

INTRODUCTION

Crisis can be defined as a worsening set of conditions, immediate or foreseen, with various scales of physical or perceived impact. It can be a large uncontrollable force of nature (e.g. earthquakes, floods), a hybrid of natural force and human action (e.g. fires), or a deliberate human will (e.g. conquering armies, aerial bombardment, terrorist strikes). Confronting crisis, resilience is the ability to react, recover, and resist. Human beings can achieve normal equilibrium when threatened by adverse circumstances through a set of coping psychological mechanisms. In a parallel manner, buildings can also be resurrected in the wake of abandonment and ruin. An analogy can be drawn between psychological mechanisms of recovery and architectural strategies dealing with devastated environments.

In 1975 a sectarian civil war erupted in Lebanon to end 15 years later. The city of Beirut was the most affected by this crisis, with hundreds of thousands of people dead and many neighborhoods brought to ruin. Today, only a few punctured buildings bearing the scars of war remain standing. This makes the reconstruction process seem successful at first blush, but in fact it only outwardly erased and embellished the scars, and left the Lebanese society deeply fractured. The fifteen-year internal conflict was a brutal war that resulted in a collective trauma leading the Lebanese to question their national identity. Confronting this post-traumatic calamity, and reminded most recently by the fighting in the northern city Tripoli at the Syrian borders, Lebanese today still need to endorse their resilience.

HUMAN PSYCHOLOGY

In his article *Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience*, George Bonanno defined resilience as the ability to maintain a state of normal equilibrium in the face of extremely adverse circumstances. He proclaims that the pathway to resilience would be by understanding the determinants of the traumatic memory. The deeper the understanding, the healthier the remembrance, the more resilience is enhanced. He suggested various schemes to achieve such an outcome, which included coping strategies and attitudes that show insight, initiative, optimism, creativity and even humor.¹

Contrastively, some people express nostalgia vis-à-vis a traumatic situation. Nostalgia is a powerful emotion—So powerful it can blind one from objectively reflecting on the past. Andrew Beckerman wrote in the review of the film *Nostalgia for the light*, “Nostalgia essentially derives its force from a false remembrance of history. Nostalgia, the longing to return home, is never about a real home, but an idealized one, flushed of the nuances”.² It is a painful melancholic feeling that keeps a person dreaming of a glorified past that (might) have existed one day. Nostalgia in the face of trauma is thus a disruption to the

¹ Bonanno, G.A. Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: have we underestimated the human capacity to thrive after extremely aversive events? *American Journal of Psychology*; 59, 2004. P.20-28

² Andrew Beckerman to Film-Forward Review online forum, March 18, 2011, Nostalgia for the light, <http://film-forward.com/nostalgia.html>

process of understanding its determinants, and henceforth a disruption to resilience.

People can also experience amnesia facing psychological trauma. By definition, it is a deficit in memory caused by brain damage, disease, or also psychological trauma. By the same token, it interferes with the ability to grasp the traumatic experience, and in its turn deranges the process of resilience.

ARCHITECTURE AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALOGY

Back to the context of the built environment, Thomas J. Campanella argues that “any study of the city in history will reveal that human settlements possess an essential ability to resurrect themselves in the wake of devastation”.³ Buildings are traces of the past, and a doorway to understanding history, traumatic history before all else; they can, but more so, should be saved and reused after they have been led to decay. This is where an analogy needs to be drawn between architecture and the above mentioned psychological explanation of trauma and mechanisms of recovery; Adaptive Reuse⁴ of buildings can thus be viewed and should be considered as the architectural pathway to the resilience of cities that have been impacted by crisis, such as in Beirut’s case, by ravaging war. Nostalgia too has an analogous strategy in architecture. It is the restorative attempt that draws upon past images through different remaking tactics that “preserve” a desired form and function. Similarly, amnesia would be the oblivious demolition of buildings to build anew.

BEIT BEIRUT & POST WAR RECONSTRUCTION

Drawing from the above analogy, national resilience of the Lebanese may be attainable through architecture, and in particular through the Adaptive Reuse strategy that saves buildings from amnesiac demolition and nostalgic restoration.

When war came to rest in 1990 the Lebanese community seemed to have a consensual agreement to immediately begin reconstruction, while the governmental body of the state of Lebanon itself needed restructuring. Consequently, private real estate companies were created and entrusted with the implementation of reconstruction works, the promotion, marketing, and sale of properties to individuals or developers.⁵ This implied that the role of the government as a civic body was negligible in the reconstruction process and the decision-making was very often in the hands of private developers, whose priorities were “to construct modern structures that would compete in the global

³ Thomas Campanella, "September 11th and the City," The Resilient City (blog), http://web.mit.edu/dusp/resilientcity/second_level/Topics.html.

⁴ Adaptive Reuse is defined by the Rhode Island School of Design’s Department of Interior Architecture journal Int/AR as the field that “includes the reuse of existing structures and materials, transformative interventions, continuation of cultural phenomena, connections across the fabric of time and space, and preservation of memory”

⁵ Salam, Assem, 'The Role of Government in Shaping the Built Environment'. In *Projecting Beirut: Episodes in the Construction and Reconstruction of a Modern City*, ed. Peter Rowe and Hashim Sarkis (Munich, London and New York: Prestel 1998), pp. 131.

markets”⁶ and maximize their profits. Heated debates would occasionally stir between those developers and property owners, intellectuals, historians, social scientists, urban planners and architects, strong believers that buildings hold a powerful societal character. As a result, few buildings were sporadically selected to be preserved for their “historical values”, but numerous other sites were erased with the promise to rebuild while remaining faithful to the urban fabric.⁷ Unfortunately most of the time it ended up being either pure facadism extending from what used to exist, or entirely new and alien to context. The preservation process, when it happened, was questionable as it failed to ensure continuity of character, reconciliation, and resilience. Hashim Sarkis brings the reasons behind that to the war itself; while in the 1970s other cities were busy discussing how preservation strategies could address the intangible social dimensions, Beirut, Lebanon, was plunged and busy with its internal war.⁸

Of the many nostalgic restorations, the Artisan’s House is one and not exclusive example of how often structures were superficially remodeled to fit what reveal “traditional Lebanese character” of the far past, ignoring an entire era of pre-war trendsetting and innovative local modernism.

As for the equally numerous amnesiac demolitions, the Carlton Hotel, an architectural asset of the 1950s modernism heydays, constitutes one of the most famous victims. In 2008, a real estate Lebanese company – launched a competition to replace the Carlton with a high-end residential program. In the promotion for his “perfect on every level” high-end residential, the developer calls back the successful days of the Carlton.⁹ However, the decision was made to demolish the building and replace it with a high-rise “modern” tower despite the many adaptive reuse schemes that were presented.

Failing to conform to this nostalgic and amnesiac trend of reconstruction that prevailed post war, Beit Beirut is one of the few examples of a conscious preservation. It not only saves a demarcation line heritage building from destruction, but also retrofits its program and design to include a war memorial program that will help the Lebanese face and reconcile their painful past.

⁶ Aseel Sawalha, *Reconstruction Beirut: Memory and Space in a Postwar Arab City*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 48.

⁷ Assem Salam, ‘The Role of Government in Shaping the Built Environment’, *Projecting Beirut: Episodes in the Construction and Reconstruction of a Modern City* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel, 1998), p. 132.

⁸ Sarkis, Hashim, "Beirut, Beirut", "The Resilient City Colloquium, Lecture, Web,

⁹ <http://www.jamilibrahim.com.lb/current.php> : “The 5-star Carlton hotel was once the most illustrious landmark and celebrity hot spot of the region. Host to countless upscale events, it became home to affluent dignitaries and the crème de la crème. International media magnates such as royal families, political figures and movie stars partook in glorious festivities and ambiance that the hotel had to offer. As a tribute to a nostalgic era and a vision towards the new rise of excellence, Jamil Ibrahim Est. offers luxury seeking patrons the opportunity to live in one of Beirut’s historical backdrops.”

Beit¹⁰ Beirut, previously known as Beit Barakat, is one of Beirut's most beautiful yellow sandstone buildings¹¹ in the city. Its importance comes from its clever architecture and its crucial location at the intersection of Independence Street (Elias Sarkis Avenue) and Damascus Road, where the demarcation line dividing the city into two camps existed back in the days of war. It was built to be the residence of the Barakat family by architects Youssef Aftimos and Fouad Kozah in 1924, and 1932, so to be an example of the transition between early sandstone building techniques and later building trends that came with the introduction of concrete as a building material.¹² Back in that period when most buildings at the corner filled the corner space with the main living room, or salon, as the most important piece, one of the most important architectural features in Beit Barakat was the central void at the corner of the intersection. This void brought light to the interior and cleverly allowed every other room of the house transparency and visual connection with the streets of the city.

Unfortunately, militiamen knew how to benefit from this mastermind architecture, and turned the building into a war machine in 1975. To them, it was the perfect location for a sniper's hideout. The magnificent visual axis that was intended to achieve visual transparency within the building became a line of death through which snipers aimed at people. Room after room they built their barricades of stacked sand and concrete walls, with rectangular openings ending in a funnel-shape to shoot from. It allowed them to sit in the back room and kill people far away on the streets, while they were safe, concealed inside. With its bullet-riddled facades, this building became a symbol of the civil war to many Lebanese.

In 1997, architect and preservation activist Mona Hallak succeeded in stopping a demolition process that would have taken this house down. She then moved on to start a campaign to urge the municipality of Beirut to expropriate the building and turn it into a museum for the memory of the city, until she finally succeeded in 2003.¹³ The building is now undergoing reconstruction, and is expected to be open to the public in 2015. The decision was made to transform the building into a cultural and urban documentation center that will shed light on the memories of the city after the ottoman period. It aims to create a collective memory that would heal the divisions still fracturing post-war Lebanese society.

The architect's strategy is to intervene in two manners. On the one hand, the original building is being restored to be solid and weatherproof, keeping the scars

¹⁰ Beit means house in Arabic, the native language of Lebanese.

¹¹ Yellow stone is the reason why the building is also known as Yellow House

¹² Hallak, "Hallak on 'Beit Beirut'," December 08, 2012, DOI: www.theplanisphere.com

According to activist architect Mona Hallak, Aftimos built the first two floors. 8 years later, Aftimos was very busy and the owners desired an addition and for that resorted to Kozah who was fascinated with concrete as a new building material. This gives the building an added value as it becomes an archive on its own of the transition in building techniques.

¹³ Wheeler, William. "Is Beirut Ready For a Memory Museum Yet?" The Daily Star Lebanon, September 14, 2007. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/Sep/14/Is-Beirut-ready-for-a-memory-museum-yet.ashx#axzz2JYKhWFqA>

of war intact. The purpose is to preserve the brokenness of it as an affective physical presence, evoking feelings of regret. On the other hand, a new contemporary architectural extension was added, with a patio linking the two corner wings of the existing house and the new addition together. Building the addition with light material such as glass and mirrors will anchor and emphasize the presence of the original structure in its place, but will also be a place where “no sniper would dare settle in” no more, according to the reconstruction architect Youssef Haidar.¹⁴ It will be a place for the Lebanese to contemplate and reflect upon as they try to sentimentally grasp what the war did.

The building’s first floor will be dedicated to artifacts and symbols of the war years that were found in the ruined building. The restoration scheme preserves the snipers war architecture where they had built their 1.8meter deep barricade walls, the small slits through which they fired at people, and the Graffiti filling the wall with signatures of snipers and war quotes. This time, these atrocious marks of war will not be erased, but will instead be part of the permanent museum of memory to only remind the Lebanese and warn the younger generation of a nearing potential fearful fate that they need to avoid in the future. The second floor will focus on the modern history of Beirut and the third floor will be dedicated to temporary exhibitions and a rooftop garden.¹⁵ Although the new program adopted in this building chiefly makes of it a war memorial, it is the architectural strategy itself that will truly convey the feeling of the vainness of war.

Several tactics were adopted in the process of post-war reconstruction in Beirut. Most of them did not deal with the past properly. Most of them shirked away from bravely admitting the atrocities of war. Instead, there was spatial erasure and neglect, or the nostalgic attempt to remake as a means to fit “the Lebanese identity”. These strategies that failed in implementing adaptive reuse, also failed in achieving resilience. The vision for Beit Beirut however is an optimistic one. By preserving the traces of war, and introducing a space for good and bad memory, Beit Beirut hopes to become a much needed place of national healing and unity.

¹⁴ Snaije, Olivia. "From Beit Barakat To Beit Beirut" The Daily Star Lebanon, October 01, 2011. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Culture/Art/2011/Oct-01/150175-from-beit-barakat-to-beit-beirut.ashx#ixzz2JZbalpox>

¹⁵ Mahdawi, Dalila. "Sodeco' War-Weary Barakat Building To Be Renovated" The Daily Star Lebanon, October 02, 2010. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/Jun/02/Sodecos-war-weary-Barakat-building-to-be-renovated.ashx#axzz2fgE0EtX7>