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Night vision for Beirut

“Place-making, walkability, creating promenades”



Urban nightscape lighting strategy, a map for the street lighting project. (Image courtesy of 4b Architects, Aartill Lighting Consultants, the Beirut Municipality and Région Île-de-France)

Claims of a fundamental lack of urban planning are often levelled at Beirut. As a city, it seems to grow in sputters and spurts; the result is chaotic, sprawling, and often not that logistically easy or aesthetically pleasing to live in.

Old, heritage-heavy buildings are demolished even as the carcasses of new skyscrapers are thrown up. Pavements are high and uneven and roads are pot-holed. Public spaces are rare, neighborhoods are semi ghetto-ized, and the city can feel like a playground for those who can afford it. But, in recent times there has been an identifiable will on the part of the Beirut Municipality to think more strategically about the future of the city and what it might look like.

Anyone who potters through Beirut's various districts will note that the one thing universally either missing entirely, badly maintained and unkempt, or inaccessible and elitist, is public (green) space. In response to this lack, in 1999, a partnership was begun between the Région Île-de-France and the Beirut Municipality. The aim: to work on urban management and other issues. In 2010, work began in earnest specifically on public space. The idea, explains urban planner Sarah Lily Yassine of architecture firm 4b Architects, was to “work on a strategy for managing, developing, and upgrading public space in Beirut.” To achieve this, it is important to look at all components of urban management, whether “public transportation, pedestrian access, street lighting, greening, or urban furniture,” Yassine outlines.



Pigeon Rocks as they would look, lit up according to the suggestions of the Beirut Street Lighting Master Plan (Image courtesy of the 4b Architects, Aartill Lighting Consultants, the Beirut Municipality and Région Île-de-France)

A number of projects were launched around the time this partnership began. One project was aimed at connecting the Beirut Central District (Solidere) with the green pine forest of the Horsh, uniting fragmented neighborhoods along the civil war green line as demarcated by the old Damascus Road – one of the first paved roads in Beirut, used by traders (initially especially silk traders who used the road when it was built in 1863) to reach the souks of Damascus and the Syrian hinterland from the port of Beirut - with a series of linear public spaces designed with different users in mind, such as playgrounds for local children. Another was a project to 'green' Beirut, introducing a greater number of botanical punctuation points to an often nature averse city. A project for slow transit or so-called 'soft connections' – slowing traffic down through landscaping, making the city more amicable to its pedestrians and setting the wheels in motion for future cycle lanes - was also initiated. Specific consultants were invited to produce bids, which, were they successful, would result in the drawing up of "master plans", or guidelines that the Municipality

would use as its headlights when navigating any future work on the city. A toddler-sized step, this was a newsworthy one nevertheless, as Yassine explains: "It's a first: the first time since the war, that it's [the municipality] dealing with these kinds of projects, with this level of long-term, strategic thinking. There has not been a vision for Beirut in recent times, or at least a vision for public space. It's a very new theme for the municipality to address:" a new theme, and a different one, in a city where laissez faire had hereto been the usual fare.

In terms of street lighting, Beirut was not always lagging behind. Street lights were first installed around the same time as the tramway, in the early 1900s. According to 4b Architects' readings, the Damascus Road could have been the first road to be lit by electricity (in 1923), before then being only lit by gas lamps. Even in the 1950s, Beirut was still quite up to date. But, whilst other cities continued developing their lighting systems, the Civil War caused Beirut's to stagnate. Now, explains Yassine, the system is badly

maintained and mismanaged – one man at the municipality is responsible for the upkeep of Beirut's 15,000 lighting poles.

Of the projects launched, that to design a street lighting master plan for Beirut might not be perceived as the most glaringly urgent in terms of need – most streets are lit, if not efficiently or comprehensively – or result. But, for Yassine, street lighting can have a profound effect. Fundamentally important to light the way for drivers and pedestrians, lighting can also give a "sense of safety... a sense of belonging," it can "create attractions even if it's not architectural lighting on facades, even if it's not lighting productions, if you just use the landscape."

It can also do for the city, with its pock marks and scars, what the city's plastic surgeons can do to faces and bodies: "with lighting you can hide things that are there in the day and things can come up at night that are not there during the day. You can improve things, you can camouflage things."



(Image courtesy of the 4b Architects, Aartill Lighting Consultants, the Beirut Municipality and Région Île-de-France)

She gives the ("sad") example of Ain el Mreisseh port, an old fishermen's port that because of urban sprawl and real estate development has become completely confined to its very limited remains. "In the day it's shadowed by these high rise buildings, but during the night you can hide them by just lighting specific elements."

Clever lighting can be a visual guide, ushering the eye to the elements of beauty in a scene, subtly sweeping under a rug the rest (at least

laid out their suggestions for the future lighting of Beirut. Yassine describes how they saw their project as one layer in the

for the duration of the hours of darkness.) To public spaces it can add definition and therefore a sense of belonging for those in them: “you can create boundaries, edges that you can’t see with your naked eye because it’s night-time.” Yassine gives the example of the spot on the Corniche opposite the MacDonald’s and Hard Rock Café. Sans lighting this could/does feel like an unusually wide bit of pavement by the side of an often clogged traffic artery. With the right lighting, directed in a certain way, enough intimacy could be crafted so as to create a kind of piazza in the imagination of passers by, and therefore a spot to sit and gather. Yassine cites the example of the Queen’s Walk area on London’s South Bank where (blue) lighting has created what feels “like a square even though it’s one long line.” Having conducted on site research and interviews, 4b Architects along with their partners in the project, French lighting consultants Aartill Lighting,

onion of other projects going on: “we thought we really need to use lighting to create continuities in the city. Our idea was to have a continuous lighting trail that goes around the Corniche - lighting main features – and extending through the central district, , and then goes towards the Damascus Road, the Horsh area.” She explains how their plan intends to integrate through illumination: “it’s interesting how places gain an identity that you can’t really touch, they just become the way they are – you know, Bliss Street has become where people go for juices, the Corniche where people go for backgammon, so we try to look at all these kind of vernacular activities or identities that you just get if you know a place, and try to bring them out. But also to try and connect different areas, focusing on public space.” Yassine is personally optimistic about the Damascus Road project, into which a lighting scheme has

been integrated. She believes that it could come to life in the near future and that if it does it will be a good case study for what the future landscape of urban planning might look like in the city.

Whilst the comprehensive suggestions of 4b Architect and Aartill Lighting’s master plan would be a huge challenge to implement at once, in full, it is likely that improvements and enhancements will be implemented “area by area, street by street, or perhaps neighborhood by neighborhood.” Although there are no plans for giant leaps forward for Beirut, the Municipality now has the blueprints, not to mention the apparent will necessary to make much-needed changes. It is not wholly unlikely that the Beirut of the near future will have a greater number of democratized, public spaces, peppered by plants, connected by cycle lanes and lit in ways that create intimacy, a sense of communality and unity.



(Image courtesy of the 4b Architects, Aartill Lighting Consultants, the Beirut Municipality and Région Île-de-France)

For more information about projects in Beirut, you can visit the [Région Île-de-France](https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/features/night-vision-for-beirut) website.