can allow for reality to be reprogrammed in favor of conditions other to those that have long since been rationalized, formalized, and institutionalized by the state.

Exploring reality as a series of fictions—of fabricated constructs—is thus key to understanding the people as creators—as agents and makers of their own circumstances. By encouraging a reading of reality—of the environment as it presently exists—not as a series of absolutes but as actively constructed, fabricated, and performed variables, the possibility for change is both suggested and recognized.

► Meriam Soltan, born 1995, has recently obtained her Bachelor of Architecture from The American University of Beirut. She is interested in the intersections of language, design, and worldbuilding. She works to explore the relevance of narrative to architecture, and how, as a tool, it is manifested in various contexts politically, culturally, and otherwise. In doing so, she hopes to better understand how various lived realities are fabricated, and how the parameters defining these stories might in turn be challenged.

