PUBLIC SPACES, VALUES, AND NEEDS

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While cities are expanding, public space is retiring worldwide. In recent decades many Middle East cities have undergone massive transformations; however, the quality of public spaces of the new globalized cities has been often neglected, although new needs and new ways of living are currently searching for new typologies of public spaces. Particularly in Lebanon, in 1990, after fifteen years of war, the Government developed an urban reconstruction plan to rebuild downtown Beirut, completely destroyed. The plan promoted the idea of building a new contemporary Beirut as the capital of the Middle East, a new city with towers, malls, commercial areas, without considering the life quality of Lebanese citizens and their social needs of new public spaces. The main research problem is the claimed need for public spaces from Lebanon's inhabitants that are currently unavailable. The paper's main aim is to promote the values of social places that can help address pressing challenges like social segregation and equity and urban regeneration processes that affect the population's life. Additionally, public space has enormous potential by strategically supporting cities' economic, environmental, and social agendas. The research methodology has been developed by conducting a series of interviews and a literature survey about the need and values of public spaces in Lebanon. The research has highlighted the transforming needs and values of public spaces that follow the transformation of Lebanese society. The research has identified some typologies of spaces currently required to improve the built environment's quality and promote higher living standards.

Keywords: Urban planning, Sustainability, Social needs, Society.

1 PUBLIC SPACES IN BEIRUT: EMERGING CONFLICTS

1.1 Aims and Objectives

Public spaces, which are fundamental resources of the Lebanese society, are not adequately taken into consideration by the local Government but need to be vigorously developed and managed to respond to all the pressing social needs of the contemporary society. The research aims to investigate reasons, and knowledge, about the need of public spaces in Lebanon to identify some typologies of spaces that are particularly requested and should be promoted to enhance the quality and standards of social life. In doing so, to enhance the opinion of the Lebanese public society a series of interviews were conducted at Lebanese American University in Beirut and Byblos involving students and instructors about the current status of the Lebanese cultural public values, needs, resources and the urban response of the territory trough the available presence of public spaces. The conducted interviews have identified some old and new typologies of public spaces that are particularly needed in Lebanon.
1.2 Literature Review

Public space in growing cities plays an essential role in urban centers by helping in addressing urgent challenges. The urban places, in fact, reduce social segregation and improve a sense of equity; by the recent massive urban regeneration projects ongoing, the issues of climate change and safety are promoted and integrated into the new social values. Moreover, public spaces have a strong potential by strategically supporting cities' economic, environmental, and social agendas (Azzali et al. 2021).

However, in opposition to urban growth, the public spaces are retiring every day and declining worldwide. Beirut, together with many other Middle Eastern cities, is currently affected by a fast urban growth, which generated pollutions, with very high traffic conditions and a very negative impact on a pedestrian circulation, neglecting the needs of children for playing spaces, and a deficient percentage of green areas (about 0.8mq/inhabitant).

In recent years, many cities in the Middle East are undergoing a massive transformation and urban expansion, flourishing in the prosperity produced by the exportation of oil and economic/construction booming. However, there is a lack in investigating the public spaces growth and their social values for the new globalized cities. The change in the urban pattern has resulted in the development of new ways of living, new typologies of spaces, and new urban patterns that address the transformations in urban needs through an innovative hybrid approach to the new social places, rather than traditional squares or markets.

The influence of the public space on the social structure of growing cities was the main aim of the conducted research. Public spaces in cities represent social diversity, national welfare, and the quality of life. Public spaces can be the starting point of social protest, needs for changes, and a platform to live and express any social practice and transformation. The public areas offer spaces for social interaction and the public relations that characterize our life and are consequently indispensable from a social perspective. In the past, public squares had represented important symbolic places with a distinctive character and played a significant role in constructing and reconstructing the city’s identity (Mazzetto 2020). In particular, in Lebanon, in 1990, after the conclusion of the war in Lebanon that host for almost fifteen years, the city center of Beirut, the capital, was utterly ruined. The Government immediately started developing an urban plan to rebuild the capital-s downtown whit a prioritized intention to initiate the Lebanese rebirth. In 1990, the reconstruction plan to Dar Al Handasah was commissioned, and in 1994, the society SOLIDER (Société Libanaise pour le Développement et la Reconstruction de Beyrouth) was assigned to rebuild downtown Beirut, involving the reconstruction of the French area of the city center, completed in 2010 with the involvement of many international architects. The project was extended to the seaside area of the city center, developing new commercial and residential districts with the intent of exhibiting a newly modernized city with luxury towers and hotels, expressed by the obsessed vision of the Government to achieve urban splendor and impressiveness but detaching the new interventions with the existing area by constructing highways, overpasses, urban arteries from south to the north of the city. The reconstructed city was supposed to showcase the vision of the Government in power to rebuild an image of Beirut as the capital of the Middle East area without taking into consideration the real urban needs, social values, and public services, hiding all the social and urban problems in place at that time.

The reconstruction strategy actuated almost twenty years ago has created boundaries and separations due to infrastructures instead of creating a relationship between urban areas and without responding to the social needs of public areas. The approach was mainly based on a holistic profit-oriented strategy, neglecting the openness to the places’ possibilities, radically
transforming the areas for the community’s life. In the complexity of Beirut city, many logics arise from the past and many needs for transformations that still are not taken into consideration, resulting in segregation and individualization. Against the contemporary worldwide approach resulting from new internet technologies, social applications, and hubs, in Beirut, the reconstruction has promoted the isolation, the segregation of religious communities, the regularization of forms and shapes against the mixing logic of irregularity and natural integration of the city-territory. In the reconstructed Beirut, we can find a city that summarizes all the other images of the city, where every resident has their ideas of the city, as the memory of the city where he used to live before, by replacing a sort of collective memory of the city with an individual memory with a lack of social spaces for social needs (El-Daccache 2021). Beirut is the response of its inhabitants, and transformations are currently in place to claim the social needs and the public values of the alive society in a continuous transformation process. Today, Beirut is becoming a service platform with an unprecedented urban transformation due to the need to create aggregation and disrupt the imposed bonds and boundaries. The new young generation, entirely embedded by the social interaction of social web platforms, claims the needs of public areas and public social resources. The planned idea of a city that accommodates the image of grandeur does not fit with the realistic situation of neglected values in the lively Beirut, such as the urban, social, and economic needs of the future generations. These fundamental elements have to be taken deeply into consideration to develop a new urban strategy. The research intends to define new approaches and tools capable of transforming the city's architecture and urbanism for a new Beirut open to dialogue discussion where the open public spaces could be the starting place of any transformation.

1.3 Methodology for Research

The main research interest is to investigate ideas and knowledge about social places' values in the past and contemporary society. The aim is to promote and share opinions about the history and current status of the public spaces, their values, and the needs of the changing Lebanese inhabitants to enhance living standards. The data collected through interviews are an adopted tool to investigate the Lebanese meanings and values in building narratives that capture the specificities of the urban setting and the complexity of the related socio-cultural aspects of the public spaces. For this research, semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data. The interviews lasted for 10 to 20 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for the following later phases, in preparation for analysis since the research is still in its initial phase and needs further investigation and analysis. The intent is to provide additional interviews to residents, local authorities, private and public stakeholders, architects, and local communities.

The semi-structured interviews have included the following main questions and points of discussion that opened the dialogues with the respondents.

- How to envision the future directions of the Lebanese urban planning strategy in enhancing the value of Lebanese public spaces?
- How can public spaces influence the development of the Lebanese country while advocating for sustainable cities?
- What are the most important social values of public spaces in Lebanon considering both the past and the contemporary society?
- What are Lebanese public spaces' main functional, social, perceptual, and heritage values?

The research attempts to identify main trends, influences, and ideologies that precisely could shape the future directions of growth of the Lebanese country by advocating sustainable
approaches of progressive strategies for the new urban public places. The paper and the research tried to classify the analyzed main arguments that have been discussed during the interviews about the values and needs associated with Lebanese public spaces. The intent is to contribute to a better investigation and understanding of the current Lebanese status of ideas about the future growing directions of the country and the urban and architectural influences that should affect the national development.

2 EMERGING OF NEW PUBLIC SPACES LEBANON

With Beirut being a city lacking public space, as stated by researchers, the existing public spaces are even more critical, and they deserve greater attention in the contemporary urban planning practice. In Beirut, the reconstruction was subjected to main privatized projects that resulted in a visible lack of public places to escape. The necessary transformation of the city includes the sedimentation of layers for the social approach to places through private and public lives. Technology and habits modification in our society reduced our spaces of aggregation to mere places where the pleasure to gather people left space to consume. In history, the modernization of the Middle Eastern cities during the Ottoman period has produced a massive urban transformation of the cities' morphology. In Beirut during the French colonization, new parks and public spaces were introduced into the traditional culture to follow a Western approach on urban spaces with a more public view in opposition to the highly private life, introducing a big challenge for a different social perspective (Polesello 2021). Recently in Lebanon, in a context of massive privatization of public services, the new public spaces in Beirut have been incorporated into massive private development projects such as malls, where the social and economic aspects have been combined into the new typology of malls as new souqs. This approach has affected the perception of any public spaces with exponential speculation due to the local political corruption in running merely private businesses. The privatization in the country has also totally affected the seashore land, prohibiting any public use for the beach and access to the sea.

There is a clear social subdivision in the use of public spaces due to the governmental speculation and private interests approaches:

- The middle/high classes, frequent malls, and luxury private access to common spaces such as private access to the seashore, luxury restored public spaces in Downtown Beirut, etc.
- The lower classes and political refugees frequent the public areas such, public beaches or traditional souqs as public spaces (Figure 1).

The economic, social division and marginalization of residents in Beirut due to the difference in economic incomes has generated many tensions and negative impacts in the use of public areas in the last periods. In the city's periphery, the class subdivision is visible in the growth of many subordinates' social collectiveness (El-Khoury 2021). However, the need for public spaces has naturally produced a social response in alternative to standardized public places, which have raised in marginal areas and in the suburbs where free access is permitted, especially to the lower classes, mainly in the highly deprived areas around the port and the seashore. The new public places are either privately owned, semi-public, or public spaces, where the lack of resources to maintain the spaces cleanliness or the absence of checking points for entrances have permitted a certain level of freedom and accessibility to a massive variety of social groups for entertainments purpose and a sustainable way to live. In particular, the Beirut waterfront has attracted the lower classes and refugee families with children since many years ago. The user groups and the activities change during the day by constantly redefining the accessibility and the use of public spaces.
3 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the research has classified the following main typologies of public spaces which are needed for the Lebanese population:

- Public open spaces as for the standard classification of green parks, open squares, beaches, and seashore.
- Multi-use public spaces mainly associated with pedestrian pathways.
- Public facilities including souqs, markets, sport, and entrainment.
- Semi-public and private commercial places such as malls and new souqs.
- Emerging new public spaces for lower classes families.

Understanding the new urban needs and directions raises the questions of improving the quality of the built environment to facilitate and promote livable public spaces that, in turn, promote higher living standards. Public spaces, particularly in lower communities, bring people together to transform the spaces into vital places encourage renewal by serving everyday needs. Further, public spaces constitute a fundamental element in contemporary urban regeneration strategies entailing the creation of a public culture that shapes public space for social interaction and constructing a visual representation of the city. In city planning, public spaces are designed to improve the overall visual character of the city and enhance the city's identity. Furthermore, public spaces promote social connectivity and diversity, thus making neighborhoods more cohesive, lively, and ultimately more attractive to residents and investors.

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References


