

## Walking in Beirut

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### 1.

If you want to think about the disappearance of place, Beirut is as good a place to start as any. The Civil War, of course, obliterated a lot of the city, including the center and the old souks, and ever since a process less like reconstruction than super-construction has been going on, a new city being built atop the ruins of the old. There's been some restoration. The character of the pedestrian avenues that radiate from the Place de l'Etoile has been largely recovered. The chic European chain restaurants that line them may even be a reasonable substitute for whatever was there before. But the souks have been replaced by a high-end shopping mall called, as if in memoriam, The Souks, a collection of elegant tan boxes with herringbone facades which are staggered in levels around sunstruck plazas and cool wide corridors. Many of the stores here are expensive—Prada, Bulgari—which may account for how lonely a walk through them can feel. Who can afford it? The Souks seem to dwarf the few people roaming their corridors. I've wondered how the stores in The Souks can make money, and I'm always told that I'm here at the wrong time of year. In the summer, people from the Gulf countries descend on Beirut to get away from the oppressive heat and the repressive moral standards of their own countries. And they shop.

In this way The Souks are about place after all, just not about Beirut, except insofar as Beirut is not Riyadh or Dubai or Abu Dhabi, except insofar as Beirut itself has become a luxury item for rich foreigners. Money is pouring into Beirut, and there's nothing like money to loosen the bonds of place. Nearly every block seems to have a brand new luxury high-rise or a ditch into which a luxury high-rise is soon to be fitted. The hoardings around these ditches display floorplans of the apartments-to-be—master bedroom, three or four subsidiary bedrooms, multiple baths, east terrace, west terrace, maid's room. A walk around Beirut can slip you into a reverie of shelter porn. Who's buying these apartments? Again, I'm told it's the rich foreigners who want a twelve-room pied-à-terre in a place that's become a center of high-end fun for the Middle East.

And then, of course, there are the rich who've always been here, and the rich who returned after the war and continue to return as the war's aftershocks subside, and there are those who are now getting rich off the money coming in. "The Paris of the Middle East" Beirut used to be called. These days it can strike you more like L. A. There are the palm trees, the seashore, the impossible traffic, and, in the eyes of the people in the chic nightclubs and expensive restaurants, a low-grade fever of status-anxiety.

### 2.

This is Beirut, but it's a Beirut superimposed on top of other Beiruts. In one sense, it's exactly wrong to say that Beirut is about the disappearance of place. It's also about the stubbornness of place. Sitting here in a glassed-in balcony in one of those new high-rises—my view somewhat obscured by an ugly new high-rise that was only half as high on my last visit—I have a view of the mountains to the east as, from another balcony, I have a view of the sea. I have these views because the high-rise is located in the hilltop neighborhood of Achrafieh, where the Christians live. I open an old copy of *Monocle*. In an article on Achrafieh, Kamal Mouzawak is quoted as saying that he “cringes” when he has to come here. “It’s the ultimate ghetto. It’s too Christian.” Just as, he indicates, the Shiite suburb Dahieh is too Shiite. The dividing lines of these neighborhoods, according to the *Monocle* article, were hardened by the war, but even so the quote startled me when I first read it, until I realized how reassuring I find the Christmas decorations in the lobby of our building. They make me feel I’m in the right place. They make me feel safe.

The other night I was at a party of Lebanese Christians in the hills above the city. The family had spent ten years in Brazil, and as much Portuguese as Arabic was spoken at the party, particularly at my end of the table which was occupied by folks attached to the Brazilian embassy. I asked a visiting diplomat how he had spent Christmas, and he lowered his voice and told me that he hadn’t done anything because he’s Jewish, a fact he seemed at pains not to advertise. I remembered a map of the region we’d seen in a bookstore on my first visit to Beirut. On the back cover, where the region was represented in small, someone had placed a tiny white sticker over Israel: the tribute the obliteration of place pays to its stubbornness.

### 3.

The stubbornness of certain facts—intractable is the word that’s always applied to the region’s problems—can be part of the fascination of Beirut. You feel you’re in a place where history was until recently being battled out. But, for this reason, walking in Beirut can put you in a kind of moral jeopardy. Visitors come. We point out the sites, which are surprisingly few, but among the most dramatic is the St. George Yacht Club where green netting keeps pieces of the façade from falling to the sidewalk. This, we tell the visitor, is where a powerful car bomb killed Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. A local restaurateur invites us to dinner at his restaurant. His father used to own a restaurant downtown. Ten minutes before his assassination, Hariri had coffee there. A few days later, I relay this story to a visitor.

Of course, you don’t have to go to the St. George Yacht Club to point out the scars of history. We can stand on our kitchen balcony and see the shrapnel-scarred façade of the neighboring building. We can walk through Achrafieh and see, nestled between still-standing or newly built high-rises, bombed-out ruins filled with rubble. We can see the mortar holes that pierce the bronze statue in Martyrs Square. But you can’t keep pointing these things out without starting to feel a little

queasy. You're not sure that you don't feel a small pleasurable frisson in noting these things, the thrill perhaps of horror divorced from danger.

You can take some comfort—if comfort it is—in the occasional charge of renewed or remembered danger. When I was here a year ago, the government of Saad Hariri fell because he refused to reject the findings of a U. N. tribunal which found Hezbollah responsible for his father's assassination. The next night several of us were at a nightclub in the city center, a place very much in the Beirut style: red velvet settees, bottles of whiskey on the tables, a floor show, and some dramatic examples of plastic surgery among the women. American news reports were making the situation in the street sound volatile, though you couldn't tell it from the flashily dressed crowd at the Music Hall (or even from the streets). Nevertheless, the conversation at our table turned to what to do in the event that fighting broke out. "Turn out the lights and keep your head down," seemed to be the local word. Even in everyday Beirut, your anxiety can unexpectedly spike. You're at an intersection, and a car, stopped for no discernible reason, is blocking the traffic, and you remember that car bombs were a favored tactic during the war and are still very much part of the regional mix. You remember accounts of people during the war panicking in such situations and trying frantically to maneuver their cars out of the jam.

#### 4.

My first summer here I was taken to visit the widow of Ghassan Kanafani who, along with his niece, was assassinated by car bomb in Beirut in 1972, reportedly by the Mossad. What I remember most about the visit is a sense of interiority, of being inside. Of course, it's common to feel that you don't know a place until you've been in someone's home, but in this case the feeling was intensified by the charged exteriority that seemed to hang over it, not just in the mementos of the dead man and girl, killed in the street below as they headed downtown one summer morning, but in the chaotic, traffic-clogged ride to get there, and the ugly city outside. I'm trying to think of another place where the inside feels so *opposed* to the outside.

Outside, in Beirut, is a problem. Public space doesn't work here. Walking through the city is a game of chicken played between pedestrians and drivers. You can tell the locals because they don't pick up their pace when walking across several lanes of traffic, just as the cars don't slow down. There are few traffic lights and many of them don't work or work only at odd times of the day. Policemen in fatigues are positioned at intersections to guide the traffic, but even they get overwhelmed. The other day we watched an officer turn helplessly about in the tangle of traffic around Martyrs Square, as drivers ignored both him and the traffic lights. It's not uncommon to spend twenty minutes stuck on one block in the narrow streets of Achrafieh. Public transportation consists of a few sclerotic bus lines; the slack is taken up by a fleet of taxis whose drivers beep or whistle or call to you as you walk by, the assumption being that if you're walking, you must need a ride.

Why all this should be, I don't know, though I'm told that Lebanon's divided government exists in a state of perpetual gridlock where nothing can ever get done. According to complicated power-sharing rules, the Prime Minister must always be a Sunni, the President Christian, and the Speaker of Parliament a Shiite, and the result seems to be three separate governments none of which knows what the other is doing. The articulation of public space, then, gets left to companies like Solidere, owned by the Hariri family, companies that are great at building malls and high rises, but not so good at creating ways to get from one to the other.

Or it may be that Beirutis are just better at insides than at outsides. It wasn't until I reached for *Monocle* to look up the quote above that I realized that I'd met the speaker, Kamal Mouzawak. We were in his restaurant on Friday. The restaurant, called Tawlét, is tucked into the far side of a grimy little parking lot next to a grimy little spa that offers both weight-training and Botox. The restaurant itself is beautiful—homey and high-ceilinged and full of sunlight. I remarked to my partner that Beirutis have a genius for such spaces. How is it possible, in a space whose tall windows give out onto a clogged, polluted parking lot, to create the illusion that you're on the edge of a garden?

It may be that the genius for interiors has been fostered by an exterior—a public space—that will always feel charged and contested. The most obviously public space in Beirut is the Corniche, the walkway that runs along the Mediterranean. Here, on a weekend afternoon, Beirutis mix. Bikes go by. Old men in suit jackets sit on the benches and chat. Men and boys sun on or swim off the rocks below. Women in hijab pass women in jogging bras. I've said "mix" but, of course, I haven't described mixing, only people occupying the same space. Even here there's a sense of guarded interiority, of maintaining the lines. It's notable that no women swim off those rocks. There's a special swimming place for "ladies," hidden from public view, but the tiny bikinis appear only at the private clubs along the beach.

## 5.

Even as I write this, though, I'm aware that these are the perceptions of an outsider, and one who spends a great deal of his time nine floors above the city, looking at the screen of a laptop. In the evenings, there are two of us, both on laptops. I read the *New York Times* online. Carlos reads *Folha*. We are not just above the city, but above place itself, freed by an admittedly sluggish internet connection from the bonds of place.

We can and do go down and plunge into the place, get stuck in the traffic, dare the non-existent crosswalks, go to the bars, the restaurants, the shops, even, the other day, taking a creeping, winding ride on a city bus. But, as place, Beirut still feels elusive, hidden. Yesterday, when we were stuck in traffic on the downtown freeway, I looked up and saw one of the old Beirut mansions that crumble, with a kind of

graceful, Faulknerian melancholy, among the more modern buildings. About three floors up was a balcony framed in Arab arches, and moment by moment it glowed in deeply colored light: blue, then green, then purple, then red. What was it? A club? Bar? Restaurant? How did you get there? Who went there? The traffic moved forward and the place slid out of view.

There are cities where the idea of place is more obvious: London, Rome, Paris. It takes you a while, in such places, to realize that the place you're seeing is not the place itself, that there's an elusive life to the city that doesn't yield itself up to the money-cushioned tourist. Paris is not the Place Vendôme. Rome is not the Campo dei Fiori. The difference in Beirut may be that the elusiveness is on display. Those old façades don't impose themselves on your view the way they might in London or Rome. They seem to shy away from it, like the last female relation, reduced to living behind shutters in three rooms of the old family manse.

6.

"In Beirut," says a documentary filmmaker we meet one night at a bar in Gemmayze, "we are trained to fear." "By whom?" I ask. "Our mothers. The war," he says. The pairing seems to get at something buried in the local attitude towards place. Not just fear, but shame. The war after all was not just a trauma, but a crime, a continual series of crimes, a human failure so complete that its local lessons seem to be mostly a weary conviction that it can't happen again coupled with a weary cynicism about the extent to which things can get better. ("Everyone is depressed in Lebanon," says our restaurateur friend.) W. G. Sebald has said of the Allied destruction of German cities during World War II that "[t]here was a tacit agreement...that the true state of moral and material ruin in which [Germany] found itself was not to be described." The destruction "remained under a kind of taboo like a shameful family secret." Perhaps obliteration is what you do to a place that has become toxic with shame.

"Beirut is not a permanent place," says Joe, the manager of a popular gay bar. But he also tells us that he owes the success of his bar to "treating everyone the same," still a radical proposition in a city in which (to hear Joe tell it) the privileges given to money and status are less the way of the world than a cherished principle of the social order. Beirut and place are not all about obliteration. "Stop Solidere," says a huge banner that hangs from a building downtown, meaning stop the Hariri family corporation that has controlled much of the way Beirut has been reconstructed. Kamal Mouzawak, besides opening Tawlét, has created, along with his partner, a farmer's market in the center of town. The French have begun restoring one of the more spectacularly ruined mansions near Sodeco Square into a cultural center. There's a conversation going on not just about what Beirut should be but what it was and how what it was might guide its becoming. Maybe the most you can ever do is guide the way a place becomes.

This weekend or maybe next week we will go out to Byblos, an afternoon or evening's excursion. It's one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, with layers of ruins from Phoenician, Roman, and Medieval times. It's also a popular destination for entertainment and nightlife, with bars along the cities old streets and fish restaurants along the harbor. The first time we went we ate at Pepe's, where the walls are lined with celebrity photos from the days, before the war, when Lebanon was a jet set destination. There's Marlon Brando. There's Brigitte Bardot. Byblos is also a good place to come if you want to think about place. You can study the video menu displayed outside one of the touristy restaurants and then look up at the moon rising above a set of broken Greek columns and feel a little dizzy, as if you can feel the place slide out from under your feet as you stand there.