NARRATIVES IN URBAN ENVIRONMENT: SIGNATURES OF BDD

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by

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Abstract

Beirut is a collage of urban styles due to the influence of Memluki, Ottoman, and the French mandate on its urban development. Beirut Digital District (BDD) is a unique cluster of innovation and entrepreneurship dedicated to creating a hub for the digital and creative community in Lebanon. The purpose of this study is to unravel the identity of BDD through a detailed reading and analysis of its multi-layered built environment. Flânerie and military urbanism theories are used to investigate the urban dress of BDD. Using the qualitative research method, in-depth interviews with 27 authors, journalists, researchers, urban planners, architects and other experts were conducted to obtain more focused explanations and perspective about the urbanism of BDD, and observation theory to collect data from the buildings, colors, shapes, and all the visual cues throughout BDD. It is found that BDD is capitalism with goodwill where heritage, modernity and omnipresent securitization aim at serving innovation. Narratives in Urban Environment:

Signatures of BDD

Every city produces a unique discourse. The colors, sounds, shapes, and objects of an urban setting charge gazers with endless storytelling. Reading the city happens through taking in its architectural and urban styles, which represent the physical frames of social thoughts, values, aspirations and identity (Backovic & Masirevic, 2010). Most cities demonstrate an instant, obvious identity – the boulevards of Paris, the cathedrals of Rome, the skyscrapers of New York (Dear & Flusty, 1998; Fayad, 2009), the iconic Opera House of Sydney and the Great Wall of China (Cruickshank, 2019) – or even inspirational themes reflecting their identities as in the horizontal lines of Barcelona with its high rising Sagrada Familia church and the uncommon heterogenic narrative in Los Angeles. Other cities embed more or less a vague urban signature such as Berlin (Pfefferkorn, 2005) and the contemporary, multi-faced Istanbul (Quataert, 2003).

Exploring the urban signature of Beirut entails analyzing its multi-layered history, streets, buildings and city layouts. Beirut is a melting pot of the old and the new, the organized and the mixed, the traditional and the contemporary. It contradicts the spirit of modernism–the uniform, unified international style of urbanism–that leads to a closer image of the postmodernist multi-cultural, pluralistic and heterogeneous flair. Located in Beirut's Bashoura area is Beirut Digital District (BDD), the Silicon Valley of Lebanon. BDD's agglomeration of multi-styled objects, decentered topography, monumentality and novelty makes it interesting for exploration. While much literature exists on Beirut and its identity (Aghacy, 2015; Fawwaz, 1983; Fayad, 2018; Fregonese, 2020; Kassir, 2010), very little has been written on Beirut Digital District. Given that

BDD's identity remains unread, this thesis explores, though the use of the theories of flâneurie and military urbanism, the discourse that BDD imparts and the narratives its urbanism offers.

Literature Review

A comprehensive discussion of the urban signature of BDD and the urban narrative that it encapsulates, cannot be undertaken without an overview of Beirut's urban context. This literature review section starts by paging through the history of urbanism and the phases of its gradual evolution, shedding light on the urban as a communicative medium, then moves to the history and the built environment of Beirut, to end by presenting Beirut Digital District, the area on which this thesis focuses.

Urbanism

Prior to looking at the urbanism of Beirut, or any other city, it is necessary to highlight the extensive history of urbanism to provide an overview of its features and evolution.

Urbanism began with the formation of the city-state. During the pre-industrial era, the history of humankind went through hunting, fishing then agriculture and herding. This agriculture-led development moved people from dispersed to nucleate living, in villages and city-states (Harari, 2015). A city-state is, by definition, a legitimate monopoly of authorities within a certain area, over a specific population (Hansen, 2006). In socio-economic terms, a city-state thrives on urbanization and markets. While the industrial revolution triggered revolutionary evolution in urban planning in Europe and the rest of the world (Hansen, 2006), city-states enjoyed the highest degree of urbanization, communication, economic and political bases among pre-industrial communities.

As a term, urbanism appeared in the eighties with Le Corbusier's views regarding town planning (Curl & Wilson, 2015). Urbanism is an academic discipline that aims at understanding

the organization and dynamics of urban areas. It embeds complex ideas and questions to help us understand the substance of our entourage. In other words, it seeks legibility of the city through thorough observation and reflection (Fayad, 2017).

Urbanism is the fusion of three elements: technical mastery, benefit and art (Fayad, 2009), which form three-dimensional hybrid ruled by market needs and demands. Design and urban planning are, therefore, not mere art since they are affected by key individuals. Those individuals influence the production and consumption of social goods, control urban planners and land markets and enhance the growth of urban managerialism. Such individuals are mostly housing managers, planners, estate agents, financiers, police, councilors and architects (Hubbard, 2006). With urban managerialism, urbanism collapses as a medium of framed communication and identity (Curl & Wilson, 2015), and goals of urban life such as identity, livability, right of control and meaningful community life vanish. Consequently, the loss of public life, placelessness and designer/developer-oriented mindset take the scene (Zhu, 2009). Urban managerialism evacuates the place's character and identity putting it out of its context and historical frame (Koolhaas, 1995), to replace its uniform urban fabric with a globalized urbanism, characterized by convergence occurring only at the price of shedding identity. Globalized urbanism is the by-product of postmodernism and the death of grand, metanarratives and the fixed paradigms that thinkers tried to construct since the Enlightenment (Lyotard, 1979). According to Jameson (1991), postmodernism is a cultural form which has developed in the wake of the socio-economical order of present day capitalism and dominates all cultural productions yet keeps a degree of flexibility which still allows for other forms of cultural production to coexist alongside it (Jameson, 1991), and exposes the pursuit of the irrational and the consistency and coherence of the seemingly unrelated episodes of urbanisms, that

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materialized in Manhattanism, in which Coney Island is an embryonic Manhattan, a sky scraper is a self-contained universe, and Manhattan is an archipelago of architectural islands (Koolhaas, 1994). Considering the scale at which this loss is happening, it must mean something; some value must lie beyond mourning the lost identity. With this global liberation from uniformity the city surprises inhabitants with a new identity every Monday morning (Koolhaas, 1995), for this suppression of depth, fragmentation, pastiche, and other characteristics of postmodern culture and architecture aim at replacing the surrounding, establishing a totally new space rather than blending in it (Jameson, 1991). Globalization will result in individuals moving to where the city experience is more attractive, and to where the promise of liberation form tyranny, repression and exploitation is higher; would the industrial city that came after the political and the mercantile cities ace that? Or would the uncertainty, perplexity, urban concentration, rural exodus and shapelessness that dominate it serve as a prelude to a critical phase of paradoxes? (Lefebvre, 1970).

A city is a platform of interwoven spider webs seeking a shape (Calvino, 1972). In order to understand how this shape is formed we need to know first why people build. While the reasons may be varied, people mainly build for security purposes, to create communities, to materialize power, and for the pleasure and joy of visual beauty (Cruickshank, 2019). Yet prior to building lies the planning phase, so what is planning? Planning is a multi-pillared enterprise; it is primarily the expression of power and order since it displays the economic and political status of nations; It is meant to control the consumption of space (Lefebvre, 1970). Planning is also a process of social longing for justice and opportunities, a rewriting of the public narrative and its associations. While the planning project is mainly the government's duty since the government is in charge of the public production of space, urban planning, in many urban contexts is, nonetheless, being privatized. Countries like Lebanon and Bangladesh are examples of how the planning project is run by the private sector and not the state. Irrespective of who oversees the planning, it is necessary to generate an urban structure that speaks to the human condition (Roy, 2011).

In the first century BCE, the Roman architect and theorist Vitruvius, defined building as the embodiment of commodity, firmness and joy (Cruickshank, 2019). This implies that building should be primarily practical, structurally impeccable and visually appealing. In the Renaissance era, the harmony found in music was expected in urbanism as much as the proportion of voices should be harmonious in music, measurements equally, should be harmonious to the eyes in architecture (Cruickshank, 2019). From the 1960 onwards, a new revived global narrative in urbanism, first made an appearance (Gulhan, 2016) and took roots in the United States through the diverse architectural character of Cleveland (Hirt, 2009) and New York cities. Other success examples stand in London, Singapore, Tokyo, Sao Paolo, Shanghai and other cities demonstrating a thriving urban entrepreneurialism and development, in addition to other fragmented, unthinkable spaces such as the city of Kabul, seemingly unplanned, seemingly undecipherable (Roy, 2011).

The Control of information is most likely to become the 21st century's definition of power and authority (Lyotard, 1979). A more novel form considers urbanism as a set of representations of control throughout space (Roy, 2011); media representations of a city become part of the urban scene. The hidden installation of media forms, practices, types and technologies into daily lives is in fact, urbanism. Urban surfaces such as digitized urban screens, closed circuit television (CCTV), graffiti, street art, advertising, scanners, as well as urban structures, which can embed a political or a cultural message, play multiple communication roles. A good illustration is the Ground Zero memorial in New York – the plaza located at the site of the former Twin Towers – which was built to commemorate the attacks of September 11, 2001 (Rodgers, Barnett, &Cochrane 2014).

The colonization of the urban space which takes place in the streets through publicity, colors, and other communication forms to make things attractive to merchandize are the bread and butter of cities after capitalism (Lefebvre, 1970), yet successful city urbanism, irrespective of genre, should provide people with benefit and should be eye pleasing, for beauty is major as Vitruvius pointed out. Most importantly, city urbanism should include art, which gives meaning and depth to a place and enhances its story. Art can tell a lot about the history, the present, the character, the successes and the failures of a city. As previously mentioned, by exploring BDD's urban environment, this thesis uncovers the many discourses this place imparts and attempts to identify its urban signature.

How A Place Speaks

Space represents the lived experience of humans and demonstrates the social production of space itself (Lefebvre, 1970). Materiality, structure, form and details are message transmitting vehicles (Browne, 2011). Dan Cruickshank, a British art historian and a British Broadcasting Corporation presenter, wrote the history of the world we live in through the story of a hundred buildings selected from different types of architecture and different geographic locations, to portray the aspirations of many cultures throughout hundreds of years. Architecture, as Cruickshank (2019) declares, can embed symbols and express power, national identity and pride. It can embody politics, economy, society, religion, science, ecology, art and culture in general (Cruickshank, 2019).

Architecture is seen as the typical comprehensive representative of civilization. In the past, architecture played a focal role in molding national identity through landmark buildings that reflected the cultural narrative. During its flourishing stages, Europe invested in state-led building projects to codify its culture and create a national identity. The great buildings, constructed between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries such as Hotel de Ville in Paris and the opera house of Dresden in Germany, are good examples as they express the selfconfidence of the ruling imperial authorities of the time, in addition to the Christian heritage which mirrored the power of the church throughout the continent's history. Following the end of the cold war, architecture entered a new phase of globalization and diminished governments' capacities to offer architectural narratives to their cities. Landmark buildings maintained their role, but in a wider cultural discourse context which doesn't represent a specific code of values, whether local, national, or universal, but an abstract one along with an emerging collective identity. The Reichstag project, Germany's parliament building is a good example. German architect, Daniel Libeskind refers to it as the non-German identity and argues that the era of national architecture is finished and irrelevant since the world is on its way towards universal or post-national identity. Another example portraying a mixed identity is the Millennium Dome in London; it is the symbol of the fragmented nature of the British national identity which oscillates between the old national and the cosmopolitan diverse and multi-ethnic Britain (Delanty & Jones, 2002).

Therefore, we can conclude that architecture and urbanism are actually means of communication (Delanty & Jones, 2002). The act of communicating a specific place in itself paves the way for its brand. Everything that brings a place together speaks its identity, its social dimensions, its organizational hierarchy and its physical structure and attributes (Fernandez-

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Cavia, Kovaratzis, & Morgan, 2018). Considering the fact that Beirut is famous for its social, economic and cultural diversity (Public Works Studio, 2019), this qualitative research seeks to decipher the communicated narrative in the urban dress of Beirut as well as that of Beirut Digital District specifically.

Beirut

The Republic of Lebanon stretches along the eastern Mediterranean coast with Beirut as its capital (Traboulsi, 2007). Every city has a distinctive identity shaped by its physical and visual forms which develop gradually over time. To uncover the cultural, historical, social and economic traits of a city, one has to dig into its urbanism (Catalani, Nour, Versace, Hawkes, Bougdah, Sotoca, Ghoneem, Trapani, 2018).

Beirut is not vertical, as it hosts very few high-rise structures. The city is continuously crawling out, up to the surrounding mountains and out into the sea making it almost impossible to define its borderlines (Fayad, 2017). The history of Beirut is mainly Mamluki and Ottoman (Fayad, 2017) and the city witnessed remarkable urban development thanks to the advanced Ottoman infrastructure plans. The grand serail and other official Ottoman projects show architectural portrayals of the Ottoman military rule, whereas the clock towers of 1899, symbolize the Ottoman's embrace of modernism away from mosques and other traditional building genres (Traboulsi, 2007). The Ottoman period was followed by the sixteenth century's Emirate of Mount Lebanon, then the French mandate introducing the European influence succeeded the Tanzimat modernization plans in the nineteenth century, before the independence (Traboulsi, 2007). The city itself was demolished and reconstructed many times, giving it a multi-layered past and hampering according to Aghacy (2015), the accurate determination and

preservation of its identity. As a result, we ended up with a well-urbanized capital embracing the new without cutting the umbilical cord with the past (Aghacy, 2015).

Being a flâneur in Beirut, walking around its streets and exploring how life goes inside it, makes you acknowledge the authenticity of the widespread cliché that Beirut was once the Paris of the Middle East. Its boulevards, beach sidewalks, cafés, old villas, and ruins from past times emanate a beauty of decaying vibes which remind flâneurs of the Golden Age before the seventies' civil war. It is not the memory of an affluent, eye-catchy, stylish city with exceptional architecture and urban dress, but of a cosmopolitan lifestyle in the middle of an Arab conservative region, as the public discourse in it embeds a narrative about a multicultural hub, secular, modern, religious, westernized, fundamentalist and many other faces simultaneously (Andersen, 2017).

As an ancient city, Beirut is an accumulation of strata, where each layer is charged with a specific history and time. Unlike grandiose ruins from the classical past, Beirut encapsulates contemporary ruins: unfinished houses, collapsing buildings and bombarded objects. Contradictions of the old alongside the new remain a dominant feature of the Lebanese capital (Aghacy, 2015). While Adonis, the Syrian poet, describes Beirut as "an open project that is never complete", and considers it as a city of "exploration" – and not "certainty" – Rem Koolhaas (2010) believes it to be an irrational eye-shocking culture characterized by its chaotic urbanism: concrete residential buildings and offices, irrelevant out of context skyscrapers which first emerged in the late fifties replacing gradually, the remains of past schools of architecture, and messing up the urban planning which was initiated during the Ottoman and French rules. This culminated in some sort of theatrical renovation that the Lebanese governing authority restored in an attempt to impress, but not accommodate the nation's identity (Fayad, 2018).

Furthermore, if we wish to reveal the identity of the Lebanese capital we need to look into its past. The history of Beirut is shaped by the interaction of both local and global forces and events in addition to the changes in the global economy, regional geo-politics, including the rise of oil economies in the Gulf as well as regional wars. Lebanon's very political economy (Yassin, 2012), gave birth, since 1840, to five phases of urban transformation in Beirut, and led to its evolution from a small Ottoman coastal town to Lebanon's primary city and cosmopolitan center (Smith, 2002).

Historically, Beirut's center was situated between two overlooking hills: Achrafieh to the east, and Ras Beirut to the west (Yassin, 2012). Originally, Beirut was a Phoenician port city, flanked by Byblos to the north and Sidon to the south (Sader, 1998). Its golden era emerged in the pre-modern age, around the first century CE during the Roman times. Beirut, or "Berytus" as the Romans named it, a Christian town back then, witnessed a prosperous period during the Roman rule until an earthquake demolished it in 551 CE (Davie, 1987, Hanssen, 1998).Except for the fact that Beirut was used by Muawiyah, the first Umayyad Caliph, to invade Cyprus, little is known about the city in the early Islamic and Arab times in 667 CE until the crusaders invaded it around 1110 CE and turned it into a typical medieval city by building walls around it with a sea front castle. In 1291, the Muslim Mamluks took control of Beirut and empowered the Sunni Muslim community in the city and other coastal towns. The Mamluks re-empowered Sunni Muslims in coastal towns as part of the strategy they formulated to face possible Crusader naval invasion and they did not leave Beirut until 1516, when the Ottomans took over and the five phases of the city's transformation and urbanization began (Yassin, 2012).

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Phase One: The Emergence of Cosmopolitan Beirut, the Levant's Doorway.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, Beirut was regarded as an Ottoman coastal town (Fawwaz, 1983). During the second half of the century, the city started to flourish thanks to the reforms or Tanzimat, employed by the Ottoman Sultanate (Hanssen, 2005). The Ottoman modernization plans resulted in the founding of the first municipal council in the city (1868), and the execution of various infrastructure projects: quays, new roads, public squares, electricity company, water company, tramway and postal system (Saliba, 2000; Zachs, 2005).

The city became the gateway to the Levant, as the silk industry and the trade exchange between Europe and Mount Lebanon grew rapidly (Yassin, 2012; Khater, 2001). During the Ottoman phase, Beirut crawled out of the medieval city borders as villas for wealthy merchants rose in Zuqaq al-Blat and Saifi areas, and other areas such as Al Kantari, Ras Naba'a, Moussaitbeh and Ras Beirut began to show urbanization traits. Demographically, 64 percent of Beirut's population was Christian (Davie, 1996) but it did not gain its Cosmopolitan status until significant changes were made by the Ottoman Empire (Fawaz, 1984).

Phase Two: "Petit Paris" and the French Mandate.

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire brought the French and British mandates to the Levant. According to the Sykes-Picot agreement, the British ruled Palestine and Iraq, and the French controlled Lebanon and Syria. The French separated Lebanon and Syria, and founded Greater Lebanon by expanding Mount Lebanon to include the coastal towns of Tyre, Sidon, Tripoli and Beirut, in addition to the Bekaa area, Jabal Amel and Akkar. Simultaneously, the French announced Beirut as the capital of Lebanon. In terms of urbanism, the French extended the Ottoman plans of modernization but with a twist: they paved roads and avenues, named large streets after their triumphant generals such as, Foch and Weygand, and they also constructed landmark projects such as the National Museum and the Parliament (Barakat, 2004).

Demographically, the French period witnessed large flows of political refugees; the Armenians and the Syrians who escaped the Ottoman assaults in 1922, some refugees from Alexandretta in 1939 (Fawaz and Peillin, 2003) and the Palestinians who fled the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948 (Ugland, 2003). Armenian and Syrian refugees, who were mostly Christians were directly integrated and naturalized (Fawaz and Peillin, 2003), whereas Palestinians settled illegally in camps outside Beirut and this led to a significant conflict in 1975 (Yassin, 2012).

By the end of the French phase, sectarian and class imbalances between neighborhoods appeared. The areas of Achrafieh and Saifi in eastern Beirut, became mostly for Christian rich families (Thompson, 2000), while western and southern areas of Beirut, such as Al Basta, Bourj Abou Haidar and Al Zarif, became largely Sunni, while Ras Beirut and Moussaitbeh were the mixed, intellectual, diverse districts which emerged around the American University of Beirut (Yassin, 2012).

Phase Three: The Fast Urbanization and the Emergence of Misery Belts.

During the 1950s and up until the1970s, Beirut became the Middle Eastern platform of service economy (Nasr, 1993). The closure of the port of the Palestinian city Haifa in 1948 due to the Israeli-Arab war, boosted Lebanon's economy as the port's activities were transferred to Beirut's port where transit services catered to oil-rich Gulf states, and goods were imported from western destinations (Yassin, 2012).

Moreover, the third phase witnessed a serious attempt to cater for a master plan for the city. Michel Ecochard, a French Planner who regarded Beirut as "the city of injustice" was

commissioned by the government to execute the master plan, which was sentenced to failure as private investor hesitated due to high restrictions (Salam, 1998).

Demographically, internal migration dominated the scene as people left the Bekaa and southern areas towards Beirut (Nasr, 1993), resulting in the construction of unregulated settlements that mushroomed around Beirut to integrate the demographic flood (Fawaz and Peillin, 2003). These deprived, low-income settlements became known as the "misery belt" of the city (Halawi, 2002) wherein radical groups and militias appeared, especially among the Palestinian refugees, some of whom were recruited and trained to counterattack and fight Israel. Fighter recruitments attracted Lebanese leftists and Muslims, especially those whose anger was growing against the injustices of the Lebanese government's policies. This militarization of Palestinian and Lebanese Muslims was regarded as a threat to the Christians in the east of Beirut and to the state that those Christians had envisioned (Yassin, 2012).

Phase Four: Civil Strife and Urbanization

The civil war between the Muslim leftist factions on one side and the Christian forces on the other, broke out in April 1975.Due to the escalating violence, families were forced to move from religiously mixed areas to homogeneous sectarian ones thereby leading to the creation of a new spatial order. As a result, Beirut was divided into 2 zones: A Christian-led east and a Muslim leftist west. The division remained until the breakthrough in 1990 when a peace agreement between the warring factions was finally signed (Yassin, 2012).

Phase Five: Post-War Re-urbanization

After years of civil violence, the Israeli invasion in 1982, and the Syrian army's control of the western enclave, over 150,000 killed, 300,000 injured, and 800,000 displaced, a peace agreement was signed in 1990 (Khalaf, 2002; Sawalha, 1998; Yahya, 2004). As the barriers

between the western and eastern sides of Beirut were removed, the late Prime Minister Rafic Hariri carried out a post-war reconstruction plan (Yassin, 2012). The plan was inaugurated in a bid to revive the city center as a commercial and business hub (El-Dahdah, 1998). The construction program, however, left the areas around the city center untouched. This disconnected the city center from its immediate surroundings (Yahya, 2004) and the city that was cut into pieces during the civil war remained so afterwards and failed to reach normalcy (Yassin, 2012).

The history of urbanization in Beirut reveals how every part of the city has been shaped, including the BDD area, which is one of the districts that exist at the abandoned borderlines around the central Beirut area. The significance of this study lies in investigating the neglected surrounding of down town in an attempt to understand their visual vocabulary, symbolism and of course functionality.

In *The Jasmine Tree*, Ghassan Saoud (2018), a Lebanese journalist and novelist, described how pigeons hang around public parks and town squares peacefully in Europe, and how one cannot pull out a sandwich publically next to Hagia Sophia in Istanbul to avoid the immediate gathering of dozens of doves around, while hunters compete, under the eyes of security forces, over shooting seagulls around Beirut's Rafik Hariri international airport. "There is no public beach in Beirut", he adds. We only have the beach sidewalks and they do not replace the public beach access. "The beach sidewalksare boring cement", Saoud says, whereas beaches like in Barcelona or other coastal cities in Morocco, Algeria and Italy are necessary public spaces which complete the cityscape and are highly enjoyed by people from all classes and backgrounds, he concludes. In an interview with him, Saoud (2020) voiced that thanks to the racist and capitalist culture in Lebanon, people are generally convinced that public areas and beaches are designated to host the poor only. Children gather up around statues all over the world to play and mingle, while street vendors take their cigarette breaks. In many countries statues are aimed at attracting tourists, inviting them to know more about the city's history and gaining the locals' sympathy through the person they represent, whereas in Beirut, as well as in Cairo, Damascus and Amman, a statue is a giant compared to normal statue sizes and is placed away from people's gatherings as if to intimidate onlookers and instill fear in people's hearts (Saoud, 2018).

"The clay roof tiles are vanishing", Saoud (2018) continues. Old buildings charged with history and memories are being demolished to be replaced by ugly high-rises. Politically affiliated investors are taking over the public areas along the coast to build luxurious inaccessible-to-all resorts. It is more like a mass grave; the old is being dumped and topped by the worthless new and the down town area with the surrounding districts are good examples. The Saifi village was renovated and painted, whereas entire areas, houses and parks were bulldozed to host useless erect towers. Beirut has changed so much and the higher council for urban planning should be held accountable (Saoud, 2018). We had a wonderful urban city just like many Turkish and European capitals, before it ended up being a cement city, Saoud (2018) points out, and it is a crime to witness that every day and remain silent, he adds. This is not a matter of defending Beirut "the garden" versus its capitalist reconstruction, nor a nostalgia invading us when we think of our past; it is a struggle for every citizen's right to life in the city. Beirut is becoming so strange, Saoud continues. Behind the new fancy skyscrapers, one can sadly detect abandoned and neglected Ottoman and French artifacts. Such buildings are totally ignored in Beirut, whereas in Istanbul and in other European cities municipalities dedicate their

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budgets to enhance their lighting, colors, pavements and green design to attract more visitors (Saoud, 2018).

In addition, Beirut is distinguished for its fragmented nature; one can easily detect five mini-Beiruts within the greater one: Ouzai, Hamra, Dahieh (Southern suburb of Beirut), Achrafieh, and Tariq al Jdideh. Each of these areas has a different urban style, people, taxis, souks, goods and infrastructure, while the public spaces around them are alarmingly shrinking with the non-stop politically backed urban massacring projects and so called re-building. Perhaps the use of bombarded building rubble in Dahieh after July 2006 war by Israel on Lebanon, to expand Beirut's waterfront is the most striking (Saoud, 2018). Unlike the renovation of Centre-Ville enthusiasts, Saoud seems to be irritated by the ongoing refurbishment going there, which raises questions around what he regarded as the "horrible fancy" renovation and building projects, like BDD, our speculation zone.

The late Lebanese journalist and historian Samir Kassir (2010) claims that Beirut is the victim of several conflicts, which resulted from the integration of geopolitics in its built environment which acquired the urban character of war. Moreover, he pinpoints its congested urbanism and the absence of master planning caused by private investors' space development projects (Kassir, 2010). Kassir's input provides insight which facilitates the understanding of the urban plural-identity of Beirut in general, and that of multi-styled BDD specifically.

In a study issued in 2009, Jon Calame and Esther Charlesworth investigated what they judged as "divided cities". In addition to Belfast, Jerusalem, Mostar and Nicosia they explored Beirut. The study states that the Maronite internal migration from rural villages to the city due to poverty, gave birth to the mainly Christian East Beirut in 1870 while Muslims, both Shiites and Sunni's settlement in the western part of the city for employment and better life conditions, created the mainly Islamic West Beirut. Despite this major ethnic division in the city, mixed districts such as Hamra, Ras-Beirut, Ain Mraisse, and the down town or Souks area, existed without highlighting the powerful distinctions between clans, classes, native Beirutis and nonnative ones. As a result, Beirut has traditionally been a pluralistic yet ethnically separated city, and the intensified rural migration to it as of the fifties, led to an unbalanced and chaotic urbanization due to the governments' inadequate policy making. Discriminatory policies at all levels nurtured social strife and divisions served to contain security crises. In other words, the study regards physical divisions as indicators of failure to provide collective security and a solution at the same time, especially for fragmented religious, ethnic, and other minorities (Calame & Charlesworth, 2009). In this sense, BDD is a portion left unstudied and uncategorized because we do not know whether it is an indication of failure of the city or a fulfillment of people's aspirations. In examining BDD, this thesis will use Calame and Charlesworth's results in studying Beirut to shed light on the district's identity.

A city can be also read through its objects; they have religious and political meanings. Spaces tell stories that journalists and diplomats don't. Sara Fregonese (2020) in her "War and the City Urban Geopolitics in Lebanon" analyzed the relationship between geopolitics, conflicts and the urbanism of Beirut. She argues that the urban style is an open dialogue on the city's identity and the nature of its sovereignty. The concept of "urbicide", or attacking the semiotic and symbolic meanings of the built environment of a city as well as the civic values it embraces, relates to Beirut enormously. The culture of a city is supposedly a culture of acceptance of others but after the civil war, Beirut, as a city, regressed to the rural mindset. Civil strife led to the bombardment of the Beirut souks area or the down town – the incubator of Lebanon's plurality and shared interests –thereby jeopardizing the possibility of fusion and communication between

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varied communities. Therefore, the city was gradually divided, on both physical and psychological levels, into east and west and the neighborhoods were equally fragmented (Fregonese, 2020). Analyzing this partition and Beirut's urban fabric of enclaves, Fregonese came up with what she called the "Hybrid Sovereignty" character, or the constellation of sovereignties that the Lebanese capital encompasses (Fregonese, 2020). Does BDD comply with Fregonese's concept of hybrid sovereignty or does it diverge form it? This thesis will consider this question and will look for answers in the following analysis.

"Living Beirut's Security Zones: An Investigation of the Modalities and Practices of Urban Security" is a study conducted by Mona Fawaz, Mona Harb and Ahmad Gharbieh (2012) to investigate the security practices in Beirut's urbanism. One of the city dwellers, interviewed by the authors, linked Beirut's highly securitized urban space to a virtual game where one has to overcome obvious obstacles and secret eyes:

These days I feel that I am back to the village except that those who are harassing me, inquiring about my whereabouts and bossing me around, are 100 strangers dressed in different costumes, playing police... Beirut is ugly. There is something lost in the city. It is that sense of freedom that I first felt when I came here from a village of one or two thousand people, where everyone knew where you are going, what you are doing or when you are eating. In Beirut, it seems as if I am playing an electronic game where one is constantly facing a set of obstacles that you have to navigate: cars, pedestrians and of course the security system (qtd.in Fawaz, Gharbieh, Harb, 2012, p.1).

Her words sum up the myriad of security-keeping means which people cope with on a daily basis in Beirut, including blocked streets, no parking zones, no photography zones, bag and

car searches near the headquarters of embassies and governmental institutions, road deviations or blocks for hours if a convoy is passing, barbed wires, metal barriers and surveillance. Well aware that security management systems were increasing in presence, at least visually, in cities all over the world, the authors interviewed writers, artists and city dwellers to conclude that Beirut uses a fragmented and omnipresent security system mirroring the social and political divisions of the country. The analysis uncovers that security deployment in Beirut was nurturing these divisions and threatening the common and the public space in the city (Gharbieh, Harb,& Fawaz, 2012). In investigating the identity of Beirut Digital district, this thesis looks at the implications of security on the dwellers of the district in an attempt to discover the impact of those security measures have, both on their actions and their perception of the city.

Beirut Digital District

The Creative Class is a term coined by Richard Florida, a Carnegie Mellon University economist and an expert in city trends; he first used it in his book *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) where he introduced the idea worker concept. Florida's definition of the idea worker or the creative class centers around people in the fields of entertainment, engineering, architecture, education, music, arts, science and other domains, whose economic role is to come up with innovation, technology and creative substance. The difference between the creative class and other classes, such as the working class or the service class, is that the latter are paid to execute based on preplanned strategies, while the creative class are paid to innovate new norms for everyone else (Florida, 2002).

Today in most urban contexts, zoning practices are being implemented based on the demands of the market. Instead of letting the majority of people leave to stronger cities, investors refurbish weak cities and smarten them up to become better places to live in. This is an essential part of the new world order (Mela, 2014). The Creative Class is therefore becoming widely talked about and is regarded as an essential class of people dedicated to the revival of dead cities. But the idea workers alone cannot rejuvenate the city. Economists claim that in order to empower a city we need to reduce crime, improve infrastructure, transportation, and public safety among others (Florida, 2002).

BDD is a hub for the creative class and a hub connecting the creatives with other classes. It is a platform where innovation, entrepreneurship and creative talents co-exist along with safety, technology as well as high-end infrastructure. BDD is a multi-layered district which embraces community, business and eco-friendly development – green solutions for water, power and landscape–and has a new design topography ensuring optimum work-life balance. The district was launched by ZRE, a real estate development group whose main aspiration is to develop a self-sustaining creative neighborhood where technology and brains join hands, paving the way for creative communities to thrive (ZRE Webpage). BDD's phasing employs a pragmatic approach to guarantee an organized growth of a flourishing and vibrant urban area (Saleh, 2012).

BDD is meshed into the historical Bashoura area where optimization with high-tech and smart infrastructure meet (Bad, 2018). Bashoura, a few hundred meters away from downtown Beirut, is famous for its old buildings and houses with gardens once owned by rich Beirutis. The Bashoura neighborhood is disconnected from the surrounding areas by four highways. If you take a closer look, you can gaze at the pulse of this zone thriving with trade: small shops, artisans, woodwork, antiquity showrooms, car garages, print houses, butchers, carpet stores and glassware, unlike the neighboring Matar alleyway, with the smaller buildings and poorer commercial scene. If it wasn't for the prime location of Bashoura and the investment magnet it represents, the project of BDD wouldn't have seen life (Public Works Studio, 2019). BDD is taking the step forward by gradually becoming an integrated digital zone through an organic, phased expansion strategy; a constant swelling out onto the suburb, renovating old objects and building up new ones. As a result, the old goes hand in hand with the new within BDD's creativity, diversity and poly-architectural identity adding to that the media-architecture boost for the media proliferation and surveillance related practices (CCTV, scanners, fingerprints, magnetic IDs...). Despite its importance in understanding the place we live in and its impact on our lives, literature on Beirut Digital District is almost negligible. Building on the existing data around Beirut in general, this thesis takes an in-depth look at the Beirut Digital District to define its identity and identify on how that identity merges with or diverges from that of Beirut.

Theoretical Framework

This section discusses the theoretical framework of this thesis. The first part defines the theory of Flânerie, while the second part is dedicated to the theory of military urbanism. Flânerie is the act of observing the urban surroundings' development; it is the art of pursuing meaning through wandering and contemplating the built environment of a city to read the stories behind the walls. Therefore, it is employed in this research to read BDD and trace military urbanization across the city and within the digital district.

Flânerie

An architectural design communicates; it tells straightforward stories that are as real as its occupants and dwellers (Browne, 2010). Architects, according to Browne (2010), have always sought to come up with meaningful narrative urbanism. Each designed object tells a different story resulting in a plethora of styles throughout history. Spatial stories can range from simple ones with direct metaphors to complex ones, as complex as novels; the observer is simply

required to give longer time to reflect and absorb the content rather than judge the book by its cover (Browne, 2010). Perhaps one of the best ways to read the spatial stories of a city is by taking a walk in its streets. In his *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino (1972) described streets as written pages whose discourse is deciphered by the gazes of onlookers. This takes us back in time to the eighties when petting a tortoise and walking it through the streets of the neighborhood, patiently, was considered normal and elegant; being the connoisseur of streets, the spectator, the flâneur was popular back then (Benjamin, 1999), unlike nowadays where a fast paced lifestyle dominates our daily activities including our walks.

A flâneur is a conscious, critical individual of leisure. A poet of urban spaces, the flâneur observes, collects and produces texts. The social base of flânerie is journalism; for with the collection of social knowledge, a flâneur acquires aptitude for critical social and political vision (Sikiardi&Vogelaar, 2003). The flâneur, originally of Edgar Allen Poe and Charles Baudelaire, is the individual sovereign of the order of things. Able to attribute meaning to things and faces freely, the flâneur is like a poet or an artist who can reap aesthetic meaning from the visible public based on his own standards and perspectives (Tester, 2014). The Holiday Inn hotel, for example, can be read as both a landmark and as the blind spot of Beirut since it was inaugurated in 1974, then bombarded in 1975 during the Lebanese civil war. It symbolizes Beirut's flourishing and the probability of the sudden collapse that can happen at any time given the politically unstable nature of Lebanon. It is a reminder of the constant horror there (Koteich, 2019).

Flânerie gained prominence as a literary character with Walter Benjamin, in the 19th century (Benjamin, 1999). After Benjamin, the flâneur became an important model and an analytical tool for scholars, artists and writers. In the wake of industrialization, flânerie, as the

prerogative of the chosen few, diminished, with the emergence of boulevards and sidewalks that transformed strolling and observing into a popular culture (Sikiardi &Vogelaar, 2003).

Although it slowly disappeared in literature, the spirit of flânerie, as a lens through which things can be looked at and explained, survived as the industrialized urban spaces emerged and attempts to make sense of one's surroundings seemed vague and undecipherable with time. In this context, the eighties witnessed the rise of the cognitive mapping concept, and with that the individual's ability to read the city, and to come up with personal understandings of spaces through mapping (Nelson, 1988). In other words, individuals could create the soft city of their desire in parallel with the myth they fantasize about while observing the actual hard city of stone and asphalt. Monk (2019) emphasized that individuals cognitively remake the city and give it meaning and identity, for the city is not only a service to humans, it is a medium by itself (Chikawori, 2008). The city is the art that encapsulates the buildings enriched by the effect that it imprints on the minds of gazers (Cruickshank, 2019) who page through the written pages of the streets, which feed them with their own storytelling. The gazers start seeing things from new perspectives or with new significations. As if reading the lines of a hand in palmistry they embark on the journey of decoding what is untold in the corners of the streets, in the shape of windows, steps, lighting, antennae and in every cell of the honeycomb in which each of us leaves a story, a number, a date of war breakout or parts of a speech and memories. We could count how many steps make up a street, or the number of stairways, or even the kind of material covering the rooftops and so on, but that would mean absolutely nothing when reading a city. A city consists of the past that it has witnessed and lived (Calvino, 1972) along with all the emotional bonds between inhabitants and the spaces they occupy (Fernandez Cavia, Kovaratzis, Morgan 2018).

Cities may be deceiving; everything you see may embed a connotation not clearly reflected in physical forms (Calvino, 1972). The urban space becomes a space of imaginative travel through narratives and meanings (Brighenti, 2012). For instance, big church windows of glass become God's light and message facilitators into the cathedral (Cruickshank, 2019); closed brick buildings reflect close-mindedness whereas glass architecture symbolizes openness and a sense of possibility (Simpson, 2013). The design of Reichstag, Germany's new parliament, turned into a generator of cultural signifiers and symbolic associations. Starting with the fact that the designer of the new building is a British architect and not German, makes the project multinational and uproots it from a particular cultural brand which goes with Berlin's vague urban identity. Leaving the anti-German Red Army's invasion graffiti and the bullet holes on the exterior of Reichstag are direct attempts to portray the city's past turmoil as well (Delanty & Jones, 2002). The Melinkov Palace built in Moscow back in 1929 by the architect Konstantin Melinkov portrays the spirit of cultural, economic and political communist revolt through its abstract, radical, sculptural, geometric and angular design (Cruickshank, 2019). Last but not least, the seven Euro banknotes show the architectural styles of different periods in the European past: the classical Romanesque Europe appears in the 5 Euros note, the 10 Euros shows the Norman bridge, the Gothic phase is manifested on the 20 Euros note, the Renaissance appears on the 50 Euros, the 100 Euros reflect the Baroque and Rococo period, iron hints of the industrial age show on the 200 Euros note and finally with the postmodern glassy style on the 500 Euros. On the other hand, there is an indirect analysis for what the Euro banknotes represent notably that the bridges, windows and the gateways they display do not refer to particular and famous European symbols and landmarks; they are, instead, symbols of openness and cooperation promoting the European Union's idea of unity in diversity (Delanty & Jones, 2002).

A flâneur is a professional meditator who wanders streets and neighborhoods, reads the environment, both built and non-built, collects colors, shapes, designs and other visual information to produce, small steps at a time, a whole story based on analysis and cognitive associations to the data found in the urban texts. Texts can vary from bricks, colors, shapes, ornaments, symbols and tools of security making and surveillance in our post-colonial times. The flâneur device of meaning-making is employed in this study to decipher BDD's identity and trace the militarized techniques of control that the urban environment integrates.

Theory of Military Urbanism

A flâneur dubs the stories that a built environment tells and detects the urban environment structural changes usually left unnoticed by locals and passers-by. Over the past years, militarized surveillance culture enormously expanded in scale and form, triggering a mounting appetite for exploration, in both academia and popular spheres (Jansson& Christensen, 2014). The flâneur tool is used in this thesis to stop by the embedded military urbanization in the BDD neighborhoods. The distinction between wars among nations and wars within nations is blurry. The terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, Baghdad, Beirut, London, Madrid and the military attacks on Mogadishu, Nablus, and other cities around the world prove how asymmetric warfare can be as a tool in combating political aggression across transnational locales.

Warfare is constantly happening in supermarkets, streets, subway tunnels, industrial districts and towers instead of open spaces, fields and unoccupied borders, thereby shaping the urban look within cities in one way or the other. The 21st century challenge remains indisputably, the mastery of warfare in urban areas remarkably with the increasing concern that the primary combat fields are now the cities. Military urbanism flourishes through:

- The normalization of militarized tracking and targeting practices of day-to-day urban circulations.
- The fast growth of transnational industrial complexes switching military and security companies to technology, surveillance and entertainment ones.
- **Thendeployment of political violence** against and through every day urban infrastructure by
- The escalating integration of militarized veins in popular, urban and material cultures.

Military urbanism is inspired by what is described as the boomerang effect – the boomerang is a hunting weapon that returns to the thrower after being thrown (Graham, 2011). In other words, the concept suggests that knowledge, power, technology and geography work together on shaping the modern social order. The formation of the western colonies, for instance, resulted in the import of a series of political, social, legal and geographical practices from those colonies to be applied in home towns and cities, giving birth to the boomerang effect. Consequently, a series of colonial practices were brought back home ending up with the West imposing, upon itself, some kind of self-colonialism. The importation of colonial and warzone techniques of control into urban arcades halted the traditional adoption of Sun Tzu's military mantra: "The worst war policy is to attack cities" (Leonhard, 2003, p.1). In cities today, control and surveillance technology mushroomed into the background, into the urban environments, urban infrastructures and urban life to ensure security, since the cities' nature nowadays relies heavily on dense networks of infrastructure providing the basic survival kit including water, food and energy. Cities host governmental buildings, embassies, thematic consumer malls and parks which may form potential targets to extremists and attackers and they are, therefore, categorized

as primary threat-prone zones. Military practices became necessary coping mechanisms and led to the formation of checkpoints and installation of CCTV, fences, security zones, biometric control, datamining and radio frequency chips (Graham, 2011), all of which are now seen as an extension to the urbanization (Brighenti, 2012), as the various media technologies, have become interconnected with the urban architectural structures. The types of media attached to the city's urban-scape range from the early urban photographs of the 1850s, to the city-symphony films and glass architecture in the 1920s and the current technological configurations of digital media and computers, which are used not only as means for recreation, but also for surveillance and control. The wave of deploying military tools within cities started in the United States in the eighties (Iveson, 2010). In "The Wars on Graffiti and the New Military Urbanism", Iveson (2010) documents how the New York City police resorted to barbed razor wires and surveillance cameras to hamper the work of street artists, in addition to the high surveillance measures throughout the city, biometrics collection and police street stops (Kaufman, 2016). Rio de Janeiro witnessed military activity within the suburbs and poor neighborhoods in 2008 in a bid to expel drug dealers police precincts and checkpoints were positioned within alleys (Fahlberg, 2018). The South African government also practiced military action within the capital in 2010 to safeguard the city during the world cup- heightened maritime and border control, airspace restrictions by Hawk and Gripen war jets, surveillance systems and contingency evacuation plans (McMichael, 2014).

Urban militarism, the militarization of urban spaces, the new military urbanism and military geographies are all common expressions of one concept and phenomenon in which military ideologies, discourses, practices and tools seep into the daily life in cities (Fahlberg, 2018). Militarization in balkanized contemporary cities is being considered as a nascent trait (Mela, 2014), or as an expansion of urbanization through varied media; yet the question that lingers is: Do such media play the role of bridges or walls? Whose tools are they? What are the motives behind their use? Are they empowerment or surveillance tools? What kind of urban space are they building up? (Brighenti, 2012). Stephen Graham (2011) assumes that new media are resulting in new control architectures integrated in our environments, bringing us to the conclusion that the media are no longer tools of producing images and visual narrative only, but they are increasingly being connected to the architectural city body (Chikawori, 2008). Consequently, cities are becoming highly surveilled lands with various types of technologies exclusively dedicated for the sanitization of urban areas (Brighentu, 2012). Computers, CCTV and high-tech apparatuses are not the only means of securitization and surveillance; wars on graffiti for instance, played a focal role in provoking what we define as the militarization of everyday life through installation of barbed wires fencing in New York City (Iveson, 2010) to be extended later on, gradually, to higher levels of militancy such as cameras, wireless networks, screens and so on (Rodgers, Barnett, & Cochrane, 2014).

The new military urbanism is based on the idea of employing militarized techniques, practices and norms to colonize or take control over the landscape, the daily routine and the population of a city. That said, the city occupants become the main threat to security and the city becomes the battlefield (Graham, 2011). In November 2007, authorities in the UK initiated military urbanism practices by announcing, for the first time in history, the installment of sophisticated computerized data-mining techniques at Heathrow, to serve as e-borders that monitor people entering and exiting Britain. This announcement marked the rise of militarizing civil areas and the daily life practices of people. Eventually, airport-style security and surveillance measures expanded across the world and became part of the infrastructure of major

cities. Military urbanism reached cities on a bed of geopolitical challenges and transformations including: cultural changes, ethnic conflicts, immigrant and diaspora integration, economic reregulation and environmental changes (Graham, 2011). Through the deployment of high-tech military methods and policies, military urbanism materialized (Dear & Flusty,1998), in a bid for securing financial districts, embassies, touristic spots, consumption locales, airports, sports venues, gated communities and parks from extremists, ethnic minorities, sectarian neighborhoods and the like. Military methods included building up security zones around embassies, governments and targeted districts with military style fences, checkpoints, closed circuit television (CCTV) and biometric surveillance.

In light of what's been said above, it is time to stop regarding surveillance as coming from the top, where the government monitors the population, there is no *they* and *us* anymore, for surveillance is the bread and butter of our daily existence including our buildings, offices, streets, stores and even mobile phones. The whole ambient is of intelligent, high-tech policing which is part of the infrastructure and furniture (Jannsson& Christensen, 2014). We are, according to Gilles Deleuze, "societies of control" as our daily lives are characterized by a sense of omnipresent tracking and surveillance –we are in the time of post-privacy where walls are becoming metaphorically transparent and everything you do inside your work place or house is being registered (Graham, 2011). Beirut is not an exception in this sense, as it adopts forms of securitization to safeguard its districts, and BDD is one of the areas where such measures can be clearly detected; hence, the understanding of how Beirut and BDD people perceive their securitization practices is one of the questions that this study intends to answer.

Research Questions

This thesis brings together the theory of military urbanism with the theory of the flânerie. The main concepts of the flânerie theory used in this thesis, are the concepts of observation and analysis to produce meaning. As for the theory of military urbanism, the thesis will use the concepts of omnipresent militarization within urban life through surveillance, checkpoints, biometrics, fences, data-mining and other military securitization means. This study will attempt to identify Beirut's urban identity via answering the following research questions:

RQ 1: What makes Beirut Digital District seem militarized?

RQ 2: What is the image Beirut Digital District leaves in the minds of its wanderers?

RQ 3: Does Beirut Digital District communicate the identity of Beirut and how?

Research Methodology

This section details the methodology used to carry out the research. Based on the nature of this study which aims at– deciphering the narratives embedded in the urban fabric of Beirut city, more specifically Beirut Digital District (BDD) – a qualitative approach is employed. The research uses both semi-structured in-depth interviews as well as observation to dig into Beirut's multi-layered history and urban character. The observation method allows for data collection from the urban environment in Beirut generally, and BDD specifically to be analyzed by the researcher, who oversees the meaning production process from the visual information at hand and the identity that the district speaks. The sample, tools and procedures used in the study are discussed below.

Sample and Procedure

Interview

To answer the research questions, a mix of semi-structured interviews and observation techniques were employed.

Twenty-seven respondents shared their thoughts and feelings about BDD, among them, are experts in the fields of communication studies, urban planning, arts, authors who wrote about Beirut, dwellers around Beirut Digital District and residents of Beirut Central District area.

Experiences were collected according to triangulated answers through the researcher's observations of BDD community behavior and its urban characteristics during the months of July and August of the year 2020.

Observation

The second research instrument was observation. The observation method puts on paper all the visual and auditory information, meanings, feelings and ideas the researcher collected and accumulated throughout his wanderings around BDD, over the past four years for professional motives, in addition to his research journey and the related readings.

Procedure

The interview questions were prepared ahead of time. Before starting, all participants signed or verbally consented to voluntarily participating in the study. Due to the spread of Covid-19 and the ramifications of Beirut port blast, some interviews were conducted online via Zoom and WhatsApp applications, others were cancelled. All twenty-seven participants answered the same questions, and the semi-structured nature of the interview allowed, sometimes, a slight diversion from the main questions for a follow up purpose. To ensure transparency, the researcher audio recorded the discussions and took detailed notes during each interview. Most of the interviews were conducted in Arabic and were translated into English by the researcher.

The average interview time was 45 minutes. First, the respondents were asked four openended questions on how they categorize a city and identify a city or a district element. These were followed by two closed-ended questions around the elements they identify in BDD.

The questions were as follows:

Q1: How would you categorize a city?

Q2: What type of elements make up a city?

Q3: What story dose BDD tells you in light of these elements?

Q4: Modernism in urbanism reflects uniformity or one international style. Postmodernism is the balkanized, polycentric and poly-cultural. Into which category does BDD fall? Why?

Q5: Military urbanism is the omnipresent military objects, measures and techniques within urban neighborhoods. Do you think BDD encapsulates this in its urbanism?

Q6: A Flâneur is a poet of urban spaces who strolls around, observes and collects texts. What is the text or the main theme of the story you get while promenading in BDD?

Q7: What is the identity of BDD?

Concepts

The concepts used for this thesis were inspired by the literature review and the theoretical framework. The following paragraphs offer a detailed description of each concept.

Urbanism.

Architecture and urbanism play communicative roles (Gerard & Paul, 2002). Elaine Sciolino, the longtime Paris bureau chief of the New York Times pointed out that France is the land of seduction. In her book *La Séduction*, she demonstrates how seduction works in all areas of French life. She concludes with the idea that this French seduction aura is portrayed by the famous, charming and seductive, four-legged Parisian lady in black: the Eiffel tower (Sciolino, 2012). This study revolves around the communicative and artistic characteristic of urbanism mainly to uncover the narrative in BDD's built environment and trace the seduction features in it.

Flânerie.

A flâneur is a conscious, critical wanderer; an observer of urban spaces. A flâneur observes, collects and creates texts. Flânerie is the social base of journalism for with the collection of knowledge, a flâneur acquires skill for critical thinking and analysis (Sikiardi&Vogelaar, 2003). Flânerie is a main research tool adopted by this study.

Beirut Digital District.

Beirut Digital District is the Lebanese Silicon Valley, a melting pot of different urban styles located in the heart of Beirut. The district makes a perfect observation sample for our study, as it embraces many of greater Beirut urban characteristics. The observation process included experiencing the built environment of the district and interviewing members of its community such as communication experts and urban planners.

Military Urbanism

The employment of military tools and tactics within cities, whether for control motives or security needs, is seen as a new constituent of postmodern urbanism and is termed as "Military Urbanism". This study investigates the potential presence of militarized urbanism in BDD.

Data Analysis

The data collected from both interviews and observations were transcribed then put into defined thematic categories and subcategories, emerging from the respondents' responses and the researcher's observations as well as the concepts chosen from the theoretical frameworks. This allowed the linkage of responses and facilitated associations among the acquired data for in-depth analysis. The findings were compared to existing literature and theoretical framework.

Ethical Consideration

It is crucial to understand that the researcher, upon conducting this research, took into account ethical considerations. That said, respondents were aware of the purpose of survey the thesis and the interviews and had full freedom to choose whether to participate or not. Some participants' identities were kept confidential upon their request and so were their responses. The respondents were informed that they could end the interview at any time they wanted.

Limitations

This survey faced three main obstacles. The first major limitation was the global situation during the breakout and spread of Covid-19. Because of the pandemic, some interviews could not be conducted face to face, the WhatsApp voice call service was therefore used for some interviews. Moreover, the process became more complicated following the huge explosion at the

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port of Beirut, which caused the cancellation of a scheduled interview with Mr. Mohammed Rabah, the general manager of ZRE contractors, the company that designed and executed Beirut Digital District. Mr. Rabah's perspective would have enriched the study by providing the designer's original identity of the place and commenting on what other respondents saw in BDD. Aside from his feedback on the input of other respondents about the district, his input would have shed the light on the dark areas that could have been missed.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study is to bring to surface the identity of BDD through a detailed reading its built environment. Eleven BDD employees, five architects and urbanists and eight communication experts who wrote about Beirut, were contacted for data collection and their answers will be discussed in this section alongside the researcher's observation of BDD's space. The respondents will be referred to by the letter "R" along with a number, so Respondent 1 becomes R1 and the answers, as mentioned before, will be merged into the analysis, thereby forming an integrated view which accounts for the multiple perspectives generated by the respondents.

After conducting the interviews and analyzing the content, a number of noteworthy themes characterizing BDD emerged:

- BDD as capitalism: BDD as a capitalist entity the utilized the tools of propaganda for promotion. Access to BDD is restricted due to its extremely high charges, yet it promotes itself as an ecosystem dedicated to Lebanese start –ups and entrepreneurs.

- BDD as seduction: a good-looking place in terms of design and services.

- BDD as miniature Beirut: like the city that houses it, BDD is a mix of

architectural schools moulded with contradictions.

- BDD as metamorphosis; a nascent civilized and smart Beirut.

- BDD as de-colonization; a contradictory approach to the colonial mind-set as it serves people rather than imposing on them a lifestyle they do not want.

- BDD as algorithm: a problem-solving set of codes and calculations, BDD is an algorithm which solves the problems that hamper Beirut.

- BDD as third place: a place where you feel at home, aside from your actual home or working place.

- BDD as the opposite of Beirut: an opposite visualization of Beirut in terms of services, urban design, novelty, security and forwardness.

BDD, despite poor urban management for the past few decades in Beirut, retained qualities that make it a liveable place. It has trees, public spaces, interesting architecture, security, services and a neighbourhood feel within its many subsections. It is a district with a relatively high quality of life compared to other parts of the city. The following sections provide a detailed elaboration of the themes acquired from interviews and conversations over Beirut and BDD.

City

Before answering the questions about the city, we need to answer a preliminary question: what is a city? That is how some of my respondents chose to start the discussion (R1, R17, and R13). According to Vitruvius—Rome's prominent architect, man inhabited caves and grottos to escape wild animals and stormy seasons before imitating birds' nests and bears' lairs to make the very first hut with mud, twigs and tree trunks. The city is the by-product of this collective need for safety and the accumulative efforts to build more houses. The journey started with seeking shelter, a place that protects humans from danger then it shifted to creating an appeal for this place later on called home (R1).

A house is the place where people feel safe. It satisfies their physical needs and visual desires simultaneously. With the agricultural revolution and the increase in population, the demand for housing grew; the surplus of food led to the division of the community: producers of food versus consumers, villages versus the suburbs. The nuclei of what is acknowledged

nowadays as cities were born thanks to these divisions and to waterways, roadways, railways and airways consecutively (R1).

Throughout history, urbanism evolved based on two primary elements: the development of new human needs and the availability of new material, which continuously changed the shapes, proportions, colors and designs of cityscapes. Every new design is a new image and a new visual vocabulary triggering analysis, and leading thus to questioning whether cities have actual identities or not (R1). Browne (2011) explained the idea of reading a city by stating that the materiality of the urban environment, the structure, form and every detail are message transmitters to onlookers and give a better perception of the place's identity.

The evolution of urbanism and architecture as the art of place mirrors how the structure communicates with the place. A location or a site is mere geography and it only becomes a place when it is built. The structure adds a lot to the location and the location contributes back in many ways to the structure (R1). This exchange of values determines how harmonious the identity of a place or a city is, according to Rahif Fayad, a Lebanese architect and academic. The material used to build a coastal house is different from the material used to build a house in the mountains or on a plain. For instance, houses in Deir el Qamar are stone houses because locals built from the material their environment offered, whereas in Younine and Zahle all you see are clay houses. The nature, climate and material dictate the shape, color and topography of buildings and contribute directly to the authenticity of a place, thus its identity. The urban language in Deir el Qamar and Zahle, as a result, is in harmony with the entourage, it communicates with the place and communicates the place (R1). The urban as a language matches Gerard and Paul's (2002) conclusion that the urbanism and architecture are actually media of communication. Everything that makes up a place speaks its identity—its social aspect, its organizational hierarchy and its

physical structure and attributes (Fernandez-Cavia, Kovaratzis, & Morgan 2018). The amalgam of architectural types found in BDD, in my opinion, speaks its identity in many ways and the following sections will elaborate further on the details.

In addition to the location and the material used to build a place, economic and political dominance have historically dictated building styles in every city around the world, hence their identities (R17). Street names, figures, facades, balconies are all urban signifiers that ferment throughout the accumulation of dominances to shape the looks of a city (R15). Urbanism is then what makes a city special; it is the fixed characteristic(R1). In order to know who authored a city and the narrative it offers, we need to look at what is fixed in it: the urban fabric (R1). One of the respondents pointed out that the urban fabric is the prime component of a city, and the accumulation of what is important is what produces a city, hence a narrative at the end (R13). Catalani, Nour, Versace, Hawkes, Bougdah, Sotoca, Ghoneem and Trapani (2018) matched our respondents' arguments in their confirmation on the distinctive identity of every city shaped by its physical and visual forms. A city develops gradually over time and so does its narrative. To know the identity of a city, one has to page through its urbanism: review the shaping history of the cityscape, speak to experts in the fields of urban planning, architecture and communication.

The architectural significance in categorizing a city was emphasized by all respondents. Thirteen respondents considered buildings and skyscrapers to be the most important trait of a city. Out of twelve respondents, six stated that they first look at the architecture of a city and another six communicated that streets are what shapes a city. On the other hand, three respondents approached urbanism differently claiming that they judge a city by its landmarks and statues.

Buildings without people are worthless (R18, R13, R8). Six respondents affirmed their curiosity about how large a population in a city could be since cities are mainly defined by hosting abundant populations. Another six respondents gave great value to the behavioral character of the population when in a city; are people welcoming or cold? A welcoming community can beautify the city while a conservative one could give inhabitants negative feelings towards it, thus, toward the way they judge it.

A well curated urban setting and the presence of citizens do not build up a city without a comprehensive web of services. What does the city offer to its community? How it responds to its community is also a major factor to be considered when assessing a city (R2). The kind of services a city offers and the easy access to those services somewhat define it(R8). Does it provide efficient and affordable transportation systems? All the respondents highlighted the importance of the qualitative and quantitative services a city has to offer and eight respondents consider good public transportation as a main city facet. In addition, four respondents identify infrastructure as a chief asset in boosting the city life and another eleven valued the availability of public spaces throughout the city (parks, public squares, public libraries, public beach and sport venues). The availability of schools, universities and educational institutions are services that five of our respondents perceived as must-haves in any functional city. Furthermore, three respondents pointed out the importance of urban healthcare services and seven respondents mentioned business attire as a necessary city trait—the corporate world, companies, workplaces, coffee shops and business coffee shops precisely, banks, restaurants and suits. Others saw that malls, traditional souks and shopping venues mostly, are the bread and butter of cities when it comes to the services sector. Briefly, one sentence can sum up the whole paragraph above: a city that lacks services is a deficient city. People need services and neighborhoods to facilitate their

day-to-day lives and for that, every good city should be equipped with a wide range of services that cater to its population.

All our respondents agreed that, at a micro level, the best cities are the ones that offer a plethora of useful services. At a macro level, eleven of my respondents labeled cities as hubs of diversity, history, culture, visual and auditory vocabulary in terms of colors, signs, ads, washed clothes hung on balconies, noises and car horns. Six of them communicated that the feel of a city is mainly created by bringing the differences together. Therefore, some cities end up with a chaotic vibe, others look luxurious, dynamic, tense and artistic; it all depends on the ingredients of their mix.

Along with urbanism and services, the rule of law, street food and traffic jams are common city straits that were mentioned by only three respondents. Mona Fayad (R17), a Lebanese political analyst and psychologist stated that law and order should be part of any city, since that is what differentiates the city from the village, where people follow norms and traditions. Another respondent declared that a city with no street food is close to a tasteless experience, and a third one claimed that he couldn't imagine a traffic-less city.

A good city, then, is an urban experience providing inhabitants and dwellers with safety, facilities and beauty. It is a platform of interwoven spider webs seeking a shape (Calvino, 1972). This study looks the shapes of Beirut to deduce the narrative it imparts.

Beirut

Beirut is a star. It is famous for its openness, history, cuisine, art, politics, culture, fashion and even wars, no wonder it was regarded as the Paris of the Middle East during the golden era before the seventies. "It is a city that stamps you," says Suad Amiry, a Palestinian author and architect who studied and lived in Lebanon during the seventies. She describes Beirut as the New York of the Arab World and the center of the Arabian culture and politics. Mouchir Aoun, a Lebanese writer and philosophy professor at the Lebanese University, argues tha the stardom of Beirut does not rule out the dissociative identity disorder from which the Lebanese personality suffers. Our talks, actions, choice of political leaders, our urban character and everything we create are perfect representations of our misery and loss of identity. This loss of identity indirectly explains the exaggerated Lebanese attachment and adoration of Rahbani brothers' musicals and plays about a nonexistent Lebanon and the enthusiasm of Said Akl for "Lebanity". The Lebanese persona is abstract and so is the urban persona of the Lebanese capital.

The French intellectual Bernard-Henry Levi compares America to a mistress with whom you spend great weekends, when everything is beautiful and easy but can you wake up together every day? Can you go to bed together every night? Can you face problems or daily life together? These are the questions we need to ask (Sciolino, 2011, p. 92). I could borrow Levi's idea to describe Beirut as a weekend mistress for a joyful company on Sundays, but certainly not daily.

Beirut is a small and cozy city, yet it hosts a population that is much larger than its capacities, as stated by six respondents. Mohammad Chamseddine, a senior research analyst at Information International, an independent research and consultancy firm based in Beirut, says the population of the Lebanese capital is estimated at 560,000 inhabitants (R27). The urbanization of Beirut went through five stages. Phase one, inspired by the Ottoman, Islamic culture, which took place within the downtown area witnessed the building of the famous three-arched or Liwan Lebanese house Beirut. The second phase of urbanization crawled out of central Beirut to neighboring Zuqaq al-Blat and Achrafieh with an updated version of the three-arched house. The third phase was colonial; it lasted until the 1940's when new facades, verandas and cement

appeared. Moving to phase four with the beginning of urban planning, a rude and repressive international style showed up and paved the way for the post Taif agreement pastiche architecture. As of 1989, Beirut's image was in the early phases of deterioration throughout the civil war until the Taif. The building activity lost its true meaning and rather than being a cultural representative, it converted to publicity (R1). Categorizing Beirut's urbanization into five stages meets up with Yassin's (2012) nineteenth century Ottoman-led Tanzimat in Beirut, the post Sykes-Picot French mandate urbanization, the wartime fragmented buildings and the post-war reconstruction.

The urbanism of a city is its dress code (R20). Twenty-three respondents said the built environment in Beirut is one of its important components. Six respondents were more precise, they labeled the old houses and buildings in Beirut as gripping. Beirut's oldest built zone is the downtown, precisely the Etoile square (R1, R10). Four respondents considered the downtown area as an open museum where Rome confirms its presence through the "Lion of Venice" statue that tops the building facing the parliament, and the Roman monuments few meters away. Kanaanites' remnants next to the port, the ottoman serial and the clock tower in addition to the French roof bricks and balconies across Beirut, reflect a colonial manifestation and a symbolic piece of the city for the Lebanese.

Fayad (2017) agrees on the labeling of downtown as the heart of Beirut and on its colonial origin, yet he mourns it as he regards the post war renovation as a theatrical restoration by the Lebanese government in an attempt to impress, not to accommodate the national identity and the citizens. One of the respondents (R13) described Solidere, after renovation, as the identity decay. Moreover, four respondents considered Downtown to be salient in Beirut's urban scene but not the genuine identity of the city. "Centre Ville and Saifi are fake imitation of real

Beirut", one of the respondents says, which brings us to Aghacy's (2015) idea of Beirut being the new that did not cut the umbilical cord with the past.

Pondering on the past of Beirut, precisely its cumulative built environment, takes us to the old Lebanese house, or the soul of Beirut, as described by seven of our respondents. The thirties Beirut—the blend of colonial and Levantine architecture is a heartfelt Beirut. We can see it in Achrafieh, Zuqaq al-Blat, Bashoura, and Ain Al-Mreisseh. No one can overcome old Beirut and it is still seen in every neighborhood despite modernization efforts (R6). Three respondents who appreciate the traditional Lebanese house, think it is diminishing to either abandon or demolish such treasures. Ghassan Saoud, a Lebanese author and journalist, agrees with the pessimists when it comes to the traditional Lebanese houses still standing in Beirut; he said that the golden old was being dumped to be replaced by the horrible new. Saoud's "horrible new" is replaced by an integrative new in BDD, where renovating the old replaced demolishing it, and integrating the heritage into the modern fabric prevailed.

The "newness" in urbanism rose in Beirut throughout the civil war and during the postwar reconstruction (R1) clearly reflecting the political instability in the built environment (R8). War and post-war re-building wiped off the genuine identity of the city and replaced rubble with emotional rubble, said one of the respondents; this brings to mind Saoud's (2018) astonishment at using the rubble of the July 2006 war to dump the sea and build a touristic waterfront, or demolishing the beautiful colonial houses to build a mall. The war reveals itself through bullet holes and damaged abandoned buildings. Beirut imposes its bruises and takes pride in them. It does not seem to be guilty about them (R15). This organic blend between the egg-like war building and the new glass and cement ones cannot be concealed, said seven of the respondents, and it all looks genuine at the same time, two respondents deduced. Kassir (2010) mentioned city and juxtaposed by the new glass structures; BDD's main glass building facing the semidamaged Beirut oval cinema building, the egg building.

The war character is not the only motif in Beirut; slums and semi-sovereign districts are everywhere as well. Governments and municipalities usually resort to urban planning to avoid slums but unfortunately, a master plan for Beirut seems to be nonexistent considering the spread of deteriorated units throughout the city (R9). With the proliferation of the slum fabric, the postmodern character surfaced (R1, RR9). Four respondents detected what they perceived as a hybrid between different designs and architectural schools, mainly the old versus the cement, iron and glass: a valuable old such as the Liwan houses and colonial buildings and a cheap new (the glass structures, the tasteless identical cement buildings), Saoud (R5) points out. Rem Kool has, in a lecture at the American University of Beirut, described the city as an irrational culture of cement, concrete and skyscrapers that shocks the gazers with chaotic urbanism (AUB, 2010). Cement is the dominant feature in Beirut; one would not really want to spend a lot of time enveloped by this fascination of cement and aspiring towers (R24). Five out of twenty-seven respondents mentioned towers as a questionable feature of Beirut as they are being erected in any empty space within the capital. It is a complete chaos. They question the value that the towers give the city, only to arrive at the conclusion that there is no value. The towers are literally empty since no one uses them; private, however property is holy property in Beirut. In exchange, people were expelled from their old buildings as the city became gentrified. The respondents commented on the high environmental costs and resources wasted to build irrelevant, storey towers especially since. The actual cost of skyscrapers is devastating. Unfortunately, the building

authority is after decorative projects only, not useful ones (R2) and Sama Beirut is a good project example. A sleek glass façade building raising questions about its efficiency in a country like Lebanon where we enjoy eight sunny months per year, unlike Paris where it is more rainy and cloudy throughout the seasons. This is a parachute identity not modernity, it is a disease, says Fayad (R1), an architect and academic. "We are building to imitate the international and not out of need obviously. We developed modernity out of industrial needs and we adopt globalization for no obvious reason and at the expense of our history and the accumulated culture" (R1).

The parachute urbanism is of cement, steel and towers that invaded roof bricks, stone, arches and verandas in a capital that does not provide much for its people. The municipality does not build for the public; they build for their own interest or based on what they think is right, said Habib Battah (R2), a Lebanese journalist. Planners, who are in position of power, do not engage with people to identify their needs and better plan the city. Battah ironically mentioned that the city planners had spent fifty million dollars to renew the tiles inside certain tunnels and do work on pavements. They have, what Battah called, a tile mentality which is an, irrational spending mentality, applied to everything. They bring in more tiles, towers and cement regardless of the people's needs, and that leads to increased pollution, sewage, narrow streets, pluralistic urbanism and a city that does not give back to its citizens. The majority of Beirut's residents enjoy luxurious gated communities and the minority have negligible places to enjoy. They just live around the oligarchy projects (R2). Yet, people in Beirut are part of the conflict because they see a project and marvel at it. "You see how beautiful this tower is?", They say. they appreciate the image not the facility, the cover rather than the content (R 24). They are happy with this urban jungle that the client state architecture has created and marketed as a mix of authenticity and post-modernity when in fact, it is nothing but anti-styling that damages the accumulated history,

hampers the maintaining of a genuine identity and weakens life quality inside the city (Aghacy, 2015).

The critics of the postmodern Beirut are plenty, yet the enthusiasts outweigh them. One of the respondents thinks that Beirut is the city of minimalism and novelty hosting vertical gardens, towers and modern projects despite its endless political and economic challenges (R15). This novelty is materialized through an integrated urbanism detected in the mix of communities and architectural schools between the slums across the city and within one single slum often times (R4, R22, and R24). Seven out of twenty-seven respondents appreciate and enjoy this postmodernist character in Beirut's urbanism- roof tiles versus high-rises, double skins and elevations versus the colonial, the classic face to face with the modern. In Beirut, you pass by eclectic, Ottoman, French, Islamic, neo-Ottoman and Tuscan architectures within a twentyminute morning walk (R6). The idea of fragmentation in urban fabric and designs is tackled by Saoud (2018), who thinks it is acceptable as long as designers and contractors do not bulldoze Liwan houses and three arched houses to build new projects. This Saoud continues that the new is not undesirable as designers put beauty into the projects they work on. This beauty can be seen in the Mikati tower and the colonial buildings. However, Saoud believes that the municipality should use its empty spaces to build new projects rather than get rid of the heritage to replace it with the new. "Built legacies should be respected; urban massacring should not be promoted as post-modernism—building that threatens culture is the massacring of civilization and beauty, not post-modernity" (Saoud 2018). BDD preserves heritage with a twist, and this, I believe, differentiates it from other districts in the Lebanese capital.

Certain respondents emphasize the contradictory character of Beirut. Three respondents considered this contradiction or what they termed as "in-betweenness" to be noteworthy. The

urban field between modernism and postmodernism has militarized niches for non-governmental entities within the city (R4), classist clusters—luxurious versus poor and tense districts like Saifi and Khandak Al-Ghamik (R5), Switzerlands and Kandahars in one state (R24). The field between postmodernism and modernism leaves Beirut with no landmarks, not even one symbolic or distinguished project (R9. R1). It is a field witnessing a city of speedy urban changes and the examples are many: Sanayeh used to be a park but is now a refugee camp; the train station is an events venue not a train station anymore (R5). Beirut is a city that surprises you every Monday morning with a new identity (Koolhaas, 1995). Respondent 1 looked back at Beirut of the fifties and lamented today's Beirut which lost its past. The fifties introduced the balconies of openness and communication, he said but these balconies were veiled nowadays. Verandas used to represent colonial beauty in urbanism and reflected an era when people went from conservativeness to socializing, he said. The veiled balconies tell a different story of displaced people from rural areas and refugees trying to adapt their mentality to that of the city, he added. These people did not want to sit and communicate as they felt nostalgic as they sought their abandoned lands and habits in the city(R1). Therefore, this unprecedented flow of cultures, lifestyles and mentalities to Beirut seemed to be an unhealthy accumulation since a healthy accumulation should not rule out the communication with history. "Sadly, we lost this communication with our progressive past and ended up in a city with no identity, no scene of its own, unlike Aleppo, Damascus or Sanaa'' (R1). We are in the middle of what Koolhaas (1995) described as the evacuation of character and identity of a place, and equally putting it out of its context and history. New York city, Singapore and other cities succeeded in demonstrating successful development and urban entrepreneurialism while keeping ties with the place, whereas

Kabul, with its seemingly unplanned and undecipherable urbanism, failed (Roy, 2011). Beirut is more Kabul-like in the sense of an open project that is never complete.

Services

The population of Beirut exceeds the city capacities, and this raises questions about the services Beirut provides to its inhabitants.

According to eleven respondents, Beirut is not a flâneurable city while six out of twentyseven participants regarded it is a parking-led city meant to serve cars, not people. These respondents judged it as an un-walkable city; in other terms, it is flâneuring in a hilly town, with lots of ups and downs, traffic, narrow sidewalks, parked cars everywhere, and blocked roads (R5). Unless you are at the beach sidewalks or in one of the city's malls, you will not be able walk for more than few a meters without encountering obstacles (R24, R1). Two out of twentyseven respondents think it is walkable, claiming that all the small retail shops depend on pedestrians, otherwise they would have closed a long time ago if strolling around the city were unpleasant and undoable. Walkable environments are the very basic service a city should provide its inhabitants with but Beirut lacks that.

Public spaces are negligible in Beirut (R24) as seven respondents raised complaints about their rarity in the capital. A public space is a spot where a citizen can engage with the entourage or environment. The Martyrs square is the main square in Beirut as people should theoretically enjoy gathering around the Martyrs Square's statue, but in fact they do not; the area is not inviting (Saoud, 2018). Public squares in Damascus, Amman and Beirut and their huge statues are unwelcoming places and seem to be there to intimidate people rather than invite them (Saoud, 2018). Parks and public spaces are rare and unequipped to host picnics or pleasant afternoons gatherings—there are no benches, no bathrooms, no tables or kitchens, no barbeque areas or water (R2, R21). The Bourj central souk and other traditional souks in Beirut where people can enjoy walks vanished gradually (R18). Beaches are not available to the public, four respondents pointed out, unlike Tunisia, Italy and Morocco where people from all backgrounds and social classes can enjoy the sea (Saoud, 2018). As a result, and in aside from the corniche Al Manara, Beirut's finest urban escape where you can still greet other pedestrians while enjoying your walk (R5), malls have become the main gathering and entertainment places of Beirut(R1). Beirut is simply a morning walk at Manara, Rafic Saab, a Lebanese graphic designer said or else, you try to locate some organic public space in your neighborhood, such as the train station in Mar Mikhael (R5), or the niche green zones inside your gated community (R24).

Public transportation is a complicated and unaffordable service as the majority of respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with the public transport system in Beirut. When it comes to medical care and education, both are two pricey services in the city (R1, R5 and R2). Out of twenty-seven, two participants valued the availability of libraries, both public and private, to readers. Seventeen respondents affirmed that unforgettable clubbing, top-notch dining out and nightlife is what Beirut can inevitably provide.

Cultural

As cliché as it might sound, sixteen out of twenty-seven respondents said Beirut is the city of history. It is 5000 years old—Phoenicians, Romans, Mamluks, and Ottomans stamped Beirut successively (R1, R24, R2, R13). Sader (1998) wrote about the prosperous Phoenician period that the city witnessed, followed by the Romans how gave it the name Berytus (Hansen, 1998). Umayyads, Crusaders, Mamluks, Ottomans and the French followed successively (Yassin, 2012), hence, branding the Lebanese capital as a party destination is lame(R18). Beirut is the Rome of the Middle East—a museum that hosts history and civilizations in every corner (R18, R7). The legacies of consecutive civilizations are showcased in the diversity of religions that this small city has, monuments, styles of architecture and ethnicities (R8, R24). This nuance of cultures inspired one of the respondents to regard Beirut as an urban documentary—the Roman baths area makes you visualize a story, the Martyrs square triggers a new story that dates back to the Ottoman era, the Murr tower bullet holes mirror the civil war but are reminiscent at the same time, of the utopian time the city witnessed before the strife in the sixties and early seventies. Every place in Beirut documents a remarkable story (R22). Three respondents considered Beirut to be the melting pot of mini-cities within one city— you can differentiate Hamra from Karakol El Druze because of their different style, cultural make up and inhabitants; Verdun is unlike Basta, Achrafieh contradicts Mazraa and so on. It is Iranian, American and French all at once, Sunni, Shiite, Maronite and Druze at the same time (R12). An unstable cultural and urban narrative can be detected easily when in Beirut (R24).

Beirut has a cosmopolitan lifestyle in the middle of a conservative Arab region (Andersen, 2017). While the majority of respondents agree on diversity and cosmopolitanism as dominant features of Beirut, four of them completely disagree. Some buildings might be of cultural and historical significance, mainly those that date back to the Ottoman and French colonialism eras, yet that does not make Beirut cosmopolitan, they said. According to them, Hamra street can be cosmopolitan, Achrafieh as well, but two or three cosmopolitan streets do not make a whole city cosmopolitan (R20, R24).

The Persona of Beirut

Robert Fisk (2007), The Independent's award-winning correspondent criticizes journalists for what he calls "Hotel Journalism"— reporting news from their hotel room without field visits, interviews or first-hand experience of the events. That said, no need to further argue why narratives seem unified and journalists' opinions cluster, not necessarily around same opinions but around same frameworks of analysis. Based on Fisk's perspective, branding Beirut as rising from the ashes of the Phoenix could represent a form of mental contagion that "Hotel Journalism" mindsets create. Briefly, this section tries to get rid of the information toxicity around Beirut, in case it exists, by introducing new perspectives based on the answers of our respondents.

What is obvious in Beirut is its toxic relationship with the past (R18, R11). Nine respondents stated that Beirut needs to reconcile with the wars and invasions it went through. The borderlines erected during the war were removed but they are still present psychologically (R18). Bullet holes, abandoned and bombarded buildings are hints at a lingering grudge with the past (R11, R24, R5, R21).

In addition to demonstrating the bruises of war, architecture in Beirut is to a big extent religious—mosques, churches and a couple of surviving synagogues are omnipresent across the city (R10, R24). Seven respondents believe that the religious architecture in Beirut mirrors the religious diversity Lebanon is known for, while two others assume that the exaggerated religious buildings reflect the dysfunctional Lebanese identity and the superiority of religious belonging. One out of twenty-seven respondents regarded the religious buildings as an indication of wisdom. He argued that the sacred architecture, mosques, churches and synagogues are symbols of accumulated experiences.

While four respondents deem Beirut to be a city of chaos, where there is no place or time for silence and reflection, others admired the chaotic nature of Beirut. One of them said he finds relief in the city chaos as it cures or mutes his inner one (R23). Two other respondents believe

that chaos is an opportunity which enables liberty in many ways and is a pleasant escape from the rule of law, without disregarding the fact that this may, simultaneously, be a cause of misery.

Beirut is visibly chaotic; it is neither a city, nor a village; it is not poor or genuine, nor new and fancy; it is not leftist nor is it rightist; it is always somewhere in between (R17, R20). The social fabric of Beirut feels more like Napoli. In certain streets like Hamra, Achrafieh, and Verdun where higher social classes live, you can enjoy your privacy and individuality while in less privileged streets like Karantina and Chyah, you get the feeling that you are being watched (R17, R13, and R21).

Economically, the capitalist power in Beirut is prominent. Fourteen respondents mentioned that capitalism could be traced from the tendency towards verticality in the city, the glass culture and the ubiquitous presence of international brands like McDonald's, Starbucks, H&M, Zara, Nike, and many others(R12). The glass towers reflect the capitalist mindset and the hypocrisy of the corporate world's gentility through architecture. They claim it symbolizes clarity and transparency, connection and collaboration, yet it is a real message of power and superiority— "The occupants clearly told us that they couldn't care less about the world outside as long as their businesses are running normally. Even if we see those practices with our own eyes executed at the expenses of the environment, the people and the urban harmony, we can do nothing to stop or change the rules" (R22).

As a capitalist city, Beirut has normalized the presence of commercial buildings and its facades, therefore, change constantly without maintaining a certain kind of value or authenticity (R1). Investors, for instance, buy old houses, bulldoze them and build new ones or mimic authenticity through renovated restaurants and pubs. Transforming heritage and aesthetics into

profit making tools, instead of shelters or cultural representations, makes Beirut a city of

hyperrealism (R12).

The gateway to Beirut, according to one of the participants, is the street trolley of seasonal fresh fruits and vegetables, which indicate how fertile and flexible the place is. Trolleys are coping mechanisms nourishing abandoned rural areas and the creativity is in the coping mechanism. Neglected rooftops are party venues, underground war shelters reopen as night clubs, Saint Nicolas' stairs host concerts, and the train station ends up as a public garden. This urban flexibility is an indicator of coping powers, creativity and uniqueness (R15).

Beirut is surprising, says one of the respondents (23). It is an ugly city which surprises you with beauty; you just need to reach out for it, to be curious to find it amid its boring urbanism. You have to see through the electricity cables and the damaged roof tiles, overcome the congested streets to find beauty in hanging laundry maybe, inspect railings, arches, windows or any other piece that captures your senses (R23).

Nineteen respondents out of twenty-seven agreed that colonialism is a prominent character of Beirut and its indicators include the French and Turkish remnants from found in the neighborhoods (R10, R1, R13, R24, R4). Another example of colonialism is the recreation of the Parisian Etoile square in Beirut: The Etoile square that still has the upper hand as the colonial mentality. They did not establish the Etoile square out of need but out of what they thought the people needed both the name and the project were imposed on Beirut. The colonial mentality is the "I know better what is good for you" mentality (R2) and adopted by the investors and the government. In other words, Beirut is an open gate to the wealth accumulation where planning is disregarded at the expenses of people's lives (R2, R20). The dominant colonial nature of Beirut is redefined in BDD which caters to its community's needs, not what the capital thinks is necessary and needed.

Five respondents feel that Beirut is a welcoming place. Its people are friendly and are ready to help and give information whenever needed. Beirut is a city for everybody (R7). The streets are welcoming and people are allowed to sit and park their car anywhere they choose. The moderate, sunny weather in Beirut encourages gatherings and social events, unlike cold and cloudy Paris or London, or boiling hot Dubai (R7).

When in Beirut, cement and roof tiles automatically capture one's attention(R8). The salient visual vocabulary of the traditional and the monster dominate the scene in the city (R8). One of the respondents (13) compared Beirut to Paris; he said the latter is grey, whereas Beirut is multicolored as every zone has its own color: Achrafieh is metallic, glassy and grey; Hamra is beige whereas Ain El Remmaneh is a jungle of colors. Colors are variables across Beirut but the green mountains in the background, the red roof bricks and the grey cement are non-variables; they only demonstrate the lack of urban planning. Life is spontaneous in this city, "we live day by day, we seek joy with what we have at hand" says Matteo Khodr, a Lebanese countertenor and an urban connoisseur. His words bring to mind the colorful Cuba with different color radiation, notably on buildings in the suburbs of Cuba, making the poor country look fancier and more joyful without pre-planning. Nonetheless, we have to bear in mind that the choice of the painting color is only made with what is available at the nearby vendor and not by the owner or the municipality. The American embargo against Cuba limited the flow of goods from overseas affecting indirectly the citizens' choices nevertheless, the result came out to be unintended impressionist beauty (R9). Another salient feature of Beirut is it's war foot print, made visible through its bullet holes, abandoned buildings and half-damaged houses (R24, R13, and

R9). While six respondents considered the posters of political leaders that blanket the city's buildings and the streets as distasteful, "Walls stay free media" (R13).

Two respondents commented on the street art scene.

Beirut is a city of messages, they said. Street art is one medium of communication between the Lebanese capital and passers-by: Every piece I have encountered holds a meaning and a taste: In Hamra Street, for example, I noticed a couple of feminist murals, one depicting the iconic Sabah; in Watah al Msaytbeh, a huge mural of Fairouz salutes you and in Achrafieh, I detected more of Sabah and Fairouz murals as well as other feminist ones (R9). Another respondent pointed out that the street art scenes in Beirut are not cheap nor those of an amateur, and this gives Beirut a unique visual attire. In addition to street art, graphics on the shops sign boards, billboards and communication campaigns are gripping and prominent. They are part of the city's urban design and give Beirut character; they even trigger conversations and comments. Street name signs are story-tellers as well. Streets like Weygand, Foch and Allenby bring to life chapters of colonialism and war generals. Bliss Street tells the story of Dr. Daniel Bliss who founded the American University of Beirut. Yet another visual cue of Beirut is the pylon forest across the neighborhoods. The story of Beirut is found in the narratives of pylon and domestic workers, squatters, refugees and laborers who come from Beirut's de facto ghettoes like Karantina, Nabaa, Hay El Sellom, Jenah and others. It represents the labor on whose backs the city was built (R16).

Beirut Identity

Landmarks are world-famous symbols of cities. Kuwait is well known for its blue towers, Cairo for its pyramids, and Istanbul for Hagia Sophia, yet when it comes to Beirut it is hard to identify a prominent landmark that distinguishes it. "It is more like asking me to pick one favorite author or book. I cannot choose one building or project to symbolize Beirut," said Mona Fayad (R17), a Lebanese academic and politician. Although four out of twenty-seven respondents voted for the Raouche rock as Beirut's landmark, Fatima Diab, assistant professor at the Faculty of Fine Arts and Architecture at the Lebanese University had another opinion. Diab explained that Raouche rock is a natural landmark, not an architectural one. "National iconography can reveal or conceal something, and the adoption of Raouche rock as a national symbol conceals the absence of a built landmark in the city thus promoting it as a landmark is escapism."

Michel Ecochard, a French planner, was appointed by the Lebanese government in the seventies to work on the city's master plan. He described Beirut as "the city of injustices" (Salam, 1998) and six respondents shared the same point of view(R20) one of them said that "Beirut is an urban protest for justice" (R20). It is a combination of what is worst in cities and in villages equally—the worst in cities in terms of urbanism, it is the chaotic, and the worst in villages due to its nomadic nature; it is as if Beirut is schizophrenic(R12). The respondents (R1), (R13), (R6), (R9), (R16), (R24) agreed that the fascination with cement symbolizes the disloyalty to history and culture. Unlike Amman, and Aleppo, Beirut betrayed its past by choosing the non-identity and the decline of taste (R1). Professor Fayad compared Beirut to Deir el Qamar and Younine continuously during the interview. Houses in Deir el Qamar are of stone; they showcase the identity of a mountainous place. The houses in Younine are clay houses and they reflect the land's identity unlike the cement and iron of Beirut. Fayad described Deir el Qamar and Younine only to conclude that Beirut wants to get rid of its people. His argument matched his behavior as he kept on escaping the conversation about Beirut to flatter Zahle, Younine and Deir el Qamar that I had to bring him back to our main topic every now and then.

Habib Battah, an investigative journalist, brands Beirut as a colonial city in two respects: the first through presence of Turkish and French architecture, and the second an indirect form of colonialism as the ruling authorities do not engage people in the decision making process thereby disregarding their needs and wants. This imposing of policies and decisions at all levels is colonialism in disguise.

The identity of Beirut lies in the sea port and the Ottoman caravanserais. In the 1800's, Beirut had a population of 3000 people; its port and caravanserais were gateways to cultures and ideas from overseas. Arthur Rimbaud, a French poet, used to work in Malta in the stone business when he visited Beirut; Nikolai Gogol, a Russian novelist, passed by Beirut on his way to Jerusalem; Alphonse de Lamartine and other orientalists and voyagers came to Beirut with ideas and stories and left with new ones (R23). This accumulation of visitors and cultures shaped the dominant multi-identity of Beirut; an amalgam of cultures, cuisines, political ideologies and architecture was brought to this small coastal city. This feels like contemporary Hellenism which matches Alexander's Hellenistic age of mixed cultures, ideas and people (R3).

The collage of history, culture, ethnicities and ideas formed what one of the respondents termed as Beirut's "urban documentary" since every single corner of the city represents a decade. Beirut is a memoire, a strata of stories (R9) and as Browne (2010) said, decoding spatial stories can lead to simple stories or complex ones. An observer is simply required to give longer time to contemplate and reflect on the structures to be able to absorb the content.

Beirut does not have the makings of a good city, seven respondents pointed out: "Do children here walk to school? Can they? Do you grab your coffee while walking to the office? Do you feel the need to dedicate a special time for your workout or you do it indirectly throughout the day in your walkable neighborhood or park? How long can you spend outdoors?

Do you feel delighted with the city scenery? These are the questions we need to ask ourselves in order to find out how fair Beirut is (R20).

The respondent agreed that Beirut was beautiful, especially in terms of the postmodernist mix of the traditional and the monster, yet there are no redeeming qualities (R2). "Beirut has got something, maybe a soul, it has something for sure," said respondent 13, expressing a sense of loss at being unable, like the other respondents, to identify that which makes Beirut meaningful and special. Perhaps, the respondents (R1, R20, R9, R15), speculated that the city's buildings which charged with memories and emotions are what make it dear. To respondent 5, the fisherman sitting on the sewage pipe of Ain Al Mraiseh sums up today's Beirut scene. Apart from poetry and prose, this man makes a living while seated on a sea of sewage; he even eats fish that survives in the sewage, silently. This scene symbolizes, according to him, the Beirut mindset: People are either incapable of changing or happy with the corruption to the extent that they see it, choose to ignore and then eat from it wholeheartedly (R5).

Beirut Digital District

BDD as Propaganda

Beirut is the context of BDD. The analysis of Beirut served as a doorway to a better understanding of its Digital District. Two out of twenty-seven respondents labeled Beirut Digital District as an entity created by propaganda (R2, R13). Urban studies are not part of the school curriculum, lamented two respondents (R2, R13). In schools, children are taught painting, theatre, music and even religion, but not offer architecture and urban studies classes. The next generation are not taught about the city they live within (R1, R2, and R15). One of the participants coming from the northern city of Tripoli remarked that he was not taught the history of his city. "How can one defend his city if he knows nothing about it? Unlike the people of Beirut, Parisians, for example, defended their city and rejected high-rises because they are educated on the urban know-how" (R1). Beirut is turning into a mix of chaos and insecurity, interspersed with moments of surprising and fading beauty such as beach sidewalks, bougainvillea and old Liwan houses. According to respondent R1, "We are losing a familiar place or an urban experience every day and it feels like a collective urban grief, yet everyone is acting as if everything is normal. "The feeling of being trapped, of being lost and of suffering from an identity crisis, is something that respondent shared. It is a reminder of Marc Auge's "non-place" which results from the exaggerated homogeneity of urban spaces where history, identity and culture diminish. In this sense, Beirut is placeless and so is BDD. The dominant narrative is that BDD embraces the old and the new, the oriental that wishes to experience the western. Beirut is labeled as cosmopolitan and a melting pot of civilizations, history and cultures in architectural language, but in fact, it reflects a design of the corporate world power. The mix of traditional and modern, old and new is nothing but a propaganda (R2). What does the old and

the new mean? And where is the old? Can you find it? The melting pot beauty and globalization propaganda is just a justification of the low standards commercial builders use in building. Beauty is not fashion or a trend, it is practicality and facility(R2). Above all, BDD is unaffordable while the promise behind being supportive means to give incentive and affordable services to people. Promoting BDD as a facility that serves the public is not accurate since it is not affordable and therefore inaccessible to many startups. Add to that, promoting BDD as a digital and a modern hub is also inaccurate since the district and the services offered within it are not up to date (R2). Beirut Digital District is an urban existence without virtue, according to one of the respondents (R1): BDD is actually a building we do not own, has no aesthetic value, designed by Lebanese, executed by workmen from rural areas in Syria or Bangladesh, and finally occupied by oligarchs. It is a district of discrimination, classism, abuse and social irresponsibility, not even close to a digital district.

Seductive urbanism

The majority of respondents (21) think that the architecture of BDD speaks to its multilayered history and environment. It is an inclusive space that hosts both social and economic life (R20). While one of the respondents described Beirut including BDD's urbanism as menopausal (R24), the other eleven framed it as a powerful and seductive mix, being home to a diverse people, setting and culture. Gloria Kaba, assistant professor at the American University of Beirut and owner of a Beirut based branding agency, described BDD as western culture meshed into an eastern community—Mediterranean and metallic buildings, digitization and war marks, technology and religious sites, productivity and dolce far niente. "History, politics, religions, culture and creativity are all there; it resembles the Beirut that used to host poets, writers and thinkers like Mahmoud Darwish, Ghada Al Samman, Talal Haidar, etc. and now, it has become tech-oriented giving its best to the thinkers of our era" (R15). BDD reminds its dwellers of the golden pastas it symbolizes, to them, history with a twist. The renovated part of the district preserves the old urban in a mold of attractive and impressive simplicity, and conserves the soul of golden Beirut through the Mediterranean building, the roof bricks and the old church at the center of the district.

Miniature of Beirut

BDD is the miniature of Beirut as seven respondents described it. This miniature embraces the contradictions of the whole city— the Liwan versus the cement, the secular represented by "the secular cafe" facing the entrance of BDD and the religious or the non-secular around the southern entrance to BDD that borders Khandak El-Ghamik area(R11). It is the fancy Silicon Valley, the downtown of the under privileged circle at the periphery of Bashoura and Khandak El-Ghamik areas. It is the Kiosks selling cheap coffee and Urbanista or Cafe Younes. One of the respondents compared Beirut to an item being tossed between an original, classical story and a globalized version, featuring a schizophrenic motif across the city(R12). The entrepreneurial identity of BDD was mentioned by the majority of the respondents. One of them (R22) asserted Beirut has always been entrepreneurial since the Phoenician alphabet; the second respondent commented on the creative murals and graphics in BDD; "the little free library" in the community garden and the urban mix attest to Beirut's spirit of creativity and making the best out of what is available at hand. The second respondent concluded with the old saying: "Cairo writes, Beirut publishes, and Baghdad reads" to brand Beirut as an entrepreneurial platform which reconstructs ideas to be weaved into the regional tapestry.

Metamorphosis

"In my visits to BDD, a conversation is always happening on what we are seeing and what it represents to us. I think certain architecture represent particular moments in history, BDD is an urbanism that speaks to our current moment" (R20). Beirut Digital District is the evolving persona of Beirut—a city serving the needs of its people while preserving the accumulated value and beauty of its urban structures (R14). One of the respondents considered that Fouad Chehab's highway lying in the middle between BDD's main metallic and glassy building and the abandoned egg building, symbolizes the quick transformation to a well-composed Beirut and a smart use of space, time and capacities which the district aspires to (R7). BDD is a metamorphosis from a lazy, abused city to a vibrant well-invested space.

Fusion and Confusion

Two out of twenty-seven respondents thought BDD has a confused identity—the windows and the glass demonstrate both the fusion in identity and the confusion between the local and the universal. The eliminated windows are postmodern and though the stone is local and the glass is international, the surveillance CCTV and other securitization measures remain colonial. For that reason, BDD is more confusion than fusion (R24).



+Figure 1

De-colonization

The argument that Beirut is a colonized city is challenged in a de-colonized BDD (R20). If colonization is the imposition of style, mindset and culture, Beirut Digital District is the restyling and rethinking of a place based on local needs and perspectives (R20, R9). Nagham Daher, a Lebanese architect based in Istanbul backed the de-colonization theory by highlighting the fact that the traditional houses and old buildings of Beirut usually belong to the elite, while in BDD they are given to a new elite, the creative elite and not the oligarchs. In this context BDD becomes a statement, not only an incubator for entrepreneurs.

Algorithm

The entrepreneurial BDD was mentioned by most respondents. One of the participants labeled it as "The Algorithm" of Beirut. This label contradicts Beirut since algorithms are problem-solving digital rules and calculations put together to make our lives easier and BDD achieves that goal.

Two respondents saw Beirut Digital District as a simulation of what a perfect Beirut could be. BDD mimics Berlin as it mixes bullet holes and damages with novelty and efficiency without losing harmony with the environment (R9). BDD is a success story of the utopian Beirut in terms of good space investment and correct value choices visual and practical.

Third Place

A utopian Beirut is a city that gives back to people. Service is the urban offering of BDD—through facilitating the dwellers lives, BDD humanized the city. Employees leaving their offices are often in a hurry and this from a psychological point of view, presumes their discomfort with the workplace (Peck, 1978). That is not the case in BDD, said Respondent (R11). People seem to enjoy the stay, as they take in things slowly around the district. Ray Oldenberg, an American urban sociologist, coined the term "Third Place" in 1989. He explains that your "Third Place" is your home away from home where you can hang out and enjoy your time contentedly-BDD is more like a "Third Place" for whoever visits it, for the friendly environment it provides, green spaces, eco-friendly policies, walkability, self-development opportunities, entertainment, employment and a lot more(R14). There is no such thing as "beautiful architecture", you have to see what the place is offering. BDD is where you feel comfortable enough to enjoy: gardens, fast internet connection, coffee shops, parking, library, scooters, banks and ATMs, safety, and beautiful interiors(R14). Beirut Digital District offers an exemplary platform for talents and idea workers to communicate and create. Richard Florida (2002) referred to the idea makers as the "Creative Class"—the difference between the creative class and the working class, the service class or other classes, is that the latter work on a basis of an existent paradigm whereas the creative class is paid to innovate new paradigms. The creative class, according to Florida, is an essential class to the revival of dead cities. However, one out of

our respondents refuted the utopian BDD argument by considering it a fake imitation of Silicon Valley and a step backwards in terms of architecture and urbanism (R13).

The Opposite of Beirut

As an oasis of creativity, BDD contradicts ailing Beirut. Victor Hugo says "Without France the world would be alone" and I say "without BDD Beirut would be alone". BDD integrated glass into its buildings to give it vibes of openness and transparency along with a bridging effect, unlike the capitalist glass that blankets the corporate buildings across Beirut (R14). Bringing architectural schools and cultures together within BDD is purposeful (R8, R21), unlike in Beirut where it is unplanned and serves a chosen few. Besides, BDD is online while Beirut is offline as it is not digitally-savvy (R13). Add to that, BDD demonstrates a smart use of space, money, and material (R10). The difference between BDD and Beirut becomes more visible in their organic connection. "We want to think that Beirut could be self-medicating through BDD" said Respondent (R13), or "maybe bringing reason to an unreasonable city" said Respondent 11, or even showcasing how citizens and private companies can overcome their government and city failures.

Visual Cues

BDD receives you with outstanding visuals. The logos on the door's interphone grabbed my attention on my first visit for a job interview. "I cannot take the 'Interesting Times' creative agency's logo out of my mind as it is part of BDD's significant visual vocabulary" one of the district employees stated. BDD receives you with beautiful public display of art as well. According to nine out of twenty-seven respondents, the mural of Jorje Rogriguez-Gerada is the district's visual cue. It is a mural of meaning and to decode it, one needs to look at the mural itself with the building that showcases it. First, the building is Stalinist, designed to crush the human spirit and establish totalitarianism and dominance (R15). This brutal urbanism dates back to the Soviet Union and the conformity era (R15). Then, in the middle of this aggressiveness, the mural depicts a child sleeping on his tummy and reading a story, to say that he is here and that he deserves your attention in the middle of all of this aggression (R15). The mural reflects the inhumane brutality of war footprints and cement, then takes it to the next level of an inspiring beauty context for BDD dwellers (R20). The Mediterranean style building is the district's outstanding old building as it evokes a sense of authenticity and depth. Second, if you walk across the central area of BDD, you come across an abandoned church left untouched and can only be renovated, by the Lebanese ministry of culture and has therefore been abandoned. This church is a representative of the neglect caused bureaucracy hampering the development in Beirut and symbolizes the centrality of religious ideology in the city's culture, said Respondent 24.BDD is more advanced than Beirut city in terms of services and design, nevertheless, it fits smoothly into it. It is an organically refurbished part of the city; it belongs to the city but offers much more than the city does.



Figure 2

Military Urbanism

Military urbanism is the application of military techniques, tools, ideas and norms within urban spaces for security reasons. Only one out of twenty-seven found that BDD is not militarized. By definition, the respondent said, the military consists of the unity and conformity, both of which are not present in the hybridity that defines Beirut and gives it mixed flair and makes it un-military. All other respondents agreed on the militarized facade of Beirut, some thought it is a negative phenomenon, others valued it and expressed oblivion when asked about their thoughts on it.

Two respondents believe that the integration of military in the urban, was new to Beirut in general, but it became the new normal in no time. "It actually seems that we do not notice it anymore as if we are hypnotized to believing it is part of our normal environment" (R24) and "we totally agree to having our biometrics in cyberspace" (R20). Respondent 17 expressed indignation at the presence of the military in the city. He believed that military urbanization violated people's privacy but become necessary, or was made necessary to the extent that people now accept it at the expenses of their rights and freedoms (R17). In my opinion, this serves as a typical description of militarization within BDD.

One of the local forms of militarization in BDD, a form of militarization that is perhaps unique to Beirut, is in the presence of the warlords' thugs who have somewhat kidnapped the city. "You can find them all day in the streets, around certain corners and coffee kiosks ready to intimidate at any time. The political parties' militiamen are the first military obstacle that hampers your free access to Beirut and to the digital district," said Respondent 22. The same idea is continued by Respondent 6 who warned about the no photo policy applicable inside and around BDD. "If you attempt to take a photo of Gerada's mural, they would instantly pop up to interrogate and ask you to refrain from taking photos in the area" (R6). This "no photos" policy is applicable inside and around BDD as well as across the whole city (R6). In addition to banning photography, road blocks around BDD are military (R15), surveillance cameras, fences and the omnipresence of security men are all military forms (R20). The security guards play an intrusive rule. Respondent 13 describes their presence as bothersome. Sometimes "when they see you smoking a cigarette alone in the community garden. They would come over to ask if you are expecting someone or try to investigate the reason of your guest's visit" (R13). There is, then, a very thin line between security as safety and security as intimidation. The continued modes of investigation and observation, make people feel alert and restricts their freedom of expression and movement especially when they in the common BDD spaces(R13). One of the respondents mentioned the project of installation of 1000 surveillance cameras in Beirut a few years ago and related it to the CCTV tracking everyone is subject to wherever they go in BDD (R12). Another continued with the same idea saying that the surveillance vibe, by default, was not welcoming as

the whole city including the citizens, even within BDD, were being violated on a daily basis and freedoms were being controlled (R22). Military behavior cancelled the building's primary role as a shelter and as a secure and private space (R16). Militarization has become an obstacle that ought to be overcome to get access to the district and enjoy its beauty (R5). This brings to mind Fawaz, Gharbieh and Harb (2012) quoting of one of Beirut dwellers' feelings in this regard. She compared the military tracking in Beirut to the invasion of privacy one encounters daily in villages, and how she felt obliged to overcome a set of obstacles every day before reaching the city.

One of BDD's employees who is southerner in origin, expressed mixed feelings about the military measures across the district. "I come from southern Lebanon, our privacies and lives are invaded by Israel, Hizbollah, UNIFIL and God knows who else. I got used to it and I do not feel uncomfortable with it anymore" she concluded (R21). Another respondent found out that she does not feel intimidated by such measures abroad, but in Beirut "you get to feel that you are being hacked by the ruling octopus." BDD might be militarized for genuine security reasons, but "you cannot separate between what you experience outside the fences of BDD and what goes on inside; it is a vicious circle," said Respondent 3. He continued that Beirut was an agglomeration of military niches ruled by warlords who want to protect their private empires. A bird's eye view of Beirut makes BDD look like a new military niche, more or less. Fregonese (2020) termed this phenomenon as the "hybrid sovereignties" of Beirut.

Although BDD's fans regarded the district as a liberation symbol, de-colonizing Beirut by boosting independent thinking and freestyle urbanism based on home-grown needs, Habib Battah uses the integration of militarization into BDD urbanism to categorize it as a new form of submissiveness and colonialism (R2).

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Two respondents regarded the scarred walls, bullet holes and the brutality of the soviet building as a military motif that stamps BDD. Others valued the safety militarization offers to BDD visitors for the sake of protecting the pleasant experience of the place. "The inner growth and the available opportunities offered by this place, make you swallow any measures" said one of BDD's frequent visitors.

Conclusion

Beirut is a city with no identity and its urban profile lacks harmony, practicality and visual charm. Landmarks distinguish cities around the world whereas Beirut doesn't have any. This research explores the urban environment of Beirut Digital District, a neighborhood in Beirut, in an attempt to uncover its urban identity, hence that of Beirut.

Beirut is a star in the region and the world. It is famous for diversity, culture, openness, moderate climate and cuisine; it is also well known for wars, blasts and political conflicts which made it, throughout the decades, a city of injustices. The urban dress of instability that Beirut wears is a reflection of its geopolitics as it marked by the old scars of war. The mix in architectural schools, religious sites and speak of the many layers of the city.

The architectural presence of the Romans and Mamluks documents the eras when great civilizations settled in this tiny country, while the urban legacies of Constantinople and Paris bring to memory a colonial mindset that ruled Lebanon for hundreds of years, and still preserves its memories in it until today. The omnipresence of the Lebanese politicians' posters in the streets of Beirut stand as reminders of a colonial vibe that any visitor gets while in the city. The superior – "I know what is better for you" – imposed mentality is what makes the colonial

persistent, and it is detectable in the way the authorities handle everything, including urbanism and security.

Taking care of Downtown area at the expenses of the rest of Beirut and the tendency to build more glassy and metal towers, is colonial because it does not serve the people nor the environment; it only serves the ruling few. Sweeping off hundred-year-old buildings to replace them with malls, and renovating the old to make more restaurants and pubs instead of more housing, is also colonial and does not give back to people but to the ruling few. To cut it short, any activity imposed on people without satisfying them is pure colonial. The CCTV cameras, road blocks, interrogations, photography bans and other security techniques across the military niches of Beirut are also colonial. They deploy men, cameras, road blocks, checkpoints and fences to ensure their own safety, then they take advantage of security tools in tracking, controlling and silencing the people, once again for the greater cause: Colonialism.

BDD is Beirut's fairest urbanism. One of the respondents regarded BDD as an image promoted through propaganda rather than an actual supportive incubator. Yet given the fact that it offers top notch workplaces for entrepreneurs and startups, I believe that BDD is the cornerstone of an evolving Beirut, or how a perfect Beirut would look like. Apart from the incubation that BDD provides to the Lebanese youth in general, the smart use of space, preservation of traditional buildings and integration of services in its urban composition, make it Beirut's almost perfect urban escape.

Looking at the collected data, we notice an indirect collective consensus on the goodness and importance of "the old", regardless of the value it offers; the abandoned old fades with time; it does not provide benefit nor beauty. BDD's renovation of the old and its integration to the new, made it useful and beautiful. Beauty is not a luxury but a way of creating possibility in the space of enclosure, a radical art of subsistence, an embrace of our terribleness, a proclivity for the baroque and the love of too much. So if beauty is about creating possibilities out of curses, or making too much out of nothing, is there something more beautiful than BDD? Who we are is constantly evolving and Beirut Digital District handles this fact with care. The problem with modern urbanism is that we tend to build more of what we do not like. We loathe towers and wide spiritless roads and streets, yet we build more of those instead of updating the mid-rises and narrow streets somehow speaking to our current moment. BDD aced that remarkably. Its urbanism communicates the place by embracing the cultures, architectures and identities within, it speaks to the place by not intimidating it with exaggerated cement and verticality.



Figure 3

The exaggeration in security making techniques within BDD is distasteful to many, but the majority of respondents were flexible with the measures taken within district and regarded it as security. However, they regarded what is outside BDD fences, in the streets of Beirut, as violation. If militarization is a colonization tool across Beirut, it is de-colonization within the district. The whole district is a de-colonization algorithm, stated one of the respondents, as it replaces imposed urbanism with a custom made one. In addition, it renovates the colonial architecture to make it available for the first time in Lebanon, to the creative class and not the ruling oligarchs.

Beirut Digital District adopts a holistic approach for development taking into consideration the economic, social and psychological well-being that makes the district's environment energizing. You can smell the open gate of infinite possibilities in BDD's air, a smell that evokes enthusiasm and creation. The harmony in urban interaction with the environment brings to mind Polshek's healing architecture theory in which he saw the urban as a healing art not only as beautification.

"BDD is capitalism with good will," as one of our respondents pointed out. While Solidere masked Beirut's identity, BDD is an attempt to take back the identity by renovating the old buildings rather than demolishing and employing them, gradually seeking the integration with neighboring slums (R18). Beirut was demolished during the civil war and no reconciliation took place afterwards; BDD handled the revival of the city in a comprehensive way, unlike the capitalist deformation that has been dominant since the Taif agreement (R20). The idea of revolutionary renovation is discussed by Cruickshank (2019) when he mentioned the Moscow's Melinkov Palace. The palace was built in 1929 and was named after architect Konstantin Melinkov. It portrays the spirit of cultural, economic and political communist revolt that took

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place in 1917 through its rebellious abstract sculptures and geometrics. BDD, in this regard, makes sense of history through the preservation of the old church, the Mediterranean building and the colonial ones, yet it says: "This is only history and now is time for renovating and extending ourselves towards the new world order. We will attend a new level of digital identity and rebel against what has been the norm in urban planning (R14)".

From a flâneur's perspective, I think Beirut Digital District answers a burning question: What kind of space are we willing to live and work in nowadays? Each age chart demands its own form and BDD is a template for an entirely new era. The choice of material, design and setting are not just aesthetically fashionable since the main district's purpose functions as a medical supplement, used to calm the anxiety of our current moment.

Although it represents a quantum leap in Beirut's urbanism, BDD is invisible. In other words, passersby won't notice BDD unless they are visiting and only then, the value of this agora can be detected, when dwellers stop, give time to take in its composition and question it. No doubt that this place always gives more to contemplate within its specificity, starting at the entrance and throughout every detail in the setting. You have to keep in mind that, while in BDD, entrances and exits are not unified; You can step in from the upper Bechara EL-Khoury side or from the egg-shaped building at the Martyrs square, also from the southern neighborhood of Bashoura or the northern side of the ministry of finance. That said, getting in and out of BDD might be overwhelming sometimes because you cannot locate yourself when inside, but it does not dictate your direction like in a u-shaped living room towards a TV set, on the contrary, it gives you a chance to wander on your own. It offers you free movement alongside free thought, which envelops its core value.



Figure 4

Pondering on the mise-en-scène of BDD, I can detect mainly three Lebanons: A Turkish Lebanon represented by the Liwan house, a French Lebanon in the renovated terraced buildings and the brick roof tiles, and a globalized Lebanon portrayed by glassy buildings, metal and vertical gardens within minimalist setting. This holistic and sustainable mix of simple yet austere urban ingredients, preserving historical strength, leaves you with an ultimate effect of inward purification or a meaningful rebirth. It goes hand in hand with BDD's campaign's hashtag on Twitter: #ANewTomorrow

The history of Lebanon is summed up in three buildings in BDD, yet the effective urban management can be traced in every corner and brick of the district. In architecture, there is a continuous seeking of stable solutions and BDD planners have fulfilled their quest it through improvising from whatever is at hand. They made dense urban living bearable through tactical urbanism: Development was arrested in Beirut long time ago but BDD planners kicked off urbanism and communication development, for the first time in Lebanon, unprecedented hybridity. They created a space that is both virtually connected and physically enriching, paving the way for multiple input gates of possibilities, where you would endlessly enjoy being quarantined; the long empty walls, clean bare open floors and expansive windows wrapping the facades of its modern buildings, eradicate darkness and the feeling of being stuck in life and career and replace it with prospect. The colorful rooms and ceilings inside and wall art as well as multi-colored buildings outside, are canals of subliminal quietness and serenity.



Figure 5

A major shift in urban ideology is translated into action in BDD through its eco-friendly environment, garbage recycling, turn off faucets to conserve water, the use of biodegradable bottles, cups and containers and its heart-warming green spaces. Street furniture is another indicator of purposeful design as it shows the willingness to please dwellers and enhance their quality of outdoor lives. Sports venues and spaces such as basketball, ping pong, kickboxing, baby foot, and other courts are meant to bolster the urban experience within the district. Cheap eats or top notch food, Manakish vending machine and local coffee shops or international ones, are there to satisfy any kind of customer.



Figure 6

In terms of Military Urbanism, the district does look militarized through the omnipresence of surveillance, security men, fencing, and interrogation at the entrance of every building yet these measurements are meant to meet new security requirements to keep BDD away from thieves, terrorists, thugs and to ensure the safe BDD experience, even if they create sometimes, unpleasant tension within the district.



Figure 7

The open floors inside and the disorganized erection of buildings and shapes outside of Beirut Digital district are synonymous with avant-garde nomadism or a style of someone who lived nowhere, can live anywhere, and belongs everywhere. This shedding off of oppression and military order is seductive. The embodiment of emotion in the renovated Levantine buildings is a beauty mark which distinguishes BDD from silicon valleys around the world. Its solutionoriented identity is reflected in the abundance and centrality of parking lots to facilitate the

accurate fast and comfortable arrival of employees to their offices in the morning, unlike the suffering that people endure anywhere in Beirut, outside BDD, to find a parking spot. The little birdhouse-like library in the middle of BDD's garden, where dwellers and visitors can donate books or pick up ones for free, sums up the whole concept of the district as a hub for knowledge exchange and an open source of innovation and growth. The wide roof terrace in BDD overlooks Beirut physically and practically at the same time. If Samarkand, as Maalouf says, is the most beautiful face which earth has turned towards the sun, Beirut Digital District, I would say, is the best face which Beirut has turned towards the skies. BDD, after all, is just like Beirut, an unconsented beauty burdened by a militarized archipelago that caused Beirut port explosion on August 4, 2020, when nearly 2,750 tons of improperly stored ammonium nitrate exploded in the seaport of the Lebanese capital, a few hundred meters away from BDD, killing more than 200 people, injuring and displacing thousands. Despite the unfathomable odds, especially after the explosion, BDD is determined on rebuilding. BDD, a Beirut nucleus, insists on rebuilding the shattered nation and is committed to perseverance despite the odd, for according to BDD's webpage, the explosion on August 4, 2020 added to a plethora of challenges and obstacles, both logistic and psychosocial, for those determined to take the leap. And they are ready to take the leap.

Table of Respondents

Number	Name	Profession
R1	Rahif Fayad	Architect/Retired professor
R2	Habib Batah	Journalist/BDD visitor
R3	Gloria Kaba	Marketer/Assistant Professor
R4	Grace Moura	Journalist at BDD
R5	Ghassan Soud	Journalist/Novelist
R6	Fatima Diab	Architect/Assistant Professor
R7	Ahmed Badreddine	Accountant/Frequent BDD visitor
R8	Nicole Khawaja	Journalist/frequent BDD visitor
R9	Matteo Khodr	Countertenor/BDD visitor/Urbanism enthusiast
R10	Omar Owada	Architect
R11	Mahmoud Seraali	Journalist at BDD
R12	Joseph Hosni	Professor (Communication Studies)
R13	Malak Hamdan	Architect/BDD visitor
R14	Hanaa Mounzer	Frequent BDD visitor
R15	Nejood Medouh	Architect/BDD visitor
R16	Nagham Daher	Architect/BDD visitor
R17	Mona Fayad	Political writer/Professor of Psychology
R18	Nada Nassif	Employee at BDD

This table identifies our respondents' names and professions.

R19	Toni Chamoun	Employee at BDD
R20	Rita Razzouk	Frequent BDD visitor
R21	Sanaa Lallous	Journalist at BDD
R22	Rafic Saab	Graphic Designer/BDD visitor
R23	Osama Baalbaki	Painter
R24	Nouna Baldi	Architect
R25	Suad Amiry	Author and Architect
R26	Dr. Mouchir Aoun	University Professor
R27	Mohammed Chamseddine	Research Analyst

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