

CONSTRUCTING AN OTHER

On Realism, The Observer and Beirut: Design as Reporting

Michael Stanton

The American University of Beirut

BEIRUT AS "REALITY"

Hüsni Yegenoglu's "The Torn Metropolis: Explorations in Beirut" published two years ago in the journal *Archis*¹ becomes a vehicle for speculation about the position of the observer and, by extension, of the architect as cultural tourist. Of the "Sites of Recovery" conference that brought Yegenoglu to Beirut in late 1999, the foreword to his essay states "Strangely enough the participants locked themselves away" while the author "went exploring." In fact Yegenoglu did come to some of the sessions as his discussion indicates, but here I want to discuss that other activity, the "exploring" that occurred and the major part of the essay that begins with "The reality of Beirut."

It is daring to present as "reality" quick impressions and follow-up provided by the relatively few books and articles that address urbanism in post-war Beirut. Can we really use the word with much comfort in any setting at this historical moment? Given the rich century of discourse following the Modernist dismantling of narratives that would support any finite notion of reality; given the subversion of the term in genres such as *surrealism*, *magic realism* and *neorealism* that have determined cultural action in the last century; given the debates of the last forty years that have interrogated language itself and, concurrently, objectivity and closure; can the "reality" of a city be identified at all, especially one with a recent history like Beirut's? Collective consensus seems to be the closest thing to reality in this era, but can such a critical common denominator be recognized in an undertaking like momentarily observing Beirut? Perhaps we have moved so far into the relative and are dealing with such a profound topic when we discuss a city that, coming full circle, we can return to the "real" only by admitting its absolute subjectivity. The "real" floats free for any of us to appropriate, hallucinate or manipulate, including especially the powers that be or wish to be. The peril of such a state of affairs is plain.

Reality aside, Yegenoglu's report reflects contemporary interpretations of a very intricate urban field. Augmenting his visit with the good recent book "Projecting Beirut: Episodes in the Construction



fig.1: Gabriele Basilico, "Beirut 1991" Frontispiece for "The Torn Metropolis: Explorations in Beirut" from ARCHIS 1, 2000.



fig.2: The same view, 2000.

and Reconstruction of a Modern City,"² he doesn't report much of what he actually saw while "exploring." The mention of the *ad hoc* social and transport hub Cola Square is the only unusual reference in the essay. The use of Gabriele Basilico's photograph from 1991³ of the war-scarred downtown as the article's first image is indicative of a general problem that characterizes the views of many visitors to this intriguing place. To show this photograph is like using Atget's images of Paris in a discussion of the French metropolis today. Basilico's recording is of a place that is now gone. Other parts of the city still do look like that, but the center is now a much more extreme field of

emptiness and nostalgia, mostly demolished or picturesquely renovated as Yegenoglu's and Leo van Velzen's pictures show later in the text. The qualitative emptiness of most new building in the rest of Beirut has produced an overheated interest in this actual emptiness at the city's urban heart - an interest in nothing, literally - that Yegenoglu continues. The war persists in the building process, both in the bellicose demolition of the heterogeneous downtown and in the ideological assault that is its rebuilding. This is not unusual. It is symptomatic in fact. National trauma historically produces repetition of the events that have induced such trauma. The erasure of history through the annihilation of the urban fabric in which it is embedded offers a chance to rewrite that history: amnesia as urban strategy. Clinically, shock-therapy obliterates traumatic memory, allowing the recreation of personality in a more docile mode. Its urban equivalent subdues cultural flux permitting a redefinition of cultural values. The erasure and partial redevelopment of downtown Beirut is indeed extraordinary, both in the radical nature of its transformation and the macro-economics that transformation represents. But the rest of the city presents an equally rich field for discussion, and finally a much more optimistic one.



fig.3: Downtown Beirut, 2000

PASTORALISM OF WAR

It is indeed enticing to begin, as the *Archis* article does, with Basilico's post-war streetscape when introducing Beirut. Scenes of urban destruction are sublime. Burton Pike writes "The fascination people have always felt at the destruction of a city may be partly an expression of satisfaction at the destruction of an emblem of irresolvable conflict."⁴ As in the work of Lebbeus Woods and his colleagues, the fetishization of war-damage, in Berlin or Sarajevo, verges on a pastoralism of war that is vulnerable to the accusations that Yegenoglu reports were leveled against Woods at the Beirut conference.⁵ Pastoralism, from Virgil to the hippies, was a condescending evocation of rural life from

the point of view of urban sophistication. Isn't this again the romance-of-the-ruin? The same conflicted sentiments that produced the 18th-century Picturesque of Hubert Robert or Piranesi, of the *veduti* and garden follies of Désert de Retz and Ermenonville, seem to be at play here. While Woods' work seems almost exclusively Pastoral, less overtly imagistic projections than his may be laboratory experiments for damaged urbanism world-wide. Paradox and patronization somewhat taint all endeavors in war-damaged areas, but the value of such endeavors is that they can attract patronage.

DESTABILIZATION

What then should be looked at and reported on when viewing an entity as rich as a city? How can a cursory view have any value? How can we, as journalists, but also as designers who must constantly work away from home, assimilate productively the inevitably scattered information available about a site or object? Is this futile or even destructive activity? Is it relevant in an increasingly homogenized global environment where *place* is becoming a devalued term mostly employed for conservative purposes, like *identity* and *tradition*? First of all, despite the aforementioned difficulties - maybe paradoxically because of them - the work of the observer is doubly crucial now. A fierce freshness of vision (we once called it *objectivity*) has always been a necessary counterpoint to the local view that argues for its completeness but always suffers from intellectual nepotism and the stuffiness of the ideological interior. The ignorance of the outsider's view may be its value, even its brilliance at times. Look at the history of criticism addressing the urban United States. From Koolhaas back to deToqueville, from Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles* and Scott-Brown's *Las Vegas*, to the *American City* team of Ciucci, Dal Co, Manieri-Elia and Tafuri: the strongest readings have come from non-natives, or from disciplinary expatriates like Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden*. Their original vision has gone far to define and present possibilities in this remarkable field while insiders are hampered by exhaustion or nostalgia.

From the Enlightenment it was assumed that *truth* would finally evolve from extended information gathering of a scientific sort: conceptual clarity = depth of experience. This reversal of what Friedrich Meineke called Natural Law⁶ assumed that finally, with enough work, all ideals were attainable. Of course, implicit at the founding of the Modern Age was an "anguish" that Tafuri among others has seen as an initial destabilization of ideological systems even at their inception. This was to become cataclysmic by the end of the 19th century. From Freud and the institutionalization of the unconscious, from Nietzsche and the death of absolutes, from Einstein and the dismantling of relations: the notion of a final arrival at complete understanding through research could no longer stand. "The reality of Beirut"



fig.4: Gabriele Basilico, "Beirut 1991."

has been obsolete for 100 years. The sacrosanct process of observation, cataloguing and concluding, so precious to the Enlightenment, has long been defunct. Now, in an inverse relation, vision seems to become more clouded as it becomes more embedded in a particular topic or place: clarity = 1/depth. Into the archives along with absolute knowledge, truth, reality, went absolute observation. The advantages of this epistemological shift are clear in all disciplines. Simply it is more appropriate to the complexities and ambiguities that never really could entertain the totalities offered by pre-Modern ontology. By recognizing a sliding field of interactions as opposed to fixed truths, the fuzzy alloy that is cultural action could be approached more productively. Criticism, in the modern sense, could happen. To view any set of factors is a subjective and partial process. It is with this understanding that the work of Walter Benjamin and his descendants could thrive. So how then can value be identified in this process? Is any sort of reaction, or emotion, or propaganda, O.K? Obviously not. There is still strong criticism and weak. We continue to debate and refine the formats that produce the former. The urban studies authored by Benjamin himself, of Naples, Paris or the Berlin of "One Way Street," but also the *Mythologies* of Barthes, the *New York* of Koolhaas, the *Roma* of Fellini, the suburbs of David Byrne's *True Stories* or Wender's *Paris Texas*: all these are exemplary. They engage culture and use interpretive models bordering on the fictional - rich retellings of fact and myth. We could all list the pompous, self-indulgent and lame commentaries that evolve from the same processes. In fact it is often the license offered by the innovations of strong critics that enfranchise the insubstantial ruminations of those that follow, inevitably tainting the process and, by that tainting, clearing space for more innovation: in the end, a healthy cycle.

Inquiry empowers not only criticism but design itself, and is thus pertinent to our practice as well as our discourse. If architecture is to



fig.5: The same view, 2000. Note the exposure of minarets and steeples due to the destruction of secular buildings.

describe other than siteless shapes or to rely totally on self-reflexive criteria for its formal elaboration, then the designer must very quickly develop the same acquisitive attributes as the critic/reporter. Design is a form of criticism in fact, for it engages simultaneously in both an autonomous dialogue with architectural culture and an engaged one with society.⁷ But is it enough to just recognize this fact and then let ambient information percolate into discourse and design? I would argue that it is not, even in this period in which the limits of relevance are vague and the field of action expansive. Original observation is essential in conjunction with, possibly superseding, accumulated commentaries. The quasi-fictional format of *Delirious New York* is an example of a very effective mix of research, remarkable interpretation and design. The role of the observer may blur with that of the producer, but also with that of the voyeur: an inevitable avocation of the designer. Architects, from Alberti to Loos, Le Corbusier and Carlo Mollino, have toyed with this "perversion" of vision.⁸ In fact the desire embedded in the term *voyeurism* may indicate a productive "swerve" in attitude from the apparently impartial disengagement of the reporter. No longer can any narrative be perceived as "objective," but the subjectivity of the observer as producer is efficacious. Analysis and critique become synonymous with creation which takes on the much richer role of translation or reinterpretation.⁹

BEIRUT AND REALISM

The importance of "reporting" having been proposed, this essay will take a closer look at the phenomenon of looking and reacting, at value and method, following from the *Archis* article and Beirut as observed. Not the Piranesian scene of Basilico but the antiseptic vacuity that has now eradicated the sentiment evident in his post-war images, the downtown is now a sign of the civic fragmentation and sectarianism that were not resolved, in fact were increased, by

the civil war that ended ten years ago. At the end of the fighting, the appropriation, by governmental decree, of all property in the center and the formation of Solidere, a real-estate corporation to develop it, was shortly followed by the elevation of that corporation's head, Rafik Hariri, to the position of Lebanon's Prime Minister and the demolition, by explosives, of the center of the city. More than a thousand buildings disappeared. It was as if the United States government gave Manhattan to Donald Trump, he leveled it but for a few monuments and then was made President, thus making easier the implementation of development strategies and giving new meaning to *conflict-of-interest*.

Most of the buildings were recoverable if damaged in this front-line area. The choice of which to save is indicative. The mosques and churches remain. By law they could not be touched in this nation where religion and state are inextricable, but their isolated survival underlines the increased importance of the various religious sects that define the nation's political geography and that identified the various militias during the war. Certain modern buildings from the 1940s to '70s period of independence were renovated, but the majority of other saved structures are historicist confections from the period of the French Mandate that succeeded the Ottomans in 1918. Many older buildings, ancient and vernacular, were destroyed. So were the structures that defined the major pre-war civic spaces like Martyr's Square, the main plaza of the city. Reference to the 5000-year history of the city is reduced to safe artifacts from Phoenician and Roman times. History's living presence in the fragments of old city fabric in the ancient souks and quarters around the center have been replaced by the safely contained ancient sites that will form "memory voids"¹⁰ in the new downtown. The reason for this is not just the strategy of the museum, the neutering of history, but also a simple real-estate imperative. The old buildings were too small. The early-20th-century structures better optimize the potentially valuable property. Also their language, a cross of Parisian boulevard and Orientalism, is appropriate to the concept of the downtown as a bourgeois neutral-ground. It is picture-perfect "New Urbanism" - decorative, exclusive and cloyingly eclectic. This is not a coincidence. Formulas made in Miami are being implemented emphatically in Beirut.

Identity is an issue for people who feel they are losing that which distinguishes them. This is indeed the case with the Lebanese. But, as usual, the identity-market gestures toward cultural recovery serve business interests primarily. If architecture is any indication, a pluralistic and liberal society within the Middle East is redefining itself as pure market. Identity is a difficult topic in any case and perhaps always primarily a commodity, here more than most. If identity lodges in architectural form at all, and if its retention is more than a conservative strategy, then the nature of its retention as form is very intri-

cate indeed. The application of debased decorative motifs of a Middle-Eastern sort, or the use of curvilinear shapes on vast modern structures is surely not the way to maintain a sense of place, if such a direct regional expression is really important. I am not convinced it is, or more precisely, that such a response lies within the purview of architectural form.

Possibly the best news about the downtown at this point is that it is mostly empty and remains so due to economics. Those few new buildings that have gone up, and the renderings of future construction, radiate a corporate generic that suggests an urbanism indistinguishable from Denver or Frankfurt. Lebanon is a complex culture, to say the least, with its mix of Mediterranean and Arab values and its really heterogeneous population making generalization impossible. Nonetheless, the neutral speculative field proposed for the city center seems too cynical. The problems may stem from the simple but shocking fact that almost the whole downtown has one owner with one objective! This may be unique in the non-Communist world. With the excuse of speed or the incompetence of the collective, the city has been appropriated. As a spokesman for Solidere put it "Can you imagine how long it would have taken with 250,000 owners!" Ten years later, it seems to be taking longer with only one. Chaos, embodied in multiple ownership, is what cities are about. The struggle of desire and fact makes a metropolitan pressure and formal mix that is the essence of the urban. On Solidere's fantasy islands, these seem especially lacking. The situation seems numbingly reductive and the streetscape produced so far is both monotonous and clearly restricted, arguing rhetorically for pedestrianism but whispering of control. Neutral and nostalgic, this place offers a lesson to those who desire the city centers proposed by "New Urbanism" or its European cousin, the conservative policies governing the reconstruction of cities in unified Germany.¹¹

To focus on the extreme activities in the downtown avoids the much more interesting developments at the scale of this two-million-inhabitant metropolis. The post-war condition does not rival the destruction and fragmentation of many American cities, but compared to the Mediterranean cities that share its topography and culture, this one is decidedly marked by war and neglect. Beirut presents an exciting *ad hoc* urbanism brought on by shifting and displaced populations and unanticipated metropolitan juxtapositions. The indomitable spirit of the residents is infectious. But is there a place in this context for architecture, especially in Beirut where there is little concern from the authorities to support construction for the social classes who shape new urban configurations? The tropical energy and sense of a fantastic pressure toward the future is so compelling that it seems architects and urbanists should find that place where they can enter this other discourse as they inevitably address the desires of power.



fig.6: Gabriele Basilico, "Beirut 1991."



fig.7: The same view, 2000.

HISTORY AND ACTION

Yegenoglu's article is presented here only as a symptom of the problems attendant in reporting on such a place as Beirut. Yet to dismiss all such rapid observation is to make nearly impossible architectural work that responds to given conditions. Desire is nurtured through experience. Design by nature finds itself continuously thrust into strange places and must quickly react to new environments. There must be material, and the gathering of that material is a process of learning in the most ordinary of senses occurring simultaneously with exceptional critical action. In fact the model of the apparently quotidian and its extraordinary extension may be appropriate to guide the metamorphosis of all the terms discussed here.

It seems essential that analysis be engaged in almost automatically. *Analysis* used here encompasses cultural material outside the autonomous realm of architectural production, and is probably should be called *criticism*. While this pertains particularly to cities, it is obviously transferable to any form of representation or scale and is perti-



fig.8: Beirut, 2000.

nent to less physical cultural phenomena. Metamorphosis and misreading may span the breach between the existing and the proposed, between the learned and the imagined, between the rejection of history and its indiscriminate acceptance. Is this finally a defense of history? I suppose it is, in the sense that the given fuels criticism/design. Whether simply reporting (but this process will never simple be when to report is a critical act) or gathering material for design, attention to both physical conditions and their implications becomes essential. To these ends I urge the revival of some apparently outmoded terms: *analysis*, *history*, maybe even *realism* - not the *real* called for in the "politics lite" of current academic discourse, a reductive and exclusive term, but in the rich interpretation that places *realism* among the cardinal properties of the modern. Through this means, the *real* as a field for action may slyly reassert itself.

NOTES

¹ARCHIS 1 - *Architecture, City, Visual Culture*, January 2000, Rotterdam

²Ed. Peter G. Rowe and Hashim Sarkis (Prestel, 1998)

³From Gabriele Basilico, *Cityscapes*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999)

⁴From Burton Pike, "The City as Image" *The Image of the City in Modern Literature*, (Princeton: P U Press, 1981)

⁵A distinction should be made here between Wood's romanticism and the Virilio-derived ennui of Diller + Scofidio's *Back to the Front: Tourisms of War*, (Caen: F.R.A.C. Basse-Normandie, 1994)

⁶"It was held that the pronouncements of reason, though they could certainly be obscured by passions and by ignorance, did nevertheless, whenever they could free themselves from these hindrances, speak with same voice and utter the same timeless and absolutely valid truths, which were in harmony with those prevailing in the universe as a whole." Friedrich Meineke, *Historicism*, trans. J.E. Anderson (New York, 1972), p. LVI ff.

⁷Here the proposal again surfaces for "criticism from within" deriving from Tafuri and articulated most explicitly in Jorge Silvetti's "The Beauty of Shadows" (*Oppositions* 9, Summer 1977). Regarding autonomy, I believe "Towards a Revolutionary Art" published in *Partisan Review* in 1938 by Leon Trotsky, with

André Breton and Diego Rivera and Trotsky's earlier "Art and Politics" were tententiously interpreted by conservatives as positing autonomy as apolitical in the arts, a position it is hard to imagine three such convinced leftists as Breton, Rivera and especially Trotsky, supporting. See Michael Stanton, "New York Rules, OK?" in *Art and Design* - April, 1985 (London: Academy)

⁸From the invention of perspective through the narrative photographs of Modernism, the position of subject and object has verged on the uncanny.

⁹See Michael Stanton, "Disciplining Knowledge: architecture between cube and frame" in *The Discipline of Architecture*, eds: A. Piotrowski, J. Robinson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001)

¹⁰This comes from the French *trous de memoire*, which has the meaning as well of "lapse of memory."

¹¹See Michael Stanton, "Wrestling with Angels: On Berlin" in *Paradoxes of Progress — Architecture and Education in a Post-Utopian Era: Proceedings of the 89th Annual Meeting of the ACSA*, Baltimore, 2001