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Ruination and the Affective Presence of the Past in relation to the Beit Beirut in Lebanon

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Abstract

The following short article is based on fieldnotes I took during my dissertation fieldwork in Beirut, Lebanon. It focuses on Beit Beirut, a building used by snipers during the height of the Lebanese Civil War, that has now been repurposed as a museum and symbol of remembrance. The essay highlights that this renovated building, which purposefully still bears the scars of war on its walls, results in a tension between moving forward whilst making sure future generations remember the past. This is made all the more uncomfortable as for some this is a reminder of a past that is impossible to forget.

Keywords: Beirut, Ruination, Memory

I was going home from work in a 'service' (a Lebanese share taxi) and was talking to the driver. Bursting with pride, he was telling me that his daughter had just started primary school and that every morning he looked forward to dropping her off at school before his day as a service driver started. We had stopped at the red light of a junction on the corner of which was a big building, seemingly crumbling - its off-white walls riddled with bullet holes - yet visibly restored with modern double-glazed grey windows, and grey pillars and beams holding the structure up. I had often driven past it and been puzzled by this juxtaposition. Waiting for the light to change, I asked him what it was. "That?" he asked, tutting quietly whilst shaking his head and creasing his

eyebrows, "It's Beit [house] Beirut". I waited a bit, expecting him to go on. In a slightly sarcastic tone he said, "It is a symbol of Lebanon's past!". "Ohhh" I replied somewhat surprised. "A big company from France rebuilt it, to keep it looking like this" he said, waving his hand at the building, his face turning into a scowl. I asked him what he thought of this project. "You think they would like this? If I come to their country and I make a building like this, about their war with all the bullet holes still in it, and say it is for a symbol, for remembering, you think they like this?" he asked. "No, I don't think they would" I replied. He turned his head to look at me and said, "So why do they think it is different for us? We are all the same. Everywhere… We can never forget the war". The lights had turned green and we drove off.

This conversation is an extract of the fieldnotes I kept during my dissertation fieldwork in Lebanon. Whilst I do not wish to present this *service* driver's view of Beit Beirut as representative of all Lebanese people's opinions of this building, it is a helpful way of problematising the way ruins and ruination are used as a way of remembering and reminding people of the past. This essay explores the way in which Beit Beirut, an object of 'ruination', repurposed as a museum and monument of remembrance, highlights the complexity of bringing the past to the present. The first half of the paper focuses on why this remembering is seen as necessary by some, touching on the notion of 'collective memory' (Sontag, 2003: 85), but how on the other hand, this remembering may cause harm to others who are thereby forced to remember events that are indelible. In the second half of the paper, I argue that Beit Beirut is both a 'lieux [and] milieux de mémoire' (Nora 1989: 7) in itself and within wider Beirut, thereby reducing the effectiveness of the symbol of remembrance.

Beit Beirut (see photo 1), also known as the 'Barakat Building' after the family who owned it, was built in 1924 (The Economist, 2017; Beitbeirut.org, 2018). During the Lebanese Civil war - starting in 1975 and lasting 15 years (Najem, 2012: 34) - it became 'a forward control post and sniper base' (Beitbeirut.org, 2018). The intersection it is on used to be known as the 'intersection of death' (The Economist, 2017). In 2003, the building was 'expropriated by the Beirut municipality [...] and renovated with over $18m of public funds' (ibid., 2017). It now stands as a museum, a 'living cultural centre' (Beitbeirut.org, 2018), and a symbol of 'remembrance and reconciliation' for Lebanon's civil war (Loveluck & Haidamous, 2018).

Photo 1 of "Beit Beirut" by Sanchez (2018) for the Washington Post (Loveluck & Haidamous, 2018).

Whilst this building could not be considered an 'authentic ruin' in Huyssen's (2010) definition of the term, as it is a relatively recent structure that has been substantially renovated. It does, however, fit Naravo-Yashin's (2009) 'ruination'. She defines this as 'the material remains or artefacts of destruction and violation, [and] the subjectivities and residual affects that linger

[...], in the aftermath of war and violence' (ibid.: 5). The architect who oversaw the renovations to Beit Beirut explains that the installations within the museum are not needed to make people notice, feel, and remember, as 'the collection is the building. [...] Look at the monstrousness of what we did. Look at the war. [Its] traces are there' (The Economist, 2017). We can see that Beit Beirut is itself a remnant of the war and violence, which generates affect in passers-by, as was clear from my conversation with the *service* driver.

Valorising, and displaying this ruination reinforces the 'commemorative function of the monument: made to enshrine the knowledge of the cultural past for the sake of future generations' (Kuchler, 1993: 53). This perceived need to preserve or bring to present the past, 'for the sake of future generations', implies that there is a tendency to forget the past and that efforts need to be made to stop this from happening. This need was expressed by a passer-by interviewed about Beit Beirut, 'the Lebanese need to see this every day, because they need to remember what they did' (Loveluck & Haidamous, 2018). Zena El-Khalil, one of the curators at Beit Beirut, explained that 'when the civil war ended, we went back to life as quickly as possible and now, 20 years later, we have a dysfunctional community. A lack of apology has created a lack of respect' (in Rose, 2017). From this perspective, the effort to bring the past to the present is, therefore, not simply an effort to remind people and future generations of the past, but also a way of processing and coping as a society. This process attempts to generate a 'collective memory', not in 'remembering but [in] stipulating that this is important' (Sontag, 2003: 85-6, qtd. In Assman, 2008: 59) and should be remembered. However, attaching 'memory' to sites of 'shared narratives of the past' (Bourke, 2004: 473) is highly problematic as 'individuals "remember", "repress", "forget" and "are traumatized", not societies' (ibid.: 473). This is furthered when considering that 'ruins are not found, they are made' (Abu El-Haj, 2005, qtd. in Stoler, 2008: 201). Therefore, sites such as these, whilst important in 're-

examin[ing] and recast[ing]' some people's relationships with the past (DeSilvey & Edensor, 2012: 471) thereby influencing their present and future, may to others simply be 'painful reminders of loss' (ibid.: 468). A loss that, from the perspective of the *service* driver, can never be forgotten anyway.

With this in mind, I suggest that Beirut itself is in many ways a 'milieux de mémoire' (Nora, 1989: 7). Nora explains that there are 'lieux de mémoire, sites of memory, because there are no longer milieux de mémoire, real environments of memory'. However, walking around the downtown and outskirts of Beirut, the visual impact of war is clear to see. Be it in the high number of seemingly abandoned and damaged buildings peppered with bullet holes, or the vacant stores and empty streets in the high-end downtown (Naylor, 2015), all of these are reminders of the impact of the civil war both on the economy and the architecture - thereby forming a 'milieux de mémoire'. Within this context, Beit Beirut can be both a 'lieux' and 'milieux de mémoire'. The exterior of the building, renovated so as to stay standing and functional yet not to the point that the impact of war has been erased from view, is there for all passers-by to see and is an example of a 'moment[...] of history torn away from the movement of history' (Nora, 1989: 12) - a 'lieux de mémoire'. As a 'symbol of remembrance and reconciliation' it is a 'freezing' of temporality designed to make people feel and reflect about the past in the present and for the future. Yet, as this is visible to all, this also results in it being part of Beirut's wider 'milieux de mémoire'. On the other hand, its inside, a 'living cultural centre', is designed as a space where people are brought to reflect on this war, thereby making that space a 'milieux de mémoire'. However, not all passers-by would be inclined to enter this 'milieux de memoire' and therefore I suggest that having this building designed to be 'symbols of remembrance and reconciliation' may have a hollow echo in city that already reminds its inhabitants of events that cannot be forgotten in the first place.

In conclusion, this essay has argued that whilst the past is crucial to remember, creating a symbol of remembrance from an object of ruination, it is problematic as it can unnecessarily reinforce the pain this past holds. When this loss is already visible in day to day life, a demarcated site consecrated to symbolising this might ring hollow.

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