

*See you again for the first time, next time*

# COLLAGING BEIRUT

بيروت

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Nadja Kim Schlenker

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for the first time,  
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“Cities, like dreams,  
are made of desires and fears,  
even if the thread of their  
discourse is secret,  
their rules are absurd,  
their perspectives deceitful,  
and everything conceals  
something else.”

- Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities -

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Close your eyes and take a seat. You're sitting at a big table where pictures, photographs, drawings and written memories are scattered across the surface. Next to them you find a white sheet of paper and glue. Take the scissors that are lying in front of you and cut out pieces that you like or that you've seen before. Cut them and start to combine them, cut, combine, cut, combine – slowly a new creation will evolve and when the image that you've created appeals to you, paste the pieces together on the white sheet of paper. But also the new image is not fixed; you can always take the scissors again, cut and recombine, add new pieces and paste together again.

To me, getting to know a place is like creating a giant collage. Every new encounter and impression, as well as every new picture and newfound connection is a piece that can be added. I might go back to a part that I've already created, move and reshape it again to connect it to the new piece that I've just found. Depending on individual values, experiences, status and relationships, collages of the same place created by various people might look very different.

One of the most exciting and interesting collages I started to create lately is one about Beirut - the capital of Lebanon with its rich history, vibrant neighbourhoods and millions of stories to tell. The city, located in a region that is so widely discussed and pointed at, made me curious. I only had one perspective on it, one from outside made from pictures on the news and travel blogs. I've heard stories about the city from Lebanese friends and people who've visited the capital before. I didn't know it and I don't know it still but while staying in Beirut for a few months, I got the chance to add more pieces to my personal collage of the city.

During the process of writing this essay back in Amsterdam an uprising against the Lebanese government started. People who are demanding better living conditions, the end of corruption, a united Lebanon and that the people in power step down, take to the streets in thousands every day. Singing and marching, they celebrate their newfound unity and spread their long lost hope. Everyday the protesters meet again or sleep at the demonstration sites. They organise talks, discussion rounds, craft sessions and start charity initiatives; revolution fashion and art fill the streets and are shared on social media. Couples get married in the middle of the gatherings, celebrating with other protesters, and on the instagram-group "thawra crushes" you can try to get in touch with the person you had an eye on during the demonstration. The days are mostly peaceful but on some days streets get blocked, tires are set on fire and fights with security forces and people who support the government and start.

I received pictures and videos from my Lebanese friends and again I found myself in the position of only having this one perspective; the perspective of an observer from far away. I tried to stay up to date by watching and reading news from every source whose language I understood and followed updates on social media. The stories I've heard from my friend's "thawra" (revolution) contrasted to a huge extent with what I saw on the news. And again I felt the urge to get another perspective on Beirut and the current situation, to collect more pieces, so I booked a flight.

To examine the city of Beirut as a collage with different layers and multiple realities, I'll have a look at the origin of collage, how it can be applied to urban surroundings and to the formation of opinions about different places. The following parts deal with architecture in Beirut, the influence it has on people and the impact individuals have on the city. I'll examine how movement can be used to change individual perspectives on cities and on regions, whereby I challenge Western mainstream media representations about the Middle East. I asked Lebanese and Syrian friends who live or grew up in Beirut to add their personal perspectives on places in the city that have a special meaning to them. I will share the observations I made, the experiences that I had and the emotions that I felt during the uprising in Beirut.

The following text can be read as a part of my personal collage and at the same time be used as a piece to enlarge your own.











## PASTING TOGETHER

The technique of cutting and pasting, taking apart, reusing and combining plays a big role in contemporary visual culture. Almost everywhere you go, you encounter collage or an offshoot from it. Instagram for example allows users to apply text and pictures on photographs to create new multi-layered images. Collage developed into a daily practice that has become so common that we sometimes don't even notice it anymore. Its origins however go back centuries.

African tribal emblems, Japanese text-collages and European folk-art are examples of early versions of collage works. Site-specific materials like stones and fabric were collected and put together in new arrangements to create weather charms and objects for cultural rituals. However, only in the 20th century has the technique been recognized as an art form. Its name derives from the French word "coller" which means to paste. The new practice was welcomed into the art world: "The technique of collage was ideally suited to capture the noise, speed, time, and duration of the twentieth-century urban, industrial experience."<sup>1</sup> Painting and sculpting borrowed from the technique to depict forms away from realistic representations; artists pasted together their own worlds and utopias.

In subsequent art movements collage was used extensively. The technique gave Cubist artists a tool to deconstruct objects and depict them from different viewpoints. The aim was to add more layers of meaning to the actual object and to depict additional dimensions. The German Dadaist Hannah Höch used collage to question gender roles as well as political agendas through combining cut out photographs, images of fashion magazines and journals. Different meanings were taken out of context and put together in a new way to criticize society and the ruling class.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> D. Waldman, *Collage, Assemblage and the Found Object*, New York, Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1992, p.11.

<sup>2</sup> A. Dempsey, *Styles, Schools and Movements: The Essential Encyclopaedic Guide to Modern Art*, London, Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2010, p.117,118.

Artists like David Hockney got interested in collage and started to play with the technique. Hockney worked with photographic collages, which he called joiners, to overcome "standard" representations in photography. For these joiners multiple pictures of the same person, object or situation are taken from different angles. The photographs are printed before they are arranged next to each other or in a way in which they overlap. To Hockney wide-angle pictures don't depict what you actually see in real life since they lack in perspective. Not only does he question the presence of the lines that are bending in these pictures but also the sheer information that one photograph contains. Hockney argues that it is impossible to actually process this amount of visual data in just one glance: "I noticed that these joiners also had more presence than ordinary photographs. With five photos, for instance, you were forced to look five times. You couldn't help but look more carefully."<sup>3</sup> The joiners give the depicted subject extra layers – the layers of time, space and movement that are not present in only one shot. "I realized that this sort of picture came closer to how we actually see, which is to say, not all-at-once but rather in discrete, separate glimpses which we then build up into our continuous experience of the world. [...] I realized how much thinking goes into seeing – into ordering and reordering the endless sequence of details which our eyes deliver to our mind. Each of these squares assumes a different perspective, a different focal point around which the surroundings recede to background. The general perspective is built up from hundreds of micro-perspectives."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> L. Weschler, "True to Life", *David Hockney Cameraworks*, London, Thames & Hudson Ltd., 1984, p.8.

<sup>4</sup> Weschler, "True to Life", p.11,16.

A collage can overcome space and time by taking people, objects and situations out of context and thereby transporting the original meaning to another context. It can be combined with other fragments in a new way that hasn't existed before. The technique allows combinations and connections that are physically impossible due to space, time, ideologies and other limitations. In a collage it is possible for ants to become giants and elves to fight in space, knights can live together with hippies on the moon and the biggest archenemies celebrate together. People, objects, places and values that usually don't mix are brought together - everything is possible. A collage can therefore be a space for unusual encounters; a playground for thoughts and values, ideas can be tested and status quos questioned. It's a space where you can dream out loud.

The works of Lebanese photographer and artist Maria Kassab represent these spaces and deal with the political and social climate in the country. Her collages act as a form of resistance through the change of context and the emphasis on the presence of different realities. In one of her latest and on-going series "Letters from home" she merges pictures of hopes, demands and wishes of her fellow countrymen in times of the uprising. She adds extra layers of meaning to the notion of home, symbolized through objects that she encounters in the streets and the protest sites in Beirut.



Maria Kassab - "Letters from home" 2019



Maria Kassab - "Letters from home" 2019

## On the way again

Beirut should feel familiar after a few visits and it does in a way but every time I go there I feel like I am meeting a new place. On the 17th of October, 24 days ago, an uprising against the government started. My Lebanese friends were excited about this new development, "hope" which sounded like a paradox only a few weeks ago, became a collective feeling. Thousands of people, regardless of their religion and political orientation took to the streets united.

Now, more than three weeks after the beginning my friends are still enthusiastic even though the rush of the first days is over and the protestors' goal is to keep the momentum going. They demand better living conditions, the end of corruption and a functioning technocrat government that replaces the sectarian system. However, the results of this uprising are unknown and it can go into every direction – the protestors' demands could be met and lead to improvements; fighting and another civil war aren't impossible either.

"Wait and see how it develops", a friend in Beirut advised me after I told him about my travel plans. "It's not 100% safe at the moment", he added. Another one was more encouraging. "Yalla, of course, come now. It's fine and it's peaceful. You should see it". The two seats next to me on the plane are empty, I am used to fully booked flights to Beirut but this time half of the seats aren't taken since a lot of tourists cancelled their flights and hotel reservations.

"The worst thing that can happen is that they shut down the airport and you're stuck here", a Lebanese friend told me on the phone while I was still back in Amsterdam not sure whether it was a good idea to go or not. My friends and family who haven't been to Lebanon are concerned since they only see the fires, tanks and roadblocks on the news. The pictures about the protest in Lebanon follow the news about air raids in Syria and deadly protests in Iraq. Media rarely covers the peaceful side of protests and I can't blame my family and friends for being worried. Of course everything can happen but until now the situation hasn't escalated.

It feels strange and interesting at the same time to sit on this plane now flying to a destination where the situation is completely unpredictable. I am entering a country that a part of the population would like to leave but who doesn't have the possibility to. I am going there, aware of my privileged position that allows me to leave the country if the situation gets complicated. In two weeks from now a flight attendant will ask people again if they want coffee or tea, somebody will sit on the other side of the aisle, maybe dreaming about what is waiting in Amsterdam and I will know how this "new" Beirut, that I've heard about so much, feels like and to which extent it differs from the pictures that I've seen on the news.







## PASTED CITYSCAPES

I took a lot of photographs during the months I stayed in Beirut. My analogue camera helped me to capture what struck my eyes and to keep the moments that would become part of my personal library of images of the city. One of these pictures was taken out of a huge window of a 70s building that itself felt like a setting in a Hollywood movie. The view that I got while looking out of this window reminded me of a collage, as if somebody took photographs from different places in different times, cut them and then combined them in the picture that I was looking at. The developed photographs that I have now intensify this feeling since they compress this view on a flat image. Almost everywhere in Beirut I got the same impression; parts of Ottoman buildings with characteristic arches are placed next to simple residential houses and skyscrapers designed in different styles rise up in the gaps in between. The picture is dense, no space is empty and still, it feels like looking at a collage that is still growing.

The writer Tamar Shafir's definition of collage in the context of architecture seems suitable for Beirut. She defines it "[...] as the introduction of discrete and unusual elements into a dimensional space, in which there tends to be a distinction between figure and ground, between content and context"<sup>5</sup>. She goes a step further and states that collage is "[...] constructing and making present a set of elements that are implausible or impossible in their proximity, due to scalar disparities, cultural incompatibility, biological recombination, geographical or temporal separation, or sheer irrelevance."<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes the borders between different parts of Beirut are still obvious, they haven't vanished after the civil war that separated areas according to different communities, religion and political orientation. Some parts grew together, lines became more fluid and a gentrification process began in the city's central area. You encounter all sorts of styles and traces of different eras while walking through the streets of Beirut. The turbulent history with the civil war that lasted from 1975 to 1990 left marks on countless buildings and you still see houses with thousands of bullet holes everywhere. In the centre of Beirut you get a surreal view; modern business complexes and recently built skyscrapers alternate with buildings like the "Holiday Inn", a huge hotel that used to be a major battleground during the civil war. Its walls are perforated with bullet and rocket holes; the hotel never got renovated and until today the building's future remains uncertain. It's like different moments in time coexist – businessmen negotiate deals in new office complexes right next to places like the "Holiday Inn" which the businessmen's parents and grandparents probably still have first-hand stories to tell about.

<sup>5</sup> T. Shafir, "Surgeon, Seamster, Sorcerer: The Embodied Practice of Collage", *Radical Cut-Up: Nothing Is Original*, Amsterdam, Berlin, Sandberg Instituut and Sternberg Press, 2019, p. 215.

<sup>6</sup> Shafir, "Surgeon, Seamster, Sorcerer: The Embodied Practice of Collage", p. 215, 216.







## The fallen star of Beirut

A mishmash of chaos, culture, and ideas - Hamra for me was a journey of self-discovery and maturity. A playground of love, pain and challenges that altered my perceptions and values in life for the better. Hamra is unfiltered, it doesn't hide behind charming facades or clean streets, from afar it seems dirty and ordinary, however once you look closely, you discover its splendid secrets.

During my first year of studies at the American University of Beirut, I used to walk around the streets every day and just observe the things around me and talk to strangers, some of whom became lovers and friends and others that became nuisances. I felt like Hamra is a damaged time machine mixing up the past, present and the future; you can find the old men that gather at "Costa Coffee" every morning to read the paper as they have for the past 50 years as if nothing has changed since their wonderful coffee shop "Horse Shoe café" closed down to accommodate westernized college students. You can also find an old barber on Bliss Street that opens his shop every morning to have no visitors yet becomes the star of a provocative fashion magazine published all around Beirut.

Despite the ever changing functions and the westernization of Hamra, the stories are still alive. What is now an unimpressible McDonalds branch was once a diner where all the revolutionaries, writers, and poets used to meet before and during the war. What is now a shopping street filled with sleazy fashion stores and blocked with Maserati's blasting Arabic dance music was once a cultural area filled with glamorous cinemas playing the greatest films the 60's had to offer.

Hamra became special to me because it allowed me to see different stratum of life and history through my own eyes while I created my own memories. My parents and grandparents have told me many stories about their life in Lebanon, however Hamra is the only area where I actually feel what they experienced when I visit the places mentioned. It is something beyond the physical space, it's the energy and the people that stay there forever.

I came to notice that everyone in Hamra is mad, from the contemporary artist that gave me drawing lessons who in a fit of rage would throw her television out of the window or run out on the streets naked, to the 60-year old homeless woman that stands at a street corner day and night, passport in hand waiting for her "prince" to take her to a foreign county and give her the lavish life she deserves, of course she will make sure to tell you the same story every single time you pass by. I enjoyed the madness of Hamra because it was so far from what I was accustomed to, and from the nature of my reserved character.

Going to Hamra every day for seven years during the course of my academic career added layers and layers of personal experiences both good and bad that made me forget how much I really loved this city. Now that I have graduated and the nerve-wrecking cloud of architecture school has faded, it has finally returned to being my dysfunctional time machine that I occasionally wander through and rediscover.













“Are you a journalist?”

“If not you must be a spy!”, the man who is sitting next to me smiles and curiously tries to catch a glimpse on my computer screen. “There are so many of you guys here at the moment.” It’s not the first time I get asked this question and he is almost surprised when I tell him that I am neither a journalist nor that I work for the UN or an embassy. There are a lot more journalists in Beirut than during the summer months. Or maybe I only pay more attention to them now since I expect them to be here in bigger numbers. A group of people arrives and sits down next to the table where I am sitting at. They passionately discuss the government and the situation is accompanied by the chewing of halloumi and labneh sandwiches. A young woman, with a camera hanging around her neck, walks in and approaches the barista who is busy drawing a flower onto a cappuccino: “Jad, I need your help! I am covering a story on the hospital situation”. Jad claps his hands, leans back and starts laughing sarcastically, “It’s bad right? There is no medication anymore.” He keeps on laughing while the woman hands him her phone. “This country is fucked up” he pauses for a second and shakes his head before he continues: “This situation is so fucked up.” He can’t hide his frustration, types in the number and hands the phone back to the woman.

I experience such scenes almost every day. Teams equipped with huge cameras and bags filled with equipment swarm through the streets, they take pictures of the protests and interview people. “Nadja, have you noticed how nobody knows which day it is anymore? The only thing people talk about is politics and the revolution”, Jad serves me my favourite coffee and tells me how much he’d love his country to be more stable. It’s weirdly quiet in the main street of Gemmayzeh today, the neighbourhood where the café is located. Some of the shops are closed again due to the events of last night, just like most schools, universities and all banks in the country. The killing of a protester early this morning put people in a state of alert. Nobody knows if this event could be another spark that makes the volcano erupt completely.

Back in Amsterdam I didn’t know what my friends in Beirut meant when they tried to describe the feeling that is in the air at the moment. They spoke about excitement, hope, unity and determination mixed with uncertainty. I tried to comprehend what they meant, but only now am I beginning to understand. Happiness, hope and worry take almost hourly turns and there is a collective waiting for something to happen even though nobody seems to know what they’re waiting for exactly.







Teacher Parent Store



## BUILT ON EXPLOSIVE GROUNDS

Imagine one of these movies in which the main actor is moving from one place to another one in only a few seconds. You're following the camera, travelling with the person in an impossible speed through space and time. Within seconds you see a place, a country or even a whole continent. This feeling of fast-forwarding is what I got when I walked through Beirut for the first time. Within one and a half hours I passed through so many different areas that I almost couldn't believe what I just saw and experienced. It seemed like I was walking through multiple cities at once.

Just like the buildings and infrastructure, the people are an eclectic blend as well, inhabitants with different backgrounds, beliefs and political orientations shape their surroundings. Fancy buildings rise up in the wealthy parts of town, people dress in expensive designer cloths and drive through the streets in luxurious cars. Other parts of the city are dominated by old apartment complexes with huge curtains covering the balconies to keep the apartment cool inside and to prevent prying eyes. In Christian neighbourhoods you can hear the church bells ring and only a few hundred meters further in neighbourhoods with predominantly Muslim inhabitants you can listen to the muezzin who calls for prayer. Every neighbourhood reflects individual characteristics; every entity has its own logic. Seemingly different worlds exist in close proximity and form a whole. A lot of cities are shaped this way, with contrasting neighbourhoods and different narratives, in Beirut however, these characteristics can be felt and seen in a distinct way only a few minutes away from each other. In his publication "Imagine Architecture" curator and writer Lukas Feireiss takes a look at cities in relation to their inhabitants and human interference: "As a dynamic system of human settlement, the city grows and shrinks, shifts and diversifies over time. Rather than a geographically localized, static area, the city is comprised of ever-changing altered states within today's global urban fabric."<sup>7</sup>

The Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury recognizes the limited influence that urban planners and architects have on Beirut and the unique situation the city is in. He calls the cityscape "catastrophic" and criticises that there is no mechanism of control; buildings are not in dialogue with each other: "I often compare Beirut to a room that is completely packed with people that turn their backs to each other, that don't talk to each other. So every single building is developed and designed in a way to protect itself from anything that is going to happen around it because there is no master plan, there is no regulating mechanism, there is no common vision so you sort of engineer your own way of protecting yourself because the outside is hostile. The state and the city did not give you any guarantee as to what is going to happen next to you; in front of you."<sup>8</sup>

If you zoom into the city and change the perspective from the city as one entity to an individual scale, every person who lives in an urban surrounding or visits it, represents one individual perspective, one piece of a whole. Lukas Feiereiss states that "the city thereby constructs multiple individual urban narratives that constantly overlap, intertwine, and contradict one another in myriads of fleeting contacts. The city becomes a palimpsest of multiple personal narratives."<sup>9</sup>

In Beirut different realities coexist and intertwine in ways that sometimes seem absurd. Next to partying crowds, children of poor families and refugees try to sell roses and ask for money to feed their relatives. Fancy bars where a bottle of wine is as expensive as a month's salary of a less privileged person are only a few kilometres away from neighbourhoods where people live below the poverty line as well as Syrian and Palestinian refugee camps where thousands of people share very little space and live under unbearable conditions. The presence of all these different realities and personal narratives contribute to the complex and tense atmosphere in the city.

<sup>7</sup> Lukas Feireiss, *Imagine Architecture: Artistic Visions of the Urban Realm*, Berlin, Gestalten, 2014, p. 136.

<sup>8</sup> Toxic Grounds – Bernard Khoury [online video], AA School of Architecture, 6 March 2018, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csiJtsKiAhc>>, accessed 10 December 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Feireiss, *Imagine Architecture: Artistic Visions of the Urban Realm*, p.137.





## An elusive childhood

On his summer vacations, my brother likes to go with his family to our grandparents' house in the South of France. It makes him happy to be there with his wife and kids. He brings his daughters to his favourite childhood places and watches them experience the same activities he used to do when he was their age. Attraction parks, beaches, artists on the side walks, July 14th fireworks, favourite restaurants, pizza, crepes, cotton candy, almost everything remained intact.

In Beirut, we don't have that connection. There are barely any places I recognize from my childhood. Everything changed: my school, my home, the streets, the shops, the people... In her song 'Beirut Sette Donia', Majida El Roumi appeals to Beirut and begs her to rise from the ashes. We offered you the knife instead of the flower, we burnt you she admits. As if physically destroying the city was not enough. We had to take its soul, too... The city's reconstruction after the war didn't just clean up the rubble, it cleared away much of the city's historical inheritance and abolished the connections between its people and its spaces.

With time and age, one becomes nostalgic. In search of physical 'remains' from my childhood in Beirut, I visit my grandmother's home. There, time came to a freeze. Until this day, whenever I enter her home, I briefly feel a sentiment of serenity. It's the joy of seeing and touching things that withstood the test of time from the period of my childhood. It's the happiness of being with my grandmother and feeling grateful that she's still around. Her home doesn't bring back the memories of war and destruction that we survived. On the contrary, it reminds me of the happy days when we used to have our big family reunions at my grandparents on a Sunday afternoon. Those magnificent Sunday lunches when my grandmother would prepare her specialty dishes 'kebbeh bi Laban' and 'Gigot d'agneau'. It's the memories of the 'tea time', a habit that my grandparents adopted from their days in Manchester. They'd prepare some tea with milk and bowls of strawberry with milk. I was never able to replicate those tastes when I became an adult. Even though I shopped at the best organic markets and bought the top ingredients, I failed to bring back the taste. I tried everything. I gave up trying.

The signs of wear and tear on the furniture quickly bring me back to reality. A sobering reminder that things are not the same. The house is no longer buzzing with life. It is quiet. The family gatherings barely take place and when they do, they don't have the same feel as before. One cannot bring back the past.

This is a home rich in memories, like many other family homes. How can we leave it to decay? Why aren't we putting our everything in restoring and making it our gathering center? I ask myself. What have I been doing all these years in the 'better world'? I didn't come here in search of a new home. When I left, it was with the intention to go out of my bubble and discover the world. I was inspired by the success stories of my grandparents who lived abroad for many years before they returned to their home country. Returning to Beirut was an option back then. It's not the case today. I speak on behalf of all the Lebanese abroad. I changed. We changed. I never imagined how living abroad for a long time would impact one's identity. When I come to Beirut for a visit, I need a few days to adjust to the craziness and the chaos of the city. Then the magic happens, invariably I have the best moments of my life. When the time comes to leave, it's always with a heavy heart, but I know I can't stay. Should I stay or should I go? That's my life dilemma. I guess Michail Nehaime provides the answer when he says: he who cannot feel home at home, will never find a home.







Rent

AUSTIN Achrafieh  
ing you a  
never left

الأشقر

الرميل

ART





8pm sharp.  
The concert begins.

A yellow and white striped curtain is being pushed to the side. A young woman in a fine knitted sweater and tight black pants enters one of the main stages of the evening - her balcony. The woman holds a medium sized pot and a wooden spoon in her hands that usually are used for cooking lentil dishes and mixing fresh hummus. She takes a look down on the sidewalk. Her gaze wanders from the neighbour's front door on the opposite side of the street up to the balconies of the floors above. She is waiting for her audience to appear. The loyal listeners are her neighbours, who will also be her fellow musicians.

DOONG DOONG DOONG

Like a lead violinist and concertmaster the young woman sets the tone for the orchestra with rhythmic and slow hits on the pot. A man with a loose ponytail steps outside, observes the scene and checks the presence of the neighbours, just like the woman did a moment earlier. With his forearms leaning on the railing he waits, knowing what to expect next. Slowly women, men and kids of every age open the doors and step outside, equipped with pans, pots and other utensils that add different tones to the sound of the night.

It's day 30 of the Lebanese uprising and the recurring concert has become a fixed part of the daily schedule. With melodies and changing rhythms, people in the whole country call the government's attention to their dissatisfaction. From Tyre in the south, passing through the neighbourhoods in Beirut, to Tripoli in the north, the melodies fill the country's houses and streets.

Cling, cling, cling, cling, a higher and faster sound joins the concert from far away and the evening melody of the revolution reaches its peak. Loud and strong tones alternate with more quiet and soft ones - the hitting of metal, ceramics, glass and plastic creates a mix that is unique for this night.

After a few minutes the sound gets less complex and the first pans and bowls fall silent. The melody is slowly fading out. Still standing on the same spot on the balcony, the young lady hits the pot determinately for the last time.

DOONG DOONG DOONG

She greets her neighbours and goes back inside before closing the yellow and white striped curtains behind her. The countrywide concert comes to an end for tonight; its echo will remain until the curtains will be opened again for the next concert of pans and pots, tomorrow at 8pm.



My favorite place in Beirut is my classroom. I am a language teacher and I have international students. Working in such an environment allows me to meet amazing and interesting people from all over the world and exchange experiences with them. Every day there is different. I walk into my classroom and never know what I am going to find! Sharing my knowledge with others is very rewarding and keeps me motivated. In the classroom we inspire, support, and get the chance to discover and share some of the best parts of ourselves as human beings. My students and I enjoy exchanging information about our culture, traditions and customs. We joke and laugh heartily.











YALLA!

We form an opinion of a place not only by visiting it but also by reading and hearing about it. Sometimes we consciously take in information about a place, other times we are influenced without being aware of it. We use the different inputs and assemble them together in our own individual way. Every picture, video and reportage we see or read is a piece that adds to our own perception, our personal "collage" of a place.

Tamar Shafrir states that today, "[...] both visual representations and technological augmentations of physical reality play an instrumental role in our experience of "actual" space"<sup>10</sup>. Taking up this idea and transferring it onto cities, the 'actual space' of these urban landscapes is a mix of personal experience of physical visits, and visual representations of it on blogs, stories from friends, travel videos on YouTube, media narratives and other sources.

The ratio between these two, the first-hand experiencing and the visual representations, depends on various factors such as your country of origin, social status and political situations. If you are from the Netherlands the chance that you have visited Amsterdam, Berlin, Brussels or Paris is much higher than that you've visited a place outside of Europe. One of the regions that are represented in Western media almost every day is the Middle East - a place that is not frequently visited by the majority of Westerners. The opinion about the region is dominated by representations and not by first-hand experiences.

As a good way to change perspectives and to gather more information about a place, we can visit it. Acquired knowledge about a place and culture changes and develops within new contexts; encounters with people can play an important role. To examine the effects that movement can have on people, artists like Olafur Eliasson started to work with it. "Movement holds a great potential for understanding how we feel part of something else, for interaction with people. If we don't move, we don't meet. [...] via movement [...] the ground for our engagement with objects is paved, and as soon as we engage, both surroundings and objects become relative. And it's only when things and systems to some extent become relative that we can reconsider them, renegotiate our surroundings. So movement is a necessary condition for our evaluation of the world, for criticism."<sup>11</sup> Olafur Eliasson's words underline his works that deal with perspective, movement and perception, in a lot of his projects the viewer needs to move to actually see and experience it. His "One-way colour tunnel" is black from one side, as soon as you start walking through it, the colours of the tunnel change, they become relative to the observer's position.

<sup>10</sup> Shafrir, "Surgeon, Seamster, Sorcerer: The Embodied Practice of Collage", p. 214, 215.

<sup>11</sup> Studio Olafur Eliasson: An Encyclopedia, Köln, Taschen, 2008, p. 269.

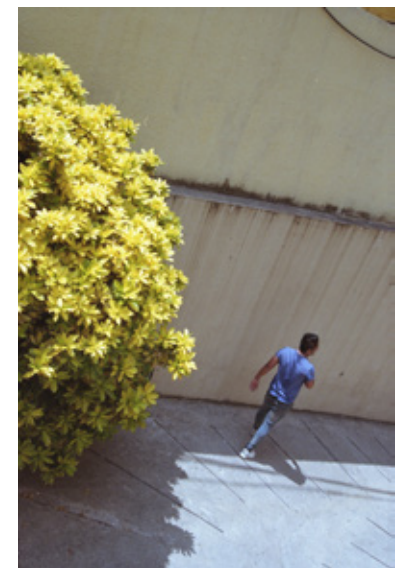
To discover a city through movement, French philosopher and situationist Guy Debord developed the "Theory of the Dérive" that refines the preceding concept of psychogeography introduced by the Situationists International. The group of intellectuals and artists aimed to create different situations to explore perspectives away from daily habits. According to the avant-garde group these situations were necessary to be socially critical and to be able to reflect on culture from various viewpoints. They defined psychogeography as "[...] the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals."<sup>12</sup> Following the approach of "Theory of the Dérive", people are encouraged to walk through an urban surrounding, forgetting about their privileged backgrounds and conditioned actions and perspectives. "Dérive" is defined as "[...] a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. [...] In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there"<sup>13</sup>. The aim is to get away from usual routines and to leave micro worlds, which are described as the routes people usually take for going to work, for leisure and consumption.

Psychogeographer Will Self utilizes this approach as a way of mapping cities in a different way. His approach focuses on geographical aspects and doesn't take social conditions into account. He gives google maps as an example where you can understand distances and geographical conditions on a rational level; the bodily experience however is missing. Only when you walk a certain distance can you understand space on a physical level, thus getting to know a place to him is like stitching together the geographical information and the bodily experience of moving through it.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> G. Debord, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography", Situationist International Anthology, Berkeley, Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006, p.8.

<sup>13</sup> G. Debord, "Theory of the Dérive", Situationist International Anthology, Berkeley, Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006, p.62.

<sup>14</sup> Will Self [online video], Talks at Google, 9 November 2007, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=zVEgOiB7Bo8>>, accessed 12 December 2019.







Gemmayzeh will always be a home to me. For many reasons this street made me feel the comfort of belonging to a place. I will not be able to choose one specific reason for this. Maybe it's seeking comfort at my maternal grandparents' house, or visiting my father in his shop. But what really makes this place feel like home is all the stories and memories that lie between those walls, shops, and stairs; memories from my experience but most importantly from my family's. I grew up between Gemmayzeh and Zalka, listening to stories of my paternal and maternal family who lived there all of their lives. My only memory of my grandpa Yorgo is in his house in Gemmayzeh. I was three years old and he was sitting there on his rocking chair playing the oud. I was enjoying the music and running around the low tables in the living room. He was listening to me playing around him. He said to my mother that he couldn't wait to teach me the piano. My grandfather was blind from a medical accident from his adolescence and yet he managed to continue his studies, get married, become a renowned physiotherapist and have six children. He played five instruments: oud, piano, guitar, harmonica and organ, and was a very professional fisherman. He was full of energy and loved life. I can see it in my mother's tears and hear it in her voice when she tells me stories about him. When I pass by my grandparents' house I can't but think of how my grandma used to carry her children and her husband and run across the street to the shelter while bombs started to rain on this part of the city.

I have so many memories in my uncle's house in Gemmayzeh. My uncle was the first generation of his family to move to the capital to work in the port. He lived in a traditional apartment, typical of the French mandate period. I can remember every foolery we committed with the complicity of my elder cousins. When my father Michel was still single he bought a small shop there and started his own business, encouraged by having his brother's apartment in Gemmayzeh.

After many successful years, he decided to move to a bigger shop on the other side of the street. He needed a new salesperson and this is where a young woman called Catherine showed up for a summer job. She was very pretty and charming and lived next to the shop. She learned quickly everything about the job even though it wasn't her study domain. The clients loved her and she was very helpful but when the time arrived for her to quit the job, my father gave her a significant raise to keep her by his side. She tried to quit several times but my father always gave her a raise, until he decided to express his love to her. And this is how my parents fell in love with each other. My mother's parents loved my dad and soon they got married.

After my grandfather's death, my mother insisted on teaching us the piano and so she enrolled me and my sister in piano lessons at the St. Antonios church in Gemmayzeh. This is where I started to claim Gemmayzeh mine between my piano lessons, my father's shop, my teta's\* food and my uncle's getaway.

I am glad that I knew and lived in the authentic Gemmayzeh before its gentrification, although I don't feel any disappointment. My memories are strong enough to keep this old part of me alive and I am ready to make place for new memories. Today as an architect I can say that I love this street even more and appreciate every part of it and admire the precious gems it hides. I am happy that I am also working in Gemmayzeh today and that I am adding new memories to this special place that I will always call home.











## BETWEEN FACT & FACT

At school, children usually learn about the history of their country over the past 50 years. In Lebanon that doesn't happen; the pages about the past decades remain unwritten since there has never been an agreement on one common narrative of the country's recent years. History always gets written by the winners of wars; In Lebanon there are no winners, or there are only winners – it depends on the perspective from which you look at it. The turbulent past 50 years are not on the curriculum in school, children don't learn about these years of the Lebanese history, they learn about world history instead. The sectarian system is one reason for these circumstances since every group has their own version of the past, some children learn about the civil war from family members but mainly through own research. "You don't get facts from people since everyone has their own story of what happened" a friend told me. "I asked my parents but they don't really talk about it, only when something reminds them of a situation that occurred during the war. Everyone looks at it from a different perspective. It's a sensitive issue and it's hard to talk about it objectively without offending someone". Another one told me: "I just lived it and then I read some published books and listened to political debates". All of the people I asked told me approximately the same, they didn't discuss it at home and if they did only in a very general way.

Growing up in Germany I am used to discussing the country's past extensively. School kids learn and discuss the Second World War, Nazi Germany and the division into East and West throughout their whole schooldays with all its horrors and consequences. In Lebanon I rarely hear people talking about the past 50 years and the civil war and only after asking, people start telling their version of history or why they don't want to talk about it at all. "We had enough of wars, violence and corruption, the only thing we want is a peaceful life and a brighter future", an old man told me in the street.

The author Alan Gilbert concludes that: "Unlike many countries recently overwhelmed by internal ethnic, cultural, and racial violence, Lebanon has never had an official truth and reconciliation commission. The length and ferocity of the war left many wanting to forget and rebuild."<sup>15</sup> People started to deal with the omnipresent tensions; instability became a part of daily life and people try to make the best of it. "We never know what to expect tomorrow so we celebrate today as if it was the last day", more than one person told me and in fact, I've never seen people celebrating and coming together as much as in Lebanon.

<sup>15</sup> A. Gilbert, Walid Raad's Spectral Archive, Part I: Historiography as Process [online article], e-flux, Journal #69, 2016, <<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/69/60594/walid-raad-s-spectral-archive-part-i-historiography-as-process/>>, accessed 19 November 2019.

In his project "The Atlas Group" Lebanese artist Walid Raad dealt with the country's history, in particular the period of the civil war. He examined its impact on social and psychological levels as well as its documentation. Records and photographs of invented characters were collected in the archive of the fictional foundation, all made by the artist himself. With his work Raad tried to raise awareness of how history can be told and manipulated and how the line between fiction and reality is blurred. In exhibitions the artist stressed the fictional character of the documents in the archive that are presented to look real and believable. "This oftentimes involved getting the audience to move beyond their own discomfort with subterfuge in order to engage Raad's larger concerns: historiography as a process conceived as a concrete series of events; the ways in which archives are formed and disseminated; the effects of personal and collective trauma on memory and its articulation; and the ultimately unspeakable and unrepresentable dimension of the Lebanese civil wars."<sup>16</sup>

I encountered a lot of contradictory opinions in Beirut that each seemed to be the one and only truth. "It's no problem at all to go to this area. It's perfectly safe!", a friend of mine told me when I asked if it was ok to go to an outskirts of the city by myself. Another one told me the exact opposite and asked me if I was completely out of my mind. In the beginning I wondered about these extreme contradictions but quickly realised that it was a normal part of the complex reality of the country. A lot of truths exist and I learnt that sometimes not only the line between fact and fiction gets blurred but also the line between fact and fact.



<sup>16</sup> Gilbert, Walid Raad's Spectral Archive, Part I: Historiography as Process, 2016.







## Transformed city

People arrive in cars, on scooters or they simply walk if they live in the neighbourhood, to the "Electricité du Liban", the headquarters of the main electricity producer of the country. They are wrapped in flags, some drew the red and white stripes with the cedar tree in the centre on their cheeks, young men and women wave their flags out of car windows and some even painted their whole vehicle in the Lebanese colours. You hear people singing "heela, heela, heela ho" and "thawra, thawra, thawra" – "revolution revolution, revolution".

People are angry with the government but also happy to be in the streets with likeminded countrymen. For the first time in the country's history there is a group of people that doesn't support different leaders. They don't chant for a political party or a religious sect, this time they stand together united. Of course there are other groups as well supporting the current system with its political leaders. Tonight however they stay at home, leaving the streets to the hopeful crowd.

It's a Sunday night and next to the "Electricité du Liban", there are other locations where people meet. Downtown Beirut has been closed for traffic for almost a month now. Every day people gather for events, discussions of the current situation and a possible future. Tonight a DJ is playing. He built up his set in front of fancy stores, next to a bank whose windows got broken and that will probably remain closed for a while. His small stage is covered in red, white and green. A young woman is standing next to him, she just climbed up on the tower of speakers and is expressively dancing to the beats with a huge flag in her hands. The crowd goes wild, jumping up and down, back and forth and waves their flags. They hold up their mobile phones with the lights switched on and the scene transforms into one big party and colourful light show. Even the national anthem turns into electronic music and the beats are enriched with popular revolution chants.

The whole area seems like one big fair. Freshly grilled corn is sold in the streets that usually only invite the rich to spend their money on expensive watches, clothes and other luxurious goods. Before the protests the area with wide sidewalks and big alleys seemed more like a ghost town.



"This is how the souks of Beirut used to be; a vibrant place where everybody meets – young, old, rich and poor with food vendors in the streets, old men focusing on their backgammon game and small groups sitting on the sidewalks enjoying their argileh. It's lively again here. It's great, isn't it!? I wish it would stay like that also after the revolution", my friend tells me happily about this new feeling in the city. The young generation is hopeful and excited, they want change. Older Lebanese are hopeful as well, however a bit less optimistic, they lived through different wars and know the system that has been in power for the past 30 years. Nobody can predict what is going to happen next and everything seems possible - from another civil war to reforms that will help to improve the country's situation. "You know, we here in Lebanon we usually live day by day but at the moment we live hour by hour", a security guard who is standing in front of a building in downtown tells me. "Inshalla, let's hope it will stay peaceful and turns out well."

Not only downtown Beirut is busy, streets in the whole country are blocked to put more pressure on the ruling class. One of these roads leads from Beirut to Baabda Palace where the current president resides. Hundreds of people gathered on the streets, facing at least five rows of heavily armed soldiers, barbed wire and numerous army vehicles. My friend joins the energised crowd, proudly singing the national anthem. Overlooking the sea of flags she spots an old school friend who she hasn't seen in years. "See, this is one of the beautiful things about this revolution. Everybody meets in the streets and you catch up with people that you haven't seen in ages."

It's late at night and people start going back home, back to their parked cars or walking to their apartments. "We will be back tomorrow. We'll stay in the streets until we see the change that we are fighting for."









I have never experienced Beirut before. Or maybe at least the Beirut I have always dreamt of. As a resident of Mount Lebanon, I rarely used to visit Beirut. I rarely felt the need to do it. I had my life there, my family, my friends and my routine. Until I started college; Beirut became my second home, my learning place, the place where I met so many people, and where I had the best memories.

But I still have never experienced Beirut before. Or maybe I only experienced glimpses of the Beirut I dreamt of. Until the day I watched my whole country in rage. Two days later, I find myself on the street surrounded by a million, maybe more. People that are so different but that never felt so close to me, people of so many different stories and yet people I connected with; people that were simply like me, asking for their basic rights. That day, I discovered a Beirut that I never knew existed before, a Beirut that trespassed sectarian conflicts, class division and discrimination.

We reclaimed our long lost public spaces, our streets and our endangered closed-off heritage buildings. We reclaimed back the life we lost from our historical city center. Outdoor classrooms and discussions were taking place in every corner, tackling topics that may seem very simple but that are very challenging to us. I never felt love towards strangers before. They suddenly weren't strangers anymore.

I never felt so safe among these people yet I was afraid. I was afraid that this could end at any moment. I was afraid that we would get tired and eventually back down. I was afraid I would never see others the same way I saw them. I was afraid Beirut would return to its sectarian comfort zone again.

Yet today, it's day 94 of this revolution. We're still going stronger. And there is no way back.

Now, all I can say is that I finally experienced my Beirut. And maybe this time my dream is coming true.







## REARRANGEMENTS

This time my eyes are closed and I'm sitting at the big table on which previously collected pictures of Beirut but also new images are scattered across the surface. I made a collage about the city before I visited it. Now being back in Amsterdam, I take this image, cut it in parts and while doing that I realise that the collage actually was fixed; fixed to a moment in time and to a specific context. The new pieces that I collected in Beirut while spending the summer months there and the impressions that I gathered during the uprising ask for rearrangement and enlargement. New thoughts and information move contexts and connect pieces that weren't connected before.

A place that I thought I knew at least a little bit seemed weirdly unfamiliar again after the uprising started. Only by going there could I comprehend the feelings that my friends tried to explain. The hope and unity of this group that I felt during the uprising was different from the summer, only three months ago, when almost nobody believed that a movement like that would be possible. It felt as if people were surprised by themselves; as if they rearranged their own view of the present and of a possible future. How it will change the social and political atmosphere remains to be seen.

Beirut is complex in every sense. Lebanon is still influenced by different sects and communities that often are connected to political parties. On an international level various governments try to steer the political agenda into different directions to demonstrate power in the region and to profit from the country's geographically strategic location; the complexity of national and international interests leads to recurring tensions.

To me Beirut is a combination of craziness, chaos, political instability, different stories, welcoming people, traditions, celebrations, intensity, history, amazing food, contradictions, tensions and warmth that will probably always move and ask for new links and connections. To me the Lebanese capital remains a place whose energy and beauty is special and impossible to describe. I couldn't put it in words better than the Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury who said: "Beirut is extremely difficult to define in simple words. It's incredibly complex. It keeps you awake and it keeps you alive. It doesn't let you go to sleep."<sup>17</sup>

I get off the table where I rearranged the collage, ready to collect more pieces that will again move and reshape the picture that I have of the fascinating city of Beirut.

<sup>17</sup> Bernard Khoury | Home Beirut. Sounding the Neighbours [online video], Museo MAXXI, 11 April 2018, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GP5WWG5Kvi4>>, accessed 20 December 2019.



Thank you!

Mama & Papa

Cynthia Atoui  
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Lea Ramadan  
Sherif Soubra

