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A psychogeographic tour through Beirut

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The current crop of books on Beirut has been produced by writers who have few first-hand memories of the Civil War, and rank the war of 2006 as a more formative experience. Their arguments about the city are psychogeographic, channeling Guy Debord and the Situationist International, concerning themselves with graffiti and the history of neighbourhoods outside the city centre. Joseph Eid / AFP

A few years ago, the photographer Rhea Karam was standing on the edge of a vacant lot in Hamra, taking pictures for a series about the urban landscape of Beirut. The space, surrounded by tall buildings on three sides with a street running along the fourth, was full of garbage. An expensive black sedan pulled up alongside Karam. A woman of a certain age - and of a certain type who would be affectionately or derisively addressed as tante (auntie) - cracked open one of the car's windows and bombarded Karam with abuse. "How dare you take pictures of this trash!" she shouted. "In a city as beautiful as this, how dare you focus on such ugliness?"

Karam was shocked but also amused. The woman had misread the situation. Karam had no intention of photographing ugliness. She was aiming, instead, for a radiant burst of graffiti on the far wall. Still, beyond missing the point by a laughably wide margin, the woman's anger was instructive. For her, the party at fault was not a population that wantonly litters and recklessly pollutes its own environment on a daily basis. Nor was it a widespread culture of impunity that regards trash collection as a task beneath the dignity of the local citizenry, relegated instead to an army of migrant workers. No, at fault here was a young artist who deigned to

document a few self-evident facts, which is symptomatic of how Beirutis see their city not as it is but how they want it, imagine it, or remember it to be. In Beirut, the politics of seeing often demand a willful and selective blindness, backed up by baseless rhetoric. Say Beirut is beautiful and beautiful it will be. Never mind the ample evidence supporting the contrary point of view, that Beirut is just as often dirty, ugly and vulgar, or beautiful only to those wealthy enough to afford a blight-blocking view.

Born in Beirut and based in New York, Karam recently published her pictures as an elegantly over-sized book entitled *Breathing Walls* (Raidy, Dh240). Notable for its subtlety, the work chronicles her reconnection with Beirut after a long absence. It also documents a topsy-turvy period, from the aftermath of the war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006 through the truce brokered by the Doha Accord in the spring of 2008, which diffused the political tensions that had erupted in street violence. Karam's pictures detail this narrative without framing a single flesh-and-blood figure. Instead, her images explore the material traces left behind on the surfaces of the city itself - graffiti, bullet holes, structural decay, shredded campaign posters, tattered propaganda flyers and more.

Breathing Walls is the record of a latter-day flâneuse wandering the streets of her erstwhile city, trying to read the freshest and most recent layer of its urban palimpsest. It is also one of several new books taking a strikingly youthful and experiential approach to the study of Beirut, emphasising facets of the city that are otherwise invisible, overlooked and ignored. In a way, these books signal the arrival of a second wave of engagements with the meaning and making of public space in Beirut. The first wave, including books such as Peter Rowe and Hashim Sarkis' *Projecting Beirut: Episodes in the Construction and Reconstruction of a Modern City* (Prestel, Dh278), began in the 1990s and followed the sharp rise of Solidere, the private real-estate company tasked by government decree with the rebuilding of the city centre. Urgent and often anguished, the first round of debate concerned collective memory and political amnesia in the aftermath of Lebanon 15-year civil war. It took issue with Solidere's Disneyfication of Downtown Beirut, its fetishising of French Mandate-era architecture, its refusal to knit the city centre into the urban fabric of peripheral neighbourhoods, and its emphasis on tourist-driven, economically self-selecting activities.

Some of the most vocal critics of Solidere were artists, architects, urban planners and urban theorists born in the 1960s. The current crop of books on Beirut has been produced by a younger generation, born primarily in the 1980s. They have few first-hand memories of the Civil War, and rank the war of 2006 as a more formative experience. Their arguments about the city are more psychogeographic, channeling Guy Debord and the Situationist International, and less overtly political or polemical. They are also less agitated or enthused by the state of the city centre, as if to say that battle has long been lost. They look, instead, to the seams, edges and peripheries, to Hamra and Mar Mikhael, to Bourj Hammoud and Dahiye, to the post-industrial concrete walls near the Beirut River (Nahr Beirut) and the city's phenomenal pine forest (Horsh al Sanawbar), a public park that has been mostly closed to the public for decades. They set Solidere aside and take up topics such as street art, the legacy of Beirut modernism, real-estate speculation, the rise of private security firms and valet parking services as modern-day militias,

and the subcultures of hip-hoppers, fishmongers, minority communities, counterfeit goods, crime rings, homosexuality and prostitution.

While *Breathing Walls* is a quiet book that lingers on the surface, *Beirut Street Art* (Art Lounge Publishing, Dh110) by Nino Azzi and Mayalynn Attieh (in collaboration with many others), is a bombastic celebration of graffiti that goes deep into the dominant forms and players active in the Lebanese capital. Bookended by a glossary of terms and a breathless international history of graffiti since New York in the 1970s, *Beirut Street Art* offers a compendium of elusive crews (from Esteem and No Pain in the 1980s through Red Eyed Kamikazes (REK) and Ashekman today) and tenuous connections (linking graffiti to music and graphic design, conflict in Beirut to division in Berlin and Belfast).

Slightly more studious is Tala F Saleh's *Marking Beirut: A City Revealed through its Graffiti* (Joseph Brakhya, Dh122), a spiral-bound brick of a book that builds on the author's final project for the American University of Beirut (AUB). *Marking Beirut* offers an analytical survey of graffiti art and street stencilling in the city. Saleh maps out the markings of various political parties - Amal's green insignia being the most prevalent urban glyph of them all - and includes in her book a series of pull-out, do-it-yourself stencils, in case readers want to start illustrating the streets for themselves, in defiance of the existing logic of politically inspired territorial markings.

Another book with roots at AUB is *Lessons in Post-War Reconstruction: Case Studies from Lebanon in the Aftermath of the 2006 War* (Routledge, Dh407) edited by Howayda al Harithy, a professor who chairs the university's department of architecture and design. After Lebanon's most recent full-scale war, a group of architects and urban planners at AUB created a kind of working group, called the Reconstruction Unit, to intervene in the reconstruction and recovery processes. *Lessons in Post-War Reconstruction* pulls together the experiences of some of the Reconstruction Unit's members, lending academic rigour to a subject - the tug of war between reconstruction schemes hatched the government and Hizbollah - which were much debated in the local press, then largely forgotten as the latter's *fait accompli*. The book also makes an intriguing case for the creation of reconstruction studies as a disciplinary subgenre of urban studies.

Where several chapters of Harithy's book focus on the urban history and experience of Dahiyeh (the Hizbollah stronghold in the southern suburbs of Beirut), Fadi Shayya's *At the Edge of the City: Reinhabiting Public Space Toward the Recovery of Beirut's Horsh al-Sanawbar* (Discursive Formations, Dh110) enlists 40 contributors to engage a single site. The Horsh is a pine forest appropriated by the municipality of Beirut in the 1870s, declared a public park in the 1960s, firebombed by Israeli forces in the 1980s, and, except for a small sliver, sealed off to residents and visitors since the 1990s (the argument being that the pine trees that have since been replanted are still too young and vulnerable to withstand public interaction, although adults over 35 years of age can apply for a special permit to enter the park). In Shayya's words, the closure of the park is "not right, not constitutional, and not just," and his book attempts to imagine and project possibilities for its public reactivation. Like *Marking Beirut*, *At the Edge of the City* comes with interactive bells and whistles: a DVD with a film by Lasse Lau called

Pine Nuts, a pull-out poster designed by Danny Khoury, and serial nudges toward a complementary blog and online discussion forum.

Equally interactive is *Beyroutes: A Guide to Beirut* (Archis, Dh75), a project initiated by the collective Studio Beirut. Published as the first in Archis' *Never Walk Alonely Planet* series, *Beyroutes* spoofs the typical tourist guidebook format, offering alternative and delightfully subversive takes on the city, replete with walking tours of assassination sites, a guide to surviving Dahiyeh (no cameras, no alcohol, no public displays of affection), a litany of useful terms and phrases ("did you flip it?" being a personal favorite, referring to the generator switches that kick in during power cuts) and a smattering of affecting oral testimonies on Beirut's hidden and forgotten places.

The best and most probing of the present pile of publications, *Beyroutes* tackles the city in layers: "first impression city," "official city", "emotional city" and "invented city". It includes excerpts from a transcript of the artist and architect Tony Chakar's "Catastrophic Space Tour", a surprisingly moving walk through Achrafieh, available online in its entirety as an MP3 file. "Let's take it slow, easygoing," says Chakar. "I know that many of you know this city very well and there's nothing new I can show you. I only want you to see it through new eyes. It's always hard to describe what's in front of you, to find the exact words, but when you do, the whole world is illuminated. It's a beautiful feeling. I will try my very best."

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<http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100806/REVIEW/708059984/1008>