

# Peace and Beyond



Beirut: a city of  
open wounds and  
accidental beauty

Cindy Mizher

# Beirut: a city of open wounds and accidental beauty

Cindy Mizher

I am writing this from Beirut, a place that I call home, described by Kaelen Wilson-Goldie (2009) as ‘home to one of the most active and dynamic contemporary art scenes in the region’. It’s a place where the aesthetics of war are still vivid and interchanging, in arts as in our daily life, impacting our relationships between conflict, culture and identity.

As a Lebanese citizen born in 1986, I am part of the generation that was raised on the myth and ruins of an internal bloodbath that had officially ended. However, I had to deal with a different kind of conflict as a child, since my memory of violence was (and still is) heavily saturated with Israeli wars and air strikes before 1996, and after 2006.

As my life led me to become part of the cultural scene in the country, I came to understand that violence constructs a major part of the identity of my generation – violence that is not always apparent, but rather masked in cultural and societal practices that shape the norms of our ‘togetherness’ as a post-war nation.

The subjects of violence and war have dominated the work of Lebanese artists. That does not come as a surprise, as the majority of the artists present in the scene currently have witnessed at least one war, whether they were raised in the bloodiest period in contemporary Lebanese history between 1975 and the 1990s (the agreed period of the civil war), or whether they have lived through the aftermath of repeated internal conflicts providing the continuity of the struggles that supposedly ended with the Taif Agreement of 1989.

My generation of cultural actors raised questions about our ability to ever live in peace; we moved towards making space to generate new artistic identities not necessarily related to war, as part of our rebellious mark on the scene. We asked questions around the notion of our identity beyond the hummus and the tabbouleh, and the unspoken agreement of the wildness of Lebanese nightlife no matter the intensity of the situation; questions aiming to analyse the diversity of the whole fabric of Lebanon with all its problematic contributions to the conflict; questions that aim to expose the post-colonial influence of the West, and the imposed image of the open-minded Lebanese versus the threats of fundamentalism.

However, no matter how our questions were posed, we all inevitably come back to the starting point: the internal power dynamics that created the civil war in the first place, those still marking the daily lives of the residents of this country, because it still allows the same people to take the lead in the political life of the nation, and its surrounding states.

It is easy to say that we do not have an identity because of the war, yet it is ironically the common denominator that defines us from outside and from within, and perhaps it is the biggest element of our collective identity. Almost 30 years have passed since the war ended and we are still producing art around it – not because we are not able to let go, but because it is still here, occupying public spheres, spaces and discussions.

In a politically charged country like Lebanon, it's significant to note that the Lebanese population have always had something to say about the situation, expressions that helped vent the frustrations, but that also led to conflicts and public drama. Flipping lightly through recent Lebanese history, you would find a country that has undergone a long bloody civil war that still takes its toll on the society/s; add to that a long conflict with Israel that left it drained and sparked even more internal conflicts. Still, through all of that, and bearing in mind that it's a population that lacks a common documented history, the Lebanese people have proved their resilience. With all their contradictions, fractions, conflicts, brutality, bloodsheds, displacement, more than 17,000 missing people and tragic losses in each family, they are still here and are still creative.

Today, almost 30 years after the official end of the civil war, we can easily acknowledge that those who documented those events through their experiences and productions, were artists that tackled the memory of the conflict and attempted to reconcile the collective agony through acknowledging the current political facts. Understanding the weight of the Lebanese wars was at various times put on the shoulders of the generation of artists that was born into it. Chad Elias (2015) notes: *'Working across the fields of photography, video, and live performance, a generation of artists who grew up during the wars... have made artworks that provide platforms for the critical examination and recovery of collective memory in Lebanon. By conducting archival research, unearthing ephemeral artefacts, and collecting eyewitness testimonies, these artists seek to bear witness not only to the physical violence of the recent past, but also to the mnemonic damage caused by it.'*

The artistic scene in Beirut can be seen as a reflection of the image of the country's divisions and fragmentations. The interventions deployed in Beirut establish a common ground that can be built upon and which invite the Lebanese to employ art in the service of the city. This support needs to be activated by civil society institutions and parties interested in the arts, especially in light of the absence of the government's role. I reflect below on two examples of how architecture and art are intertwined in memorialising the war.

## **The Burj el Murr (Murr Tower) incident – why war monuments should stay war monuments**

The 30-plus-storey Murr Tower, with its numerous open window frames, began to rise in 1970, and remained the tallest building in Beirut until the construction of Sama Beirut. The Murr Tower's construction was stopped at the beginning of the civil war in 1975 so that the building could be used strategically in the battles, where members of the Phalanges, Al-Ahrar, the Amal movement, as well as the Lebanese military forces, the Syrian army and the Palestinians, all took turns in controlling it. Making use of its location between the eastern Christian and the Muslim west in the city, the tower was both a fortress and a host to elite snipers, providing them the best view overlooking most of Beirut's streets.

The tower still stands incomplete: a naked, concrete, grey building standing amid the renovated yet empty downtown of Beirut and the Hamra area, controlled by the Solidere company. Solidere holds a major responsibility for the drastic actions of reconstructing the damaged concrete structures after the Taif Agreement, simultaneously deconstructing the collective memory of downtown Beirut, and wiping its history, while evicting its locals to make room for new rich tenants.

With the new post-war function of the building as a military base, the tower remained an empty unreachable piece of grey concrete, reminding Beirutis daily of the agony that was once there. As a monument that occupied a great deal of the spoken and written documentation of the civil war, it attracted many artistic interventions around it, yet no artist, nor anyone unconnected to the military, could access it – until very recently.

On a breezy day in mid-May 2018, Beirut woke up to the sight of colourful fabric hanging from the window frames of what was once a dead – and deadly – tower. The cloths, resembling the typical coloured nylon drapes of the Beirut balconies that paint the city's visual identity, blended the tower into the urban colour palette, and suddenly it was not so alien any more. The concept, despite its simplicity, had a huge impact on those who passed the building daily; it caught their eyes and breath. For many people, including me, the movement of the drapes dancing in the wind felt also as if they were turning a page in time: giving us a new start, a new beginning, a new set of possibilities of what is yet to occupy that painful static space. Seeing an artist accessing this war monster gave the cultural community a renewed sense of ability, having been paralysed by an atmosphere that encouraged a less thoughtful, more mindlessly positive approach to artistic interventions.

Through artist's Jad El Khoury's installation Burj El Hawa (the tower of the wind), we could see a sea of possibilities for our interventions in the space. Sadly, that sense of empowerment and euphoria did not last long. Although Jad had certainly obtained all relevant permits from governmental and military bodies, and from Solidere, and had fulfilled all his duties, he was given two days to dismantle the work from the building by Solidere with no further explanation. The life that had come back to the Murr Tower did not last. Thirty-four floors representing torture, kidnapping and the unknown fates of thousands during the civil war were no longer transformed. Yet to many artists, this action merely compounded their sense that there was already a sense that the powers-that-be were disrespectful of both the city's architecture and its memories.

The question remains as to why such a peaceful artistic intervention would require such rejection. Is it possible that there are those who do not want art to beautify the building, or expose its value, while reminding the Lebanese of its significance? Or is it because it is not in their interests to heal the wounds of the conflict in a politically charged city? What a shame it would be if the only proposal that wins favour is that of demolition, making room for another skyscraper built over the memory of the city that will soon be forgotten.

## **Beit Beirut: turning war monuments into a place to reconcile and shape the collective memory**

My first real encounter with the Barakat building was in 2005, as I took part in a silent sit-in in support of dialogue and reconciliation between the different Lebanese affiliations. The year 2005 was critical for the country, as the ghost of the civil war started re-emerging following consecutive political assassinations, as well as a public demand for reviewing the Syrian militant interventions in the country.

In light of the tensions that have existed – still exist – between the parties involved in the Lebanese conflict, the sit-in was intended to express indignation over the political situation at the time. We were situated in the hall of a building destroyed by the recent war, and thus a marker of its bloody history. The location was strategically chosen for its symbolic qualities, helping the protesters to present their concern towards the future of their city, and country, while still reminding people of its destructive effect, still markedly present on the building.

The Barakat building (named after the family that owned it) is an architectural monument located on the former 'seam lines' where opposite sectarian residential areas intersected in Beirut, and which has changed its face with construction and demolitions to make room for modernity. Throughout all the aesthetic changes in its surroundings, Barakat remained a place that would revive the memory of the Lebanese nation and show the material and human cost of the war. The building remained deserted until very recently, having been the action point of some of the most skilled snipers throughout the civil war. Through neglect, the building remained as a witness to a bloody history, with the marks of bullets and bombs still visible on its yellow walls. But with the efforts of the community, architects, scholars and activists, the city council agreed to restore the space instead of tearing it down.

The extensive campaign to save Barakat served to celebrate the resilience of the local people, who chose to preserve the collective memory of the city, and to link memory and public space. It asked: how can we commemorate the war and avoid its return if we do not speak about it? It recognised the need to bring this memory of war into schools, institutions and public spaces, and that space must be preserved in order to do that.

After a lengthy rehabilitation process Barakat opened its doors in 2017 under the patronage of the municipality of Beirut. Architect and artist Youssef Haidar intervened in the restoration of the building, aiming to keep its visual identity, but also turning it into a functional entity to be used publicly.

It changed its name to Beit Beirut (Beirut's home), and became the first memory museum in the city. The artists who first accessed the space found material that belonged to the initial residents of the buildings, all of which helped to tell the story of the building before war, and through it some of the story of the city. As the space stands now with no official programming structure, it still serves as a museum of memory; each of its rooms holds traces of a time that must be remembered.

Having overcome a rough start, Beit Beirut has opened its exhibition spaces, auditoriums and halls to host the cultural activities of the city and is now much in demand.

### The current scene, swimming against the (main)stream

Today, we see many Lebanese artists and curators using artistic interventions to express their multiple identities and their relationship to a conflicted and complex city such as Beirut. They aim to address their traumas, question their identities and deconstruct war, but also to communicate the vast social changes that have been hard to articulate in the mainstream.

So Lebanon, long a source of inspiration for many, now has a huge array of interventions in art concerning war, memory and reconciliation, and this is seen in each generation of artists that emerges, as well as in the avant-garde scene.

We need to acknowledge that the memory of all the residents of Lebanon is saturated with art that directly addresses their lived experience and the experiences of those who have gone before; that is a responsibility taken by the artistic community that is rarely acknowledged, and it has an impact that is definitely worth further exploration.

**Cindy Mizher is Arts and Society Projects Manager, British Council, Lebanon**

### References

- Elias, C (2015) 'Artistic Responses to the Lebanese Wars', in Elias, C (ed) *In Focus: On Three Posters 2004 by Rabih Mroué*. Tate Research Publication. Available online at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/on-three-posters-rabih-mroue/artistic-responses-to-the-lebanese-wars>, accessed 7 November 2017
- Wilson-Goldie, K (2009) *On the Politics of Art and Space in Beirut*. Available online at: [www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/on-politics-art-and-space-beirut](http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/on-politics-art-and-space-beirut)

**'Almost 30 years have passed since the war ended and we are still producing art around it'**







Peace and Beyond was a partnership between the British Council, Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, and delivered in association with the Centre for Democracy and Peace Building.

### **Photography**

All images © Pacemaker Press International