The Neighborhood – Beirut´s architecture after the explosion

Usually you don't get goosebumps while reading a business-like article in the broadsheets. But this one is different: „**The Neighborhood**: as reconstructions start, architects, urban planners and residents are exploring a fully new city".[1] The author begins by summarizing the current situation in the **capital of Lebanon** after the deadly explosion three months ago on August 4th, 2020 which left more than 200 people dead, 6,500 injured and over 300,000 homeless. She then goes on to describe in quite touching detail how the Lebanese are showing an **incredible willingness and power to rebuild their city** on their own against all odds in a very short amount of time.

Already some of the local shops and restaurants have reopened and all day long you can hear the familiar noises of buildings being reconstructed in damaged Beirut. This is even more impressive when we take into consideration the enormous challenges the people face due to the current COVID pandemic and the already weak economy in Lebanon.

With this essay I want to underline from a sociological point of view the – probably never expected – positive side effects of the horrible catastrophe to local architecture and urban planning. Beirut's old nickname is „Paris of the Middle East" as you can find a lot of beautiful old houses with a French touch, which were built during the French Mandate after WWI. They are in good companionship with even older residences dated back to the Ottoman Empire that are charming with their traditional eastern style.

A lot of this cultural heritage is now **damaged beyond retrieval**.

What you **would usually expect** to happen after such an event is that a lot of foreign investors would flock to the growing and dynamic metropolis who are eager to make a great deal of money by rebuilding houses and districts as soon as possible and as cheap as possible. And such a process would normally lead to **gentrification** (here: when poor people within a district are replaced by wealthier ones) and probably the loss of „the old friendly face" of Beirut, as the damaged neighborhoods with their local old workshops and nice design studios were once called.

Well interestingly enough – and not only for Sociologists – the situation in Beirut is different. **„We will never leave, we will rebuild"** is the slogan of the locals' reaction to the catastrophe. Despite their misery, the locals show endogenous economic and personal power. Actually, it seems they are a prime example of agglomeration theories, namely how creativity and innovative capacity can emerge from a high urban density (with an estimated population of 470,000 people within only 85 square kilometers, Beirut is definitely packed). And they are supported by the – financially nearly ruined and reputationally more than stricken – Libanese government, who rapidly announced a new law to protect the inhabitants. It also includes financial support for the local rebuilding.

The question I ask myself is: **why are the Lebanese so successful in opposing international investors – while in most big cities of the world inhabitants aren't?** Where does their strength come from?

Doing my sociological research I found three key points that helped to answer my questions, yet in full awareness that these findings definitely make no claim to be complete:

· **THE YES-WE-CAN MIND-SET:** analysing both local newspaper articles and interviews with local experts, I found that they were all underscoring how „Beirut's soul is its people". They call the current reconstructions a „people-centered recovery". As most Lebanese are hesitant to rely on the government due to bad past experiences, the home owners of the blasted districts in Beirut took it on themselves to start rebuilding on their own. One reason for this mind-set might be the history of the Libanon, dated back to the first century B.C., when the Phonecians founded the city. This still is an important aspect of differentation to the Arabian world until today. Also, the Libanon has always been a haven for refugees of different cultures and religions. Up to now each ethnic group shows special solidarity, which may be crucial in the beginnings.

· **COMMUNITY-SAVING NEIGHBORING:** upon a deeper and more diverse look at Beirut's affected districts shows that there is an extraordinary solidarity within these communities, despite their different backgrounds. For example, the two districts Mar Mikhael and Karentina, which surround the port and epicenter, can serve as case studies for bottom-up recovery processes. Other deeply affected

middle-class neighborhoods in contrast have faced aggressive speculative property investments in the past years, so that the inhabitants here show less self-sufficiency, as this was ineffective before.

(**Something that struck me as interesting here**: in sociology we typically assume that Third Places (planned buildings especially intended for social interactions) are crucial in creating and fostering a community feeling in neighborhoods. As a matter of fact, in Beirut there are actually very little examples of such common ground Third Places. It is instead quite typical for the locals to meet casually in small courtyards or front yards, stairwells and on highly crowded pedestrians walkways, to sit together and chit-chat on rickety lawn chairs made of plastics (which are sometimes affectionately called the „park benches of the Middle East"). You can only imagine that these informal places also act as discussion points fuelling the current rebuilding.)

· **LOCAL-NGO-SUPPORT:** to transfer local rebuilding processes in a more wider urban planning context a lot of local NGOs have turned up. The already established „Beirut Urban Lab" for example has created the first map of Municipale Beirut as a platform of shared geolocalized information to coordinate and monitor damage assessments and recovery efforts. This is now heavenly used after the explosion in Summer 2020. They also organize community-based workshops, where inhabitants and owners can directly interact with local experts such as architects. Another example is the long-established NGO „Arab Center for architecture". Their members have a deep expertise in local architecture and urban planning. Currently a lot of these experts are roaming through the streets of Beirut looking for buildings worth protecting.

And so here is the positive side effect of the disaster to local architecture: not only the historic Osmanic and the French buildings are now in the focus, but **also modern cultural heritage as wells**. As a matter of fact, 80% of Beirut's houses come from this period. For instance, the head office of the governmental electricity supplier „Electricité du Liban in Beirut", built in 1965-1972 by Neema et. is now a listed building. On top of this, the house with the first ever Schindler (electronic) elevator in Beirut has also been chosen to soon become protected. Back in the 1950s it was an attraction and people from all over the country came to see it.

Another positive outcome is that the buildings that are worth protecting are no longer viewed as stand-alone examples of architecture, but within the **broader context of their surroundings**. For example, urban planners are currently looking for buildings that tell a similar story as the Schindler elevator and are primarily searching in neighborhoods in more undeveloped areas or big parking slots. With this strategy, Beirut wants to preserve not only a single building, but also a whole neighborhood against speculative financial investments.

Obviously, there are a lot more other influencing factors which also lead to a lot more positive side effects. Building reconstructions is expensive. Building reconstructions of whole districts is even more expensive. As a result, local NGOs are working together with **international institutions and organisations**, such as UNESCO. They in turn provide support through both money and expertise. Also the close interactions of architects, urban planners and sociologists with local inhabitants and owners are key. Due to their own and their family history, the latter have a deep knowledge of Beirut's buildings deserving protection.

They all seem to have one short-term goal: that the government establishes an urban **„Masterplan" for Beirut** as soon and as detailed as possible. Until then the locals and the experts work closely together to rebuild the city and to protect the cultural heritage. To me, this is incredibly admirable (and worth learning from).

For further reading:

Al-Hamarne, A. et (ed.).: Neoliberal urbanism – urban development processes in the Arabic world. Edited volume, published in German, also including articles in english], 2019.

Al-Harity, H. et.: Initiatives in Response to the Beirut Blast
https://www.beiruturbanlab.com/en/Details/680, 22.11.2020.

Arbit, G.: Modern architecture in Lebanon as part of our cultural heritage – Part I
URL: https://blfheadquarters.com/2018/02/20/modern-architecture-lebanon-part-cultural-heritage/ , 16.11.2020.

Fawaz, M.: „A People-Centered Recovery",
https://www.beiruturbanlab.com/en/Details/661, 15.08.2020.

Hahn, J.: BIG, Tatiana Bilbao and Norman Foster donate drawings to Architects for Beirut charity auction
https://www.dezeen.com/2020/11/02/architects-for-beirut-big-tatiana-bilbao-norman-foster/, 02.11.2020.

Krätke, J. et. (ed.): Transnationalism and Urbanism, 2014

Pintos, P.: Stone Garden Apartment Building / Lina Ghotmeh Architecture
https://www.archdaily.com/950128/stone-garden-apartment-building-lina-ghotmeh-architecture, 22.11.2020

Rustom, J: The white gazebos of Beirut]
https://www.bauhauskooperation.com/kooperation/project-archive/magazine/follow-the-bauhaus-into-the-world/the-white-pavilions-of-interwar-beirut/, 2017, 22.11.2020.