Living and Imagining the City: The Biartis and the Urbanistas in Beirut

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Abstract
This Culture and Politics senior thesis examines and compares the imagined and the lived experience of the city, using Beirut, the capital city of Lebanon, as a model. In a neo-liberal city such as Beirut, group formations can be engaged in multiple hegemonies that affect and define the ‘urban’ city experience. In this thesis, I will label two major group-formations in Beirut that shape its urban experience: the ‘Urbanistas’ and the ‘Biartis.’ The Urbanistas are an affluent upper-class group that imagines a ‘global’ and worldly Beirut that is in connection to the rest of the world. This group then lives its ‘social imaginaire’ of the city in a tightly confined upper-class conceptual map of the downtown, the Zaytouna Bay Area and Rue du Verdun. The Biartis on the other hand, a lower-income group, represent the lived experience of Beirut, living a city of manifestations, contradictions and concerns. I will argue that both groups exhibit a form of hegemony in their city, albeit a different one, and interact with each other in different ways. To explore the role of these groups in the social production of the city, this thesis analyzes interviews with Urbanistas and Biartis, participant observation of the socio-spatial habits of these groups, media coverage of Beirut and advertisement, pictorials and street art within enclaves of the city. Due to the multiple hegemonies of these groups, the ‘global’ city should no longer be taken to be identical to its image. Groups such as the Urbanistas, wishing to engage in a global and capitalist experience of urban city life, present a singular image of cities that is an imagined reflection of them. While groups such as the Biartis, have an inward looking experience, shaping the notion of the city through their daily lived occurrences.
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The capital of Lebanon has “much to offer the adventurous traveler.” Find “exotic cuisine and cocktails” at the “most exclusive clubs in the world” in what one reader calls “the Paris of the Middle East.” This city offers a “tapestry of sects, religions, and lifestyles that provide a feast for the mind of the intellectual.”

On October 16, 2013, Conde Nast Traveler, the high-profile New York magazine, released its annual list of top twenty-five cities to live in, ranking Beirut as number 20th in a dominantly western list. In this category, Beirut existed as a cosmopolitan city, a feast of the mind for the worldly and erudite traveler. While this occurred, more local media agencies such as the Daily Star drew attention to an anarchic Beirut existing in a year full of repeated explosions. Other local media agencies such as Al Akhbar explicitly categorized Beirut as a ‘city for the rich’, only critiquing the high inflation and ‘ridiculous’ real estate market prices. The contrast between the two images of Beirut—the worldly one and the disorderly one—encapsulates the problematic of this project, a schism in the production and the life of the city relative to dominant groups who inhabit it. In this paradigm, two group formations exist, what I will call the Urbanistas and the Biartis. These group formations are responsible for the polarized and opposed reports on Beirut and are the groups that drive the dichotomies of cities. Echoing the words of renowned urban sociologist Robert Park, the city is “a state of mind and a chain of costumes . . .”, meaning that the Urbanistas and the Biartis normalize their relationships with the city through different forms of interaction. The Urbanistas imagine the city making it exist through its image and outward presentation, while the Biartis live the city and endow it with thought-provoking scrutiny.

Beirut and the Social Imaginaire: The Urbanista Connection to the Global Network

In this study of urban group formation, I will use the term Urbanistas to label an outward looking, upper-middle class group formation, which lives in Beirut and which shares a constructed habitus of the city. This habitus is characterized by a connection to a global network of world-cities and is based on an upper-class conceptual map of Beirut consisting of the Downtown, the Zaytouna Bey Waterfront, Ashrafieh and the Verdun commercial area. In this conceptualized space, a strong hub of world-class restaurants, hotels and boutiques exists. Most of the residence facilities are a mix of gated and guarded communities and towers labeled as the “urban dream.” Lastly, in this Urbanista habitus, pictorials and advertisements are based on world brands and fashion houses, reflecting a strong capitalist consumption habit.

The Urbanistas normalize their relation to Beirut through their ‘social imaginaire’ and through imagining Beirut. By imagining, I mean that the Urbanistas construct a narrative and an image of Beirut that is worldly, bourgeois, upper class and exceptional relative to the region. They present this image to the global network through media, advertisement and word of mouth in their trips abroad. While imagination puts Beirut in the realm of the imagined instead of the lived experience, the Urbanistas shape their habitus in a manner to provide empirical proof of their imagined Beirut. Lastly, the Urbanistas have a smaller sub-group that shares their upper class origin, but disagrees with their representation of the city. This group fights the image of Beirut through museums and other forms of urban activism.

Living Beirut: A Biarti City of Manifestations and Contradictions

In contrast to the Urbanistas, who emphasize imagining and branding the city, the Biartis present a different Beirut that is shaped by their gritty lived experiences. I use the Biarti labeling to describe a disconnected lower-income class group formation that resides in Beirut.

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Unlike the Urbanistas, the Biartis do not share a tightly confined Habitus. They live all of Beirut as a space that is full of paradoxes, reactions and contradictions. They are uninterested in global representation, imagining and branding of the city and this is mainly due to their lack of interest in global connections. Beirut for the average Biarti is lived in less capitalist ways, through examples of “two-dollar” coffee drunk on the corniche. At certain times, the Biartis enter the habitus of the Urbanistas and practice spatial habits that do not conform to the Urbanista-value-system of high capitalist spending and self-presentation. Most importantly, Biarti spaces are constantly in risk of being ghettoized and polarized with the Urbanista habitus of Beirut. Interestingly enough, a ‘creative class’, the sub-group of the Urbanistas, settles in these areas protecting them through opening art galleries, pubs and restaurants. The Biartis have a sub-group of a similar class origin, but who identifies more with the Urbanista branding of Beirut due to a developed cultural capital and a desire to join the Urbanistas.

The Biartis constantly normalize their relationship to Beirut through living the city. Living is the opposite of imagining, it means that they do not uphold to one imagined image of Beirut and constantly construct and deconstruct the city through their thoughts. Through daily interactions and exposures to Beirut, the Biartis have a different and changing perception of the city. Through their social mobility and their lack of an Urbanista-like group connection, the Biartis constantly set Beirut in flux and in a motion. The Biartis have the ability to “penser Beirut,” to think of the financial limits of the city, of the increased gentrification and their outward push to the outskirts, of their affinities to an old Beirut and their critiques of the current reconstruction of the city.

**Representing Beirut in the Age of Solidere**

In the average tourist map of Beirut that can be picked up from a museum, airport or random shops, the focal points of the city and the prime destinations are the Downtown, Ashrafieh, Zaytouna Bay and Rue Du Verdun. Many other interesting areas, offering alternative travel experiences, are not mentioned. Such tourist maps are not necessarily representative of Beirut; they are representative of an Urbanista Beirut. The Urbanistas took their conceptual map of Beirut and placed it in a tourist guide made for the foreign ‘other.’ In this guide, the Urbanistas provide the areas in which the ‘social imaginaire’ of Beirut can be lived. Simple items such as these set the premise for my discussion on the relation between the Urbanistas and representation. In this section, I will argue that the Urbanistas’ representation of Beirut is a deliberate, imaginative act. One in which the city is repositioned in homogeneity with other global cities. This imaginative act occurred during the age of Solidere, a Franco-Lebanese company, based in Saudi Arabia, which reconstructed the downtown of Beirut. Solidere used this reimagined Beirut as a blueprint for reconstruction and set the tone for the new, spatially “reified” city.

**Solidere: A Brief History**

Solidere cannot be discussed without mentioning its founder Rafiq Al-Hariri, a Lebanese billionaire and the previous Prime Minister of Lebanon who was assassinated in 2005. Hariri was a self-made man who went from humble beginnings in Lebanon to friend of the Saudi royal family and international business tycoon. Hariri’s connection with the downtown of Beirut began in 1982 when he was tasked to clear the rubble and the damage from the constant shelling caused during the war. Through this cleaning process, Hariri thought of reconstructing and actualizing the re-imagined Urbanista Beirut, bringing it physically to life. For this reason, in 1983 he did a feasibility study on the restoration and reconstruction of the commercial center of Beirut. The task of reconstructing Beirut involved hundreds of bankers, accountants, urban planners, engineers and legal experts. The project was ready, but the reconstruction of downtown Beirut did not commence until Parliament passed a legally enabling law in 1993, one year after the civil war ended.

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8 Iskandar, *Rafiq Hariri and the Fate of Lebanon*, 47.
Downtown is an area that is engrained in the collective memory of the inhabitants of Beirut and has changed dramatically through history. The downtown area, previously known as the Bourj, has architecture from every metropolitan force that controlled Beirut, from the Romans, to the Ottomans, and to the French. In order to reconstruct the downtown, Solidere and Hariri essentially privatized a public space of the capital. Through this reconstruction, Solidere became known for its high quality restoration and redevelopment, with the downtown becoming a beacon of its world-class achievements. Looking back at the initial building plan, presented in 1991, it can be seen that the reconstruction suffered from extreme globalism and 'gigantism.' Hariri wanted to imitate the high-rise and mega-style of architecture he was witnessing around him in the Arabian Gulf, and in Saudi Arabia in particular. He wanted skyscrapers, a world trade center on an artificial island in the Saint Andrew Bay and numerous expressways. Eventually, Hariri abandoned some of these geographically unrealistic plans, but succeeded in transforming the downtown into a 'modern' and completely pedestrian-friendly area, restoring old districts in the process such as Rues Allenby, Place de l'Etoile and Rue Ma'rad.

Solidere should be looked at in the context of the Urbanista environment it was thriving in. Solidere not only reconstructed the downtown, it also added a physical center, from which the Urbanistas connected Beirut to the global cities of the world. Hariri himself can be classified as an Urbanista as he famously stated he wanted Beirut to be the 'Hong Kong of the Orient.' Due to the immense destruction that hit the downtown, Hariri had a tabula rasa to work on, enabling him to imagine a new Beirut connected to the rest of the world. With his immense wealth and the green light from the government, it was easy for this imagination to actualize. Through this imagination, the downtown became a panoramic enclave of Beirut, a feast for the eyes. Perhaps the most famous quarter of this city center is the “Nijmeh Square.” The Square is actually a circular and centralized space, which hosts the famous Hamidiyeh Clock Tower in its center. The tower is surrounded with buildings with intricate facades and storefronts, a historical church and the Lebanese parliament. Walking north from this tower, you cross sushi parlors, expensive local restaurants and Italian eateries, until you eventually arrive at a bustling driving zone. To the left of this driving zone, you get a view of Roman ruins and of the Saint George Maronite Cathedral standing next to the blue-domed Ottoman-style Mohamad Al-Amine Mosque. Walking further up, you arrive at the Grand Serail Governmental Palace and you get a mix of international buildings for the United Nations and the World Bank.

Walking south from the Clock Tower, you arrive at grand Parisian-style boulevards filled with shops such as Dior, Chanel, Marc Jacobs and others offering the latest in fashion and international exclusivity. Adjacent to this area are the Beirut Souks, a contemporary open-air shopping market that is supposed to resemble traditional Greco-Roman markets. The Souk also caters for a wealthy clientele, hosting fashion houses from Massimo Dutti to Tommy Hilfiger. In the Souk, you can enjoy a mix of ‘modern’ and ‘antiquarian’ activities through having ice cream at the Haagen-Dazs café while staring at Roman ruins.

Perhaps one of the most historically important squares of the downtown is the Martyrs’ Square, the former heart of the city-center. The square holds a monument of idealized and renaissance-esque bronze martyrs carrying a torch. The monument is dwarfed by the high-rises popping up next to it and overshadowed by hotels such as Le Grey. Behind the Martyrs’ Square is an area called Saifi Village, presumably a residential space stacked with pastiche and warm-colored houses with ‘artisan quarters’ tucked in between.

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9 Samir Khalaf, Heart of Beirut: Reclaiming the Bourj (London: Saqi, 2006), 144.
10 Khalaf, Heart of Beirut: Reclaiming the Bourj, 140.
12 Kassir, Beirut, 531.
13 Kassir, 527.
Lastly, the downtown was recently extended to the sea through the Zaytouna Bay Waterfront Project. In this area, after being inspected by security, you can enjoy a stroll along the port with a view of the yachts in front of you, with a series of towers, such as the Four Seasons Hotel, surrounding you. The port is filled with expensive international restaurants such as Signor Sassi that cater to cities such as ‘Geneva, London, Dubai and Beirut’ and expensive local retail shops.

This reconstruction and salvaging of downtown Beirut from wreckage came at a price, particularly a financial one. Suddenly the area transformed from a pre-civil war melting pot of classes into an upper class and luxurious enclave of Beirut. The area became full of global five star restaurants, hotels and nightclubs, allowing a certain clientele of Lebanese and foreigners to enjoy the space. In this sense contemporary urban design, which is supposed to bring people together in cities, created a segregated space. The downtown became the first physical and empirical marker of the Urbanista imaginaire, through creating a space of the upper class to live the global, communal network of capitalism. Ergo, Hariri through the licensing of these hotels and boutiques in the downtown was able to retain some elements of his globalization.

In addition to the creation of a physical space for the Urbanistas to thrive, the Urbanistas, along with Solidere, would present their outward push of Beirut through the media and advertising to the global elite. In the next section, I will analyze how the Urbanista vision of Beirut prevailed with the use of discourse and media. Media in the case of the Urbanistas is a form of hegemony, meaning it is a form of control and a form ensuring that their Beirut triumphs while subordinating other narratives.

On the Urbanista Hegemonic Discourse

For the Urbanistas, imagining Beirut is important, but it is not enough. This imagination needs to be hegemonic, i.e. it needs to become the only narrative of Beirut and the Urbanistas need to become the hegemonic group in control. This hegemony actualizes through representation in the media and through the use of language and discourse. The Urbanistas utilize the media and numerous forms of representation in order to create a distinctive language on Beirut that expresses their meaning of the city. In order for the Urbanistas’ language to convey and have meaning, it must be part of a hegemonic discourse. Discourse, in the Foucauldian sense of the word, is an encompassing set of statements and language that enable discussing the representation of a certain form of knowledge. It is also a form of discursive social praxis that conveys strong meaning. Thus, the discussion of representation cannot actualize without having a pre-existing set of language that enables the description of such a representation. Applying this to the Urbanistas means their imagination goes through a threefold process. Firstly, they codify the system of language and words that would describe their global Beirut such as ‘worldly,’ ‘cosmopolitan,’ ‘fashionable,’ ‘5 star,’ ‘leisurely,’ ‘fancy,’ and many more. Secondly, after the descriptive language and the discourse are developed, the Urbanistas utilize media and advertisement to give an image to their language of Beirut and to represent it. Thirdly, the Urbanistas utilize social praxis through their spending habits in their habitus of Beirut.

Discourse, when hegemonic, is important because everything outside of the Urbanista system of praxis and meaning would be of no value. By virtue of being outside of this powerful discourse, alternative narratives of Beirut would be considered untruthful. Through this form of power, the representation of Beirut becomes the only viable option and the only urban truth out there.

This discourse and codified language of Beirut comes to life in the next section in which I present the various western media outlets that are fascinated with covering ‘worldly Beirut.’ In the last decade, Beirut has received immense media coverage. Articles such as these are important for the Urbanistas because they present a “general conception of life” in Beirut.

16Ibid., 44.
that interweaves their desires and wants. When reading these articles it is important to note that most of Beirut is defined through the downtown and that urbanism appears as a form of extroverted display of private opulence.19

Media and Connection to Western Media Outlets

On the 17th of February 2014, a video titled “Being Happy in Lebanon” went viral on social media outlets. A mini-spectacle, the video, displayed Urbanista-like Lebanese and foreign expats, mainly youth, partaking in joyful activities such as dancing in nightclubs, jumping around squares and enjoying life along city boulevards. The various activities of the video had a common bond; they were all shot in downtown Beirut.20 The video put the Urbanistas and their Beirut on display, everyone was happy and for a couple of minutes life in Beirut seemed wonderful. On the same day, a bomb went off in southern Beirut killing four people in the process.21 In one day, two extreme and different images of Beirut existed in two completely different areas. This would leave the outside observer in a sense of wonderment, baffled and asking how such extremely polarized activities can exist in the confines of a small city like Beirut. In the Urbanista model of Beirut, this makes perfect sense. Southern Beirut is completely outside the conceptual map of the Urbanistas and is of no relevance to them. The south is not a place where an Urbanista would be ‘happy’ and is not a space in which Urbanistas thrive. For them, the south of Beirut is not part of the imagined Beirut and is not part of their narrative.

This Urbanista representation of Beirut is not new and has proved to be popular within western media outlets. In 1998, Travel and Leisure magazine released its article “all eyes on Beirut,”22 talking about the revival of the city and the return of bars, hotels and fancy restaurants. This article talked about Beirut as a Mediterranean city with a ‘cosmopolitan’ ease and with the ‘promise of new worlds.’ With the use of word such as ‘promise,’ ‘new world,’ and cosmopolitanism, the Urbanista discourse of the imagined Beirut is utilized. This imagined Beirut is linked to high-end materialism through the bars, hotels and international restaurants. Beirut was coming back from wartime destruction and was ready for tourists and outsiders in its ‘party dress.’ This Beirut would be connected to the world, through its capitalist enclaves and its leisurely spaces. The article discussed the massive Solidere reconstruction of downtown as an unavoidable evil as they were the only ones ‘preserving buildings.’ However, the timing of the article is important, it shows the beginning of the Urbanista social imaginaire shortly after the end of the war and only halfway through the reconstruction of the downtown. The fact that downtown Beirut was still not fully reconstructed and not fully developed again, indicates the importance of imagination for the Urbanistas. Beirut existed in the realm of the outward image and not the lived experience.

The hegemony of this imaginaire is obvious; articles emphasizing the greatness of Beirut and its splendor kept accelerating and increasing. After the assassination of Hariri in 2005, Beirut became a hub of instability with constant bombings and assassinations taking place. However, Beirut at the same time enjoyed its share of international display being in the ranks of top ten world cities, while retaining its local disorder. In 2006, Travel and Leisure ranked Beirut as the 9th best city in the world and in 2009 the famous Lonely Planet travel magazine and largest travel guide book publisher in the world, put Beirut on its top ten world cities because of its ‘contemporary and lively image.’23

This listing goes another step further with rankings such as those by the New York Times that placed Beirut as the number one city to visit in the world for the year 2009.24 In this ranking, the New York Times exclaimed that a détente kept the violence in place in Beirut, which was ‘posed to reclaim its title as the Paris of the Middle East.’25 It did not matter if...

19David Harvey, Paris Capital of Modernity (New York: Routledge, 2003), 212.
20“Happy in Lebanon,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RqSFiVUhDw.
violence was temporarily curbed beneath the surface, as long as the glamour of a Parisian-esque
city was showcased. It was a fancy Beirut, which had global hotels from London such as Le
Grey, luxurious ones like the Four Seasons, and international restaurants transforming “its
culinary scene.” The highlight of this listing was the Souk el Tayeb farmer’s market, a “gastro-
political awakening” in the heart of downtown Beirut. Hardly, a gastro-political awakening,
the Souk el Tayeb was a Lebanese rendition of your average western farmer’s market, taking
the local blends and the ‘traditions’ of the mountains and polishing them for the affluent
Urbanistas and tourists.\(^{(v)}\)

The \textit{New York Times} was not alone in emphasizing Beirut’s glamour and ignoring other
violent realities. \textit{The Guardian} confidently reported in 2010 that “Beirut is back and it’s
beautiful.”\(^{26}\) This article admitted that from 2005 onward the city had its share of unstable
violence, but hoped and sensed that the dawn of a ‘new Beirut’ was coming back. Beirut was
pinned with labels that are familiar to the western and the American tourists, calling it the
“Elizabeth Taylor” of the Middle East. Nevertheless, this article like many others focuses on
the downtown, the Mediterranean charm and glitzy lifestyle of its inhabitants.

This manner of representing Beirut does not solely exist in the media and can be lived in
certain enclaves of the city, in which the Urbanista lifestyle becomes that which is represented.
In the next section, I will introduce my interview with Alexandra, one of the Urbanistas, who
displays a life very similar to that described in the media outlets.

\section*{Living the ‘Imaginaire’: The case of Urbansita Alexandra}

In my interview\(^{27}\) with Alexandra, Urbanista Beirut, the represented and the imagined, comes
to life in her lived conceptual map. Alexandra presents the third and final step of the Urbanista
hegemony, which is social praxis of discourse. She is a twenty-three years old female coming
of age in Beirut, who comes from an upper-class background. She speaks with a refined accent
and resides in the upper-middle class and intellectual quarter of Beirut known as Hamra. She
was born in Germany, where she lived for five years, until moving back to Lebanon. She is
enrolled in university and is currently pursuing an undergraduate degree in graphic design.

Before discussing Alexandra’s bespoke image of Beirut, it must be noted that in the interview
process I became the global link through which Alexandra displayed Beirut. My relationship
with her becomes a receptive one of the Beirut she displayed. Alexandra’s first take on Beirut
is that it is the heart of Lebanon; a city that has all requirements of life and to which everyone
flocks. For Alexandra, Beirut is the only inhabitable space in Lebanon, she “belongs to Beirut
and it is her city.” Thus, she begins the interview with a clear sense of ownership over the city
and a strong emotional affinity to it.

1. \textbf{Framing Alexandra’s Conceptual Map:}
   Alexandra defined her conceptual map of Beirut as that of Hamra, Verdun, Downtown
   and Ashrafiyeh. All of these areas represent the upper-class enclaves of the city and
   most importantly the enclaves in which the ‘imaginaire’ can be lived. The areas with
   their international restaurants, boutiques, artisan bakeries and hip pubs, allow for the
   imaginaire of Beirut to materialize and flourish. Alexandra enjoys the rise of new
   projects such as the Zaytouna Bay Waterfront project and labels them as ‘successful
   projects’ in the city. This enjoyment is not simply a form of extending her leisurely
   spaces; it is also about expanding the scope of the areas in which the ‘imaginaire’ of
   Beirut can be lived.

2. \textbf{An Urbanista Lifestyle:}
   In Beirut, Alexandra has an obvious social mobility espousing a lifestyle that is a mix

\(^{27}\) Alexandra. Interview by author. Beirut, December 29, 2013.
off going to university, frequenting the gym, dining out, occasional drinks at the pub and hanging out with friends. This indicates a leisurely mobility that is based on time-enjoyment and on the spending of money. Alexandra enjoys frequenting the Beirut Souks and the Downtown, because they are ‘modern’ areas in which the restaurants and the nightlife are appealing. I asked her, since nightlife is so popular in Beirut, why does she prefer the downtown in particular? She answered affirming that the people in this part of Beirut are more presentable, the design of the places is better and security is better relative to other areas. Through her lifestyle, Alexandra reveals to us three important markers of the Urbanistas: (1) Being on display, Alexandra observes the people frequenting these areas from their clothes, to the food, to social behavior and accent. In return, she also becomes on display in these areas, knowing fellow Urbanistas will be watching. (2) Feeling ‘secure’ from the ‘other,’ through having gated communities and security guards watching over the Urbanista premises. (3) Space as a marker of identity, focusing on the whole notion of the ‘modern’ and hip designs of the places the Urbanistas frequent, which are a reflection of their own spatial ‘self.’

For Alexandra, this leisurely social mobility does not stop during times of conflict. When asked about the continuation of normalcy after bombs in Beirut, she responds casually that people in Beirut are used to explosions and life in terms of enjoyment goes on. She exclaims that especially in the downtown, life always has to go on because certain people have offices there, work there and have their lives attached there. For Alexandra, the continuation of life during conflict was pegged with the notion of “enjoyment,” not with the notion of resilience or survival during conflict. It indicates that social mobility for the Urbanistas during conflict continues especially in terms of leisure and ‘having a good time.’ Ergo, the completely bespoken lifestyle of the ‘imaginaire’ is based on fun, frivolous enjoyment and the spending of capital.

3. Avoiding the ‘Other’ Beirut:
Alexandra lives and enjoys certain parts of Beirut, but she also avoids and rejects other parts of the city. In particular, she would not go to ‘Dahiyeh (a Shi’ite enclave of suburb Beirut that was previously associated with poverty), Tariq Jdideh (a Sunni enclave of Beirut that is usually associated with hosting lower-income residents) and similar areas such as Sabra and Ouzai (extreme lower-income areas, or ‘ghettos’, that have migrant and Palestinian refugee camps in them). The reasons Alexandra does not go to these areas are extremism, sectarianism and lack of safety. These are areas where leisure cannot thrive and cannot spatially exist. In particular, she says the areas are limited to having one conservative ‘sectarian’ group that prevents the rise of nightclubs and the ‘quintessential’ Beiruti facilities. Looking at this ‘other’ map of Beirut, Alexandra avoids the poorer and the lower-income areas of the city. In particular, she tends to avoid the Muslim parts of the city that tend to be on the poor side of the spectrum. This is not to ascribe a sectarian bias to Alexandra, who is Muslim herself, but it is to affirm the importance of money in her conception of Beirut. Alexandra labels the ‘sectarianism’ of the Biartis in this group as a preventative reason for the lack of nightclubs and leisure facilities. However, facilities such as these would not thrive there regardless of the sectarian identity, due to the lack of constantly flowing capital that can sustain them.

4. Beirut Comes to Life Through Alexandra:
For Alexandra, Beirut is an international city. It might deceive you with its small size, but ‘it has everything.’ It has all the ‘necessities’ of an international life from global shopping, to nice restaurants and five-star venues. From the beginning, Alexandra frames the Urbanista model of the international city through materialism and the ability to spend. In this international Urbanista city, Alexandra throws the usual hotel labels that the western media outlets do such as “Le Grey,” the “Four Seasons,” and the
“Phoenicia.” In her case, she affirms that places such as these made the city beautiful. This of course is a form of aesthetic internationalism that is based on branding and of marking a distinctive and tasteful space. However, this notion of city beauty is specifically relevant to the global link. The city became beautiful through its connection to the international aesthetic cosmopolitan scene. All of these hotels function from the downtown, but in Alexandra’s imaginaire they beautified all of Beirut, even though they are not accessible to all of its residents.

In this Beirut of grandeur, Alexandra affirms that the nightclub scene is one of the best in the world and the tourists can “attest to that.” This indicates a strong connection between the tourists, who are physical representatives of the global link and the Urbanistas who frequent the same scene. It was important for Alexandra to have a confirmation from the tourists of the worldly scene of nightclubs in Beirut, in order for her ‘imaginaire’ to be strengthened and for Beirut to thrive as a global city. She gives a summary of the best nightclubs in the city, from the “White Bar,” “Sky Bar,” “Pier 7,” and some others. All of these nightclubs are exclusive, sometimes requiring three months’ reservation ahead of time and spending can start at a minimum of one thousand dollars. Alexandra seemed to put a lot of emphasis on the nightclub and pub culture as part of the Urbanista lifestyle. This emphasis on nightclubs can be for many reasons; one of them is Alexandra’s age. In urban areas around the world, young Urbanistas tend to perceive and experience nightclubs as a rite of passage to a new form of adulthood. Another reason would be the allure and enchantment of urban nightlife in which the presented self can be mixed with anonymity and mystification. The imagery of an expensive urban nightclub creates the allure of fabulous “dudes” and “divas” sipping cocktails and creating a fantasy world. However, this only plays a minimal role, as Alexandra is presenting a liberal self that is contrast with a conservative self that could be labeled as part of the lower class. It is apparent that in Beirut, the Urbanistas associate western liberalism with dress, lifestyle and mannerism, more than it is associated with thoughts and ideologies. Thus, through me as the global link, Alexandra wants to present herself as part of a movement of aesthetic western liberalism, based on clubbing and attire.

I wanted to question Alexandra’s imaginaire and to see if she would confront it through her answers. I asked her if the cosmopolitan image of Beirut was exaggerated or unreal in some parts, and she said no. Alexandra explained that if Beirut was not a global city than the international brands and the hotels would not come. For Alexandra this was not an ‘imaginaire’ it was a reality, one that could not be denied. However, when asked about the Conde Nast ranking of Beirut as the 20th best world city, Alexandra revealed a contradiction. While she defines Beirut as a world city, she says that the ranking only applies to the center of Beirut and areas like Hamra, while the previous poor areas she mentioned do not hold to those rankings. This indicates a realization on her part that not all of Beirut is the same; however, her outward representation of Beirut remains uniform and monotonous. This indicates a sense of territoriality within globalism, she wants ‘her’ areas to be the Conde Nast ones on the local level, but on the global level, she wants to display Beirut as one city.

Final Remarks

Whether it is the western media outlets or the life of Alexandra, the data reveals to us the leisurely experience of the Urbanistas. In the contemporary urban experience, a world of leisure and a search for everyday happiness comes out of the realm of everyday life. This leisurely urban experience is highly influenced by spending and the constant circulation of capital. In this urban experience, money is everywhere, but in no specific place. The experience of money and spending of capital is not city-specific and not bound to a specific locale; it is part of the global link and the present-day cosmopolitan scene.
of the worldly and the capitalist experience of cities. The general lifestyle of the Urbanista becomes a high-end international consumerist one, which can be lived in any city that offers the appropriate facilities.

The strength of the Urbanistas is in their hegemonic practices that allow their personal experience of cities and their imagination of cities to become defined as the normative one, as is the case in Beirut. This creates a ‘reality’ of urban experience that should hold true with all its residents. Converging away from this reality would mean converging away from the ‘true’ city experience.

Notes

i. While Bourdieu specifically uses the word Habitus to refer to a system of lifestyles, social constructions, ideologies, values and expectations, the author will also be using it to refer to a conceptually demarcated space for the Urbanistas in which this encompassing system thrives.

ii. This is a quote from one of the Biarti interviewees, the author interviewed.

iii. The Lebanese Civil War lasted from 1975 to 1990.

iv. Many Lebanese citizens residing in Beirut usually tend to label the proximity of the church to the mosque, which Hariri built, as a sign of post-war sectarian coexistence in Beirut.

v. The Souk is located in the Beirut Souks enclave of the downtown and is only open on Saturday mornings. The author will be discussing participant observation he performed at this Souk, in a different chapter on interaction between the Urbanistas and the Biartis.

Bibliography


