Gebhardt, H./Sack, D. (Eds.): History, Space and Social Conflict in Beirut. The Quarter of Zokak el-Blat. Beirut (Orient-Institut der DMG Beirut, Beiruter Texte und Studien 97)

Auszug aus der Einleitung, verfasst von Ralf Bodenstein, Hans Gebhardt, Jens Hansen, Bernhard Hillenkamp, Oliver Kögler, Anne Mollenhauer, Dorothee Sack, Friederike Stolleis
ZOKAK EL-BLAT. Introduction to a Multidisciplinary Urban Research Project

Zokak al-Blat occupies a unique position within Beirut’s urban fabric. It was one of the city’s first sites of urban expansion before 1840, and as such it has been distinguished by its direct access to the city centre. During the Lebanese Civil War of 1975-1990, being near the country’s financial and political centre meant proximity to the “Green Line” – the demarcation zone between east and west Beirut. The post-war reconstruction of the downtown area that began in the 1990s has embraced the northern parts of Zokak el-Blat and deeply affected the architectural and functional aspects of the whole quarter.

The aim of this research project has been to conduct a comprehensive survey of the architectural, social and economic structures of this quarter – past and present – and to analyse the factors and processes that have conditioned its transformation. We consider Zokak el-Blat a geographically bounded space in which high levels of migration and social, ethnic and confessional heterogeneity have structured the process of urban development. The quarter acts as a microcosm of the history of modern Beirut and of the trials and tribulations of an urban society in the throes of post-war reconstruction.

Zokak el-Blat represents a prism through which we may examine those who act to effect urban transformation, their interests and bases of power. Kurdish and Shiite immigrants, refugee families, pre-war house owners, tenants, real estate companies and property speculators as well as heritage activists, municipal agencies and state institutions constitute a complex political and socio-economic matrix in which actors are engaged in an intense power struggle.

The scholars engaged in this study come from disciplines that have, in recent years, become more methodologically flexible. Indeed, the task of understanding the different levels of urban space – morphology, structures and processes of development and everyday life – in integrated terms demands an approach that draws upon multiple methodologies and disciplines. This project’s most important conceptual goal, then, has been to combine the disciplines of social and architectural history, social anthropology, geography, political science and conservation studies within the context of fieldwork-oriented methods and a clearly defined urban research area.

Practising multidisciplinary research means a continuous exchange of data, observation and analysis. Most of the contributors have spent many months and years together in Beirut. The formal fieldwork started March...
2001 and continued until the middle of 2003. We intermittently held internal workshops and “jours fixes” to discuss new findings and the methodological adjustments that necessarily emerged out of them. Moreover, we participated in public and academic debates on heritage and history at seminars in Beirut and conferences in Germany. By co-ordinating our respective disciplines in this manner, our place-based, micro-historical approach has been methodologically enriched by our comparative experience. Although the scope of this project is limited to Zokak el-Blat, it benefits from the authors’ previous and ongoing research projects. This combination offers perspectives on the question of whether collected data is specific to the quarter or may be extrapolated upon.

On the technical level the Zokak el-Blat project used a Geographic Information System (GIS) as an electronic platform to collect, process and evaluate data and to make it available to all members of the group. Combining geography with history, the GIS was used to generate contemporary and historical maps of the quarter. It collates data concerning a building’s age, number of floors, occupancy, functions, state of repair, heritage value and so forth, and renders it visible.

The Zokak-el-Blat group consists of two senior academics who have co-ordinated and supervised the project, and seven investigating researchers. From chapters two to five the first group deals largely with historical questions. The second group approaches Zokak el-Blat from the perspectives of social anthropology and political science, while the third group looks at the quarter through the eyes of the human geographer. These texts are preceded by a joint orientation chapter, which takes the reader on a tour through the quarter as it looked in late 2003.

In the second chapter, the urban historian Ralph Bodenstein presents a survey of two centuries of urban development in Zokak el-Blat. He argues that when dealing with an unplanned quarter such as this one, we need to focus our attention on the correlation between property relations and socio-logical processes of change. In the nineteenth century, Zokak el-Blat was a
coveted location above the nearby city centre. In the course of the twentieth century, the quarter became too central and too crowded for an upper-class lifestyle and the kind of rentier economy that had generated the vast urban estates of some of its original wealthy landowners. According to Bodenstein, the very real-estate policies and construction activities that made Zokak el-Blat an upper class garden community also triggered its local intellectuals mixed and mingled to produce the lively, cosmopolitan atmosphere that characterised fin de siècle Beirut. Taking a micro-historical approach, Jens Hanssen unearths material that suggests a far higher degree of interconnectedness, indeed intimacy, between Muslim and Christian intellectual circles than is generally acknowledged. Moreover, by plotting schools, teachers and students in Zokak el-Blat from late-Ottoman historical sources, an Ottoman and local Beiruti educational project emerges that far exceeds previous imagination. Hanssen argues that Zokak el-Blat not only provided an open space to negotiate common ground between Christian and Muslim visions of Lebanon but also that it was a cradle and a microcosm for Beirut’s political culture in the twentieth century.

In the next chapter, social anthropologist Friederike Stolleis first surveys the demographic shifts in Zokak el-Blat over the last eighty years. Then, using oral history, she examines the memories and perceptions different socio-confessional groups had of each other in contemporary Zokak el-Blat. She argues that confessional categories of self-identification are not the only determining factor in interaction, avoidance and exclusion. Rather, the construction of the Other is contingent on fluid notions of class difference and the time and circumstance of immigration to the quarter. In surveys and interviews, Stolleis has established that the inhabitants of post-war Zokak el-Blat are locked up in conflicting claims as to who “owns” the quarter. A central strategy of “self-ing” and “other-ing” is the question of who arrived first. Relative rootedness operates as a means of conferring authority over groups who immigrated more recently.

Chapter six engages the literature on patron-client relations by focusing on two of the chronically underrepresented groups in Lebanon’s confessionalist system – Shiite and Kurdish immigrants to Zokak el-Blat. A political scientist, Bernhard Hillenkamp traces their strategies of survival and representation by inverting Michael Johnson’s analysis of Sunni Muslim bosses. Hillenkamp’s main concern is not elite formation and crowd control but how marginal members of urban society organise their own representation from below – their modes of subversion, strategic positioning and invention of political constituencies.
It was not until 1984 that Shiite political institutions were allowed to operate in the capital, and the late integration of Shiite migrants into the urban space of West Beirut is clearly symbolised by the construction of a social and religious centre, the Husseiniyya, in Zokak el-Blat in 1984. After the Taif Agreement of 1989, which readjusted the confessional system in an effort to stop the civil war, the Shiites moved from the margins closer to the centre of the political system. The Kurds finally received citizenship and the right to vote in 1994 but, Hillenkamp argues, they remained on the margins of Sunni politics.

Chapter seven describes the course of the various efforts to protect the urban heritage in Beirut’s pericentral quarters. Andreas Fritz focuses on three official studies that were conducted in the late-1990s to identify historic buildings and to put them under legal protection. He demonstrates that efficient and legally sound government protection of Beirut’s historic buildings has not been forthcoming until now, as it is a difficult task to elaborate a suitable solution for the preservation issue that finds the agreement of all involved actors.

The final chapter offers a detailed survey of the multiple factors that affect the prospects for conservation of old houses in Beirut. Between the professional pessimism of the conservation activists and the pragmatic optimism of Solidere that its redevelopment project would eventually generate popular desire for historic buildings in the city, the geographer Oliver Köglers discerns unexpected preservation opportunities within a complex legal, economic and cultural matrix. Köglers bases his survey on extensive digital mapping of Zokak el-Blat’s historic architectural fabric and compares his findings with other pericentral districts in Beirut. He argues that the battle over architectural heritage is an important aspect of Beirut’s post-war urban development. Historic buildings are symbolic sites where conflicting visions of Beirut’s future compete and clash with one another.

The eight chapters are followed by an extensive annex containing the bulk of illustrations and maps. Further maps, illustrations, graphs and tables are located in the individual chapters. To help the reader locate all these figures, we have resorted to a dual referencing system. The figures in the chapters are referred to by capital letters and those in the annex by numbers. In addition, the book contains a number of boxes that provide glimpses onto select phenomena, buildings and personalities. They are meant to enrich our story of Zokak el-Blat.

Heidelberg, aout 2004