Urban Geography: Conflicts in the Preservation of the Urban Heritage in Beirut/Lebanon

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Abstract

Middle Eastern Cities actually run through a modernization process driven by the structural changes of economy, the in-migration of rural population and transnational workers and the investment of petrodollars. This is the case for example in the Gulf states and Saudi-Arabia as well as in Lebanon (Beirut).

Conflicts between the permanent reconstruction process of the city and the preservation of the urban heritage have a long history in Beirut. New architectural styles, new types and ideas of housing have been imported over the last decades and replaced the traditional forms more or less. But especially the civil war from 1974 to 1990 brought new dynamics in these processes. Fighting and wartime demolition destroyed and damaged numerous buildings in the centre of the city and in the pericentral fringe. Well-known places from pre-war times as for example the central "Martyrs Square" disappeared from the city map as well as the old suqs. Along the borderline between East and West Beirut a real "green line" emerged, a no-mans land in the former city with green bushes and hide-aways of the militia.

All that set up the chance but also the necessity to reflect in a general and fundamental way about the future of Central Beirut. In the immediate post-war period after 1990 a very controversial discussion about the fate of the urban heritage began. On one hand house owners claimed their rights to make profit of their lots and urban planners wanted to create a new city which should allow to forget the troubles and rumors of the civil war period. A powerful private agency called Solidere and backed by the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al Hariri, pushed this process. All these "modernizers" had the vision of an urban environment they called metaphorically "Hong Kong at the Mediterranean". On the other hand NGO’s and activist groups arose to protect the cultural heritage of the old charming Beirut, the former imagination of the "Paris of the East".

It was the aim of two urban research projects since 1998, both sponsored by the German Research Foundation, to analyse the conflicts, the roles of the different actors and the power relations in the reconstruction process of Beirut after the civil war. Conflict-related approaches to space should identify actors and their actions in relation to different goals, measures and enforceability. Paths of spatial development were charted to offer insights into the power of regional and local actors to shape, impede and define change.

The lesson about “Conflicts of the preservation of the cultural heritage in Beirut/Lebanon” reflects on the basis of empirical data, done in two Ph.D. theses under my supervision by Heiko Schmid and Oliver Kögler over the general problem to preserve “culture” –whatever it means- in a economy driven and very fast urban modernization process.
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Some views of actual Beirut