

REPORT

Divercities: Contested Space and Urban Identities in Beirut, Cairo and Tehran

Beirut, Thursday 12 – Saturday 14 December 2013

Organised by: Orient-Institut Beirut and Goethe Institut Lebanon



This three-day multidisciplinary event was a joint project by the Orient-Institut Beirut and the Goethe Institut Lebanon. *Divercities* discussed contested spaces in Beirut, Cairo and Tehran from diverse perspectives and different methodological approaches. Apart from fourteen academic presentations with participants from Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, Europe and North America, the programme included a panel discussion with Beirut's deputy mayor (Nadim Abu Rizk), a senior urban planner of Solidere (Amira Solh) and civil society activists (Omar Abi Azar from Zoukak Theatre Company and activist Vladimir Kurumilian). On an artistic level, Dictaphone Group (Petra Serhal, Tania Khoury, Abir Saksouk-Sasso) explored the use of public space through two performances, *Bus Cemetery* and *This Sea is Mine*, and a lecture introducing several of their projects. The improvisational theatre performance by the Lebanese group Laban – Live Lactic Culture unfortunately had to be cancelled. *Divercities* brought together academics, artists and activists in a multidisciplinary event.

The first day (12 December 2013), which took place in an old warehouse in the Karantina district on Beirut's eastern periphery, revolved around actors and power dynamics in the context of planning and using space. After a short welcome on behalf of the organisers (Nadia von Maltzahn and Monique Bellan of the Orient-Institut Beirut, and Ulrich Nowak of the Goethe Institut Lebanon), the first panel kicked off with some reflections by the discussant, urban planner Omar Abdulaziz Hallaj. He talked about how in the wake of the Arab spring fragmented agencies have not yet been able to materialise into formal alternatives to the previous formal governance structures, and that it still remained to be seen where new actors and agencies would take us. He wondered whether change was taking place more on a symbolic level rather than effectively taking place, with politics high on the agenda but political organisation low. Roman Stadnicki (CEDEJ) in the first talk of the day gave us an overview of urban activism in Cairo since the 2011 revolution, presenting a typology of different actors as authors of change. This was followed by architect and urban activist Omar Nagati, who gave insights into some of the projects documented by CLUSTER, the platform for urban research and design initiatives that he co-founded in Cairo. These initiatives are summarised in a recent publication by CLUSTER, "[Archiving the City in Flux](#)". Omar Nagati also presented some of his ongoing research on competing narratives on Cairo's urban landscape following the "coup or new revolution" of 30 June 2013. Shifting the focus to Beirut, Hiba Bou Akar (Hampshire College) discussed Beirut's geographies of what she terms "The War Yet to Come", demonstrating how spatial practices of religious political organisations are transforming Beirut's southern neighbourhoods.

The panel continued with a paper by Maryam Amiri, whose co-presenter Esmaeil Izadi from the University of Tehran unfortunately could not join us. Maryam Amiri introduced the audience to Tehran's urban density sales law, endorsed by the city's municipality in 1990 and henceforth making economic imperatives rather than planning drive urban development. Continuing with competing interests over land ownership, Nada Moumtaz (Ohio State University) examined practices of commoning in Beirut, looking at public utility and religious interests in the context of the *waqfs* of Beirut. Discussant Mona Fawaz of the

American University of Beirut (AUB) drew attention to the notion of the commons and the role of property in the context of Downtown Beirut, wondering to what extent the community of Downtown Beirut could have a voice or be negotiating the future of Downtown had it not had property. She was also questioning the usefulness of Lefebvre's "Right to the City" framework for talking about the development of Northern Tehran following the density sales law, while wondering whether some of the claims we could hear in Iran through the Green Movement was a claim of "Right to the City", also linking Amiri's presentation back to Nagati's earlier talk.

During the breaks Dictaphone Group took participants on an imaginary bus tour through Beirut in the context of their project "Bus Cemetery". Captain Pop (Petra Serhal) evoked memories of times gone by, critically engaging with issues of lack of public transport and public spaces through an audio performance that the audience experienced while sitting in one of Beirut's old buses that had been brought from the "bus cemetery" in Mar Mikhail. The first day finished with a panel discussion on "What does Beirut's Urban Future Look Like", in which Beirut's deputy mayor (Nadim Abu Rizk), a senior urban planner of Solidere (Amira Solh) and civil society activists (Omar Abi Azar and Vladimir Kurumilian) came together to discuss their respective visions of Beirut's future, followed by a heated discussion.

The second day (13 December 2013) started with a second audio performance by Dictaphone Group, "This Sea is Mine". While initially envisaged to take place on a fishing boat on the sea, starting from the Ain El Mreisse port, the tour had to take place on foot due to weather conditions caused by storm *Alexa*. Pre-registered participants were divided into two groups, who walked along the Corniche while listening to a sound piece taking them on a journey that explored land ownership of Beirut's seafront. Dictaphone Group is working on making the sound recording available for download in the future so that people can take this journey independently.

The afternoon panel, entitled "Between Public and Private", took place in Zico House, a cultural organization close to Hamra. It focused on gender issues and cultural production in Beirut and Tehran. Nazanin Shahrokni (Harvard University) looked at gender-segregated spaces in the Islamic Republic of Iran, taking public buses as a case study to theorize gender segregation as a state policy. Mathew Gagné (University of Toronto) presented mobile communication technologies in the context of expanding queer spaces in Beirut as contestations to heteronormative space. The next talk shifted the discussion to different interpretations of the public sphere by looking at the case of music in Tehran. Nahid Siamdoust (University of Oxford) argued that a fragmentation of state authority happens in a semi-public sphere, through everyday actions by individuals. Mazen Haidar (ALBA) and Akram Rayess (Arab Music Archiving and Research) talked about the project of setting up a Fairouz Museum in the childhood home of the singer in their presentation entitled "Public Sounds, Private Spaces". Discussant Robert Saliba (AUB) drew parallels and raised questions about comparing the different experiences of Beirut and Tehran. At the end of the day, Dictaphone presented a number of their projects in a lecture entitled "Why the Sea is Mine", in which they spoke about "Bit Téléférique", "This Sea is Mine" and their latest project "Nothing to Declare".

The third day (14 December 2013) was held at Mansion, a traditional Lebanese house used by artists and architects in the quarter of Zoukak el-Blat, close to the Orient-Institut. The panel looked at open air spaces of gathering, starting with more of a historical approach before turning to uses and definitions of public spaces. Historian Lucie Ryzova (University of

Oxford) started the day with a presentation of the different functions, usages and meanings of Downtown Cairo through the twentieth century, analysing the practice of loitering or strolling in the city through both gender and class. Soraya Batmanghelichi (Brooklyn Institute for Social Research) investigated the spatial transformation of a pre-revolutionary red-light district in southern Tehran into a post-revolutionary family park, engaging in a discussion of the role of prostitution by looking at the rehabilitation of a public space. Discussant Anton Escher (University of Mainz) wondered whether Downtown Cairo can be considered a heterotopic space as defined by Foucault, and asked about the role of international tourism in the context of understanding Downtown Cairo. Artist and image researcher Rana ElNemr presented us with a different pace through her Olympic Garden image-based project.

The third day finished with the second part of norms and practices of open air spaces of gathering, and presented different interpretations and readings of the notion of public space. Maïa Sinno (Sorbonne University and CEDEJ) looked at the “Gulfisation” of Cairo’s Downtown Corniche, while Abir Saksouk-Sasso proposed we should learn from the public who appropriated open areas in the city as public spaces, such as Beirut’s Dalieh and Ard Jalloul. Konstantin Kastrissianakis (University of Cambridge) suggested to rethink public space in light of Isaac Joseph’s work on public space as the “world at hand”, Ibn Khaldun’s notion of *asabiyya* and Sloterdijk’s concept of “immunological spheres”. Discussant Mona Harb (AUB) shared her frustration of how so often public space was talked about as a “lost public space”, with people lamenting this loss without opening up research or activist agendas. She was happy this was not the case in this panel, which instead approached the subject by looking at public space as a spatial practice and through its usage, and of ways to rethink public space. *Divercities* was wrapped up with some concluding remarks by Anton Escher.

Despite icy temperatures (especially for Beirut standards) induced by Storm Alexa that coincided with *Divercities*, the event attracted an interested public who joined in the lively discussions. Some of the presentations can be watched on the *Divercities* blog <http://divercities.hypotheses.org/>, where a [photo reportage](#) can also be found.

Programme overview

Day 1: 12 December 2013

Panel 1: Claims and Agency

Discussants: Omar Abdulaziz Hallaj (Urban planner) and Mona Fawaz (American University Beirut)

- Roman Stadnicki / CEDEJ: *The Emergence of Urban Activism in Cairo since the 2011 Revolution*
- Omar Nagati / CLUSTER: *A Coup or a New Revolution? Competing narratives inscribed on Cairo’s urban landscape*
- Hiba Bou Akar / Hampshire College: *Beirut’s Geographies of the ‘War Yet to Come’*
- Maryam Amiri / Tehran: *Tehran Urban Space Under the Rationale of Sales Price*
- Nada Moumtaz / The Ohio State University: *Practices of Commoning: Public utility and religious interest in the waqfs of contemporary Beirut*

Panel discussion with Beirut Municipality

What does Beirut’s Urban Future look like?

Moderator: Rami G. Khouri / Issam Fares Institute

- Bilal Hamad / Mayor of Beirut

- Amira Solh / Senior Urban Planner, Solidere
- Omar AbiAzar / Zoukak Theatre Company
- Vladimir Kurumilian / Social activist

Dictaphone Group: *Bus Cemetery*

Day 2: 13 December 2013

Dictaphone Group: *This Sea is Mine*

Panel 2: Between Public and Private

Discussant: Robert Saliba

- Nazanin Shahrokni / Harvard University: *A Gender-Divided City? An inquiry into the spatial politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran*
- Mathew Gagné / University of Toronto: *Expanding Queer Spaces in Beirut: Mobile communications technologies and contestations to heteronormative space*
- Nahid Siamdoust / University of Oxford: *Tehran's Soundscape and the Public Sphere*
- Mazen Haidar / ALBA and Akram Rayess / AMAR: *Public Sounds, Private Spaces: Towards a Fairouz Museum in Zoukak el-Blat*

Lecture Dictaphone Group: *Why the Sea is Mine?*

Day 3: 14 December 2013

Panel: Open Air Spaces of Gathering: Norms and Practices

Discussants: Anton Escher (University of Mainz) and Mona Harb (American University Beirut)

- Lucie Ryzova / University of Oxford: *Strolling in Enemy Territory: Contested spaces and spatial practices in Downtown Cairo, a historical analysis*
- Soraya Batmanghelichi / Brooklyn Institute for Social Research: *Red-lights in Parks: A social history of Park-e Razi*
- RanaElNemr / Artist & Image Researcher: *Olympic Garden 2009-11*
- MaïaSinno / Sorbonne University and CEDEJ: *The 'Gulfization' of the Cairo Downtown 'Corniche' behind Differentiating Social Practices?*
- Abir Saksouk-Sasso / Architect and Urbanist: *Contesting National Authority in the Construction of Public Space: the making of communal spaces in Beirut*
- Konstantin Kastrissianakis / University of Cambridge: *Rethinking Public Space in Beirut since the Ta'if Agreement: From the reconstruction-reconciliation discourse to 'sphere-building'*