



Brilliant Beirut

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Posted by Marie Bonte

Brilliant Beirut?

If you go out at night in Beirut, you might want to be careful about where you tread, so as not to stumble. With its uneven lighting levels, large areas of public space remain obscure. The weakness and irregularity of public lighting signifies insufficient public services in Lebanon, but contrasts with the reputation of the city as a party town.

1) Beirut, the dark city?

The story of public lighting started during the government of Ibrahim Pasha of Egypt (between 1831 and 1840). The vice regent decided to develop the city, which at that time, was only lit by domestic oil lamps. The government required storekeepers to place a lantern at the entrance to their shops after dark. Later, the administration of the Ottoman Empire was reorganized and modernized, and in March 1888, the Gas Ottoman Beirut Company began to supply public street lighting. In 1908, the first electric lighting poles were installed along with electric tramways, and public lighting of Beirut was gradually expanded to more areas. In January 1925, the Municipality upgraded the system. The number of lighting poles increased to 1500: most of Beirut streets were lit.

Yet today, existing fixtures are old, obsolete and energy consuming. There is only one street light per 33 dwellers, compared to one per 7 in France, for instance. 50% of the 10,000 street lights were installed on wall brackets and utility poles. The city has a high ratio of damaged and corroded fixtures, and even recently installed lights are obsolete, since manufacturers, mainly Schreder and Phillips, sell their old array of light bulbs. Moreover, the fixtures are subverted from their original purpose. Sometimes, lighting towers are transformed into garbage dumps, and residents make informal connections in order to acquire electricity in their otherwise unconnected homes. Photosensitive cells, devised to activate lighting, are unreliable, or are covered or painted by inhabitants in order to provide electricity round the clock. The lighting network is haphazardly activated, generating energy losses. Ratios of energy consumption are comparable to European cities of similar scale, but with a lower return rate. And the maintenance of fixtures suffers from understaffing, and a lack of technical guidance and resources. The streetlights have obsolete photometric specifications: high pressure sodium lights provide a weak yellow light, inefficiently radiating into the night sky, contributing to energy loss and light pollution. These conditions foster a sense of insecurity, a lack of visibility, and a division of the urban nightscape into different territories.

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Street light used as a garbage dump

2) Being enlightened, a privilege ? A fragmented urban nightscape.

Those remarks seemingly contradict Beirut's reputation as a city 'that never sleeps', where nightlife is intense and diverse. In fact, the city is never totally asleep, and illuminated urban nightscapes are rather like micro-territories that act as a kind of relay points amongst a geography of light inequalities.

Most streets are left in the dark, even in planned public areas like

the seafront at Corniche where some portions of the walk remain in darkness. Those streets or districts that are illuminated are supposedly the most lively during the night. Yet this geography of urban nightscape is in perpetual motion, where trendy and fashionable places change quickly in this divided, fragmented city.

One key fragment is the symbolic central district of the city. Throughout the period of prolonged war and turbulent aftermath, this district was both the epicentre of violence and the focus of reconstructions plans. Solidere (a private company founded by millionaire politician Rafic Hariri), has been entrusted with its reconstruction and development. Creating a real tabula rasa in the city's core, Solidere systematically razed all damaged buildings, and rebuilt a new city within Beirut, with restored Ottomans buildings, churches and mosques, and French colonial promenades. The ambition was to create a global, tourist friendly and cosmopolitan Beirut with pedestrianised streets and effective street lighting. However, it is difficult to consider this central area to be a truly public space today, with the regulation of access creating physical breaks in the city, reveals the fragmentation of the city at night.



Area of downtown, illuminated but with controlled entry by barriers and soldiers

There are other territories where lighting is private, signified by the neon signs of bars, restaurants, cafés, and shops. There

are two different kinds of 'territories of light': where you can find alcohol and where you can't. The districts without alcohol provision are not open all night, and are comprised of clusters of restaurants, international or Lebanese fast food outlets that target students and families. Many places are also dedicated to young and pious Muslim who strive to have fun while following moral norms in their leisure activities, and they provide restaurants and fast food, juice bars and coffee shops with soft drinks, water-pipes and traditional games.

A further territory of light is more explicitly designed for partying. Trendy districts such as Hamra, Gemmayzeh and Monnot are highly ephemeral and mobile. The streets are easy to identify, due to their neon scenography in which people are in the spotlight and act accordingly. From the car to the pub or the nightclub, a parade of people is

orchestrated and regulated by 'men of the shade', parking valets, bouncers, and snack retailers. Part of the landscape, they stand alongside the state authorities, sometimes transmitting the urban order represented by police or soldiers. This consolidates a reading of space in which light means safety and darkness means danger.



Lighting in the transient party districts of Beirut

In the rest of the city, there are scattered micro-territories of light, fixed or volatile, lasting or ephemeral. They are places like Souk al Khodra, a non-stop territory of light, a wholesale market place, with officially opening hours but always operating, particularly during the night. Full of fruits or vegetables, trucks arrive all night long from Syria and Egypt, supplying large areas of the city. Shops, boutiques and little groceries, quite isolated and scattered, also bring light and activity among the darkness and silence. The snack bar Barbar has three branches in



Beirut. The biggest, in Hamra, is divided into specialty stores and never closes. At any hour of the day and the night, people eat on the street before going back to their offices, homes, or hotels. During the night, these multicoloured shops become a stopping and socialising venue for workers, party-goers and taxi-drivers, attracted by light and food. Such micro-territories can also be found on the Corniche. This promenade, restructured after the war, constitutes one of the rare public spaces (or more precisely, publicly accessible space) in Beirut. The colourfully dressed crowd during the day is replaced by night-time leisure and activities, quite hidden from public view. Groups of young boys lean against their cars, sitting on a carpet or on the rocks, listening to music, smoking water pipes or drinking alcohol, all activities frowned upon by the religious and social ethos of many people. In a city that never sleeps, the lack of effective public lighting doesn't mean the end of activities but the emergence of other kinds of practice. For in Beirut, micro territories can quickly turn into territories of darkness in which people seek more independence, autonomy and more expansive behaviour. These are places where lovers can meet, where people can have discreet relationships or engage in practices like drinking alcohol. Some areas of the Corniche provide meeting points for young gay men who manage, with suggestive gazes, or evocative bodily postures, to approach other informed observers.



Souk al Khodra,
micro-territory of
light

3) Brilliant
Beirut? Let there
be light!

Trying to solve the
question of lighting
in Beirut, the
Lebanese
architectural firm,
Said Bitar, have

proposed the 'Beirut street lighting Master Plan Strategy', designed more precisely as a SDAL (Schéma Directeur d'Aménagement Lumière). The study is in response for a call for tender, made by the French Region of Île-de-France and deals with the social role of public lighting, aesthetics, tourism, security and the rational use of energy. The first theme of the lighting plan is to establish functional public street lighting that provides security, a better nocturnal environment, improved urban circulation and the continuation of day activities, through standardised and better maintained lighting. It remains to be seen whether the municipal will to achieve this plan exists and whether it will ever be adopted. The second aim seeks to develop environmentally friendly public lighting involving low energy lamps. The creation of several 'paths of light' typifies the last theme of the lighting plan. For instance, Damascus Street, known as the Boundary Line separating the city during the Civil War, is proposed as the new 'green belt' between Pine's forest and Martyr's Square, and a seam between East and West, two parts of the city which still turn their backs to one another. Furthermore, the promotion and embellishment of the city is envisaged through the lighting of buildings, monuments and landscapes. This includes a strategic choice of street lights to convey the image of a 'modern' city or alternatively, the 'historic city'.



Detail of the
Martyr's
Monument,
transformed by
the sparkling light
of 'Brilliant Beirut'

However, such
schemes provide,
for the visitor, a
pre-formatted path
through the city.
'Essential' points
are highlighted
while others, 'not

worthy', are shrouded in darkness, creating a partial and biased reading of the city. Those proposals tend to remind us of the significance of illumination for urban marketing. One of the most striking sentences of the lighting plan, 'It is time for our city to shine again', announces their communication campaign. Its slogan, 'brilliant Beirut', means two different things. It indicates brightness, being lit up, and also someone exceptionally clever or talented. The sentence appears on postcards showing Beirut 'by night'. Beyond simply illuminating the city, the lighting plan mobilises two key principles. First, a city that lives at night is a modern city. Urban lighting is the spearhead in suggesting a modern, global and cosmopolitan city that never sleeps, lively and trendy. The lighting plan provides 'normative' vision of the metropolis, forgetting the ancient and varied existence of urban nightlife. Secondly, it is claimed that Beirut must be brilliant again. This corresponds with the idea of a glorious intellectual past (for instance when Beirut was one of the

centres of Nahda, the cultural renaissance that occurred in Ottoman-ruled Arabic regions). The determination to highlight a chosen part of the past in making Beirut a 'historic city' has little regard for what currently exists and is invented everyday in the city. For Beirut has never stopped being brilliant.



Territories of Light in Beirut's nightscape (L.Le

Douarin, M. Bonte)

April 22nd, 2013 - 09:27am

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