Crafting futures in Lebanese Refugee Camps – Burj El Barajneh Palestinian Camp

Working Paper

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Abstract

The initiative at the Burj El Barajneh camp is run by a network of local associations, and aims at improving living conditions, services, infrastructure and livelihoods for the inhabitants. Burj el Barajneh has a large number of active associations and many highly educated professionals. However, in this kind of complex hyperdense context any kind of change needs to be carefully considered, there are no simple recipes, and existing professional expertise does not necessarily match the specific conditions of the locality.

By working with collective design and collaboration between the camp's inhabitants, it becomes possible to envisage larger coordinated efforts, and to solve issues that remain blocked at an individual level. Thus, work can be undertaken with maintenance of infrastructure, but also looking for new and more sustainable solutions to serve the needs of the camp as a whole. Knowledge and know-how can be developed that are better suited to the context. Beyond technical problem-solving, the lives and aspirations of the inhabitants become central to the way issues are addressed. At the same time, networking with other camps, as well as with academics, professionals and organisations in Lebanon and abroad, creates opportunities to share experiences, thereby opening up alternative ways of approaching the local issues. Systemic design methodologies can here provide powerful tools for collective reflection and action, involving multiple actors. Not only do these methodologies allow participants from diverse backgrounds to grasp interconnections between issues and identify points of entry, but they accelerate processes both of developing new ideas and evaluating possible consequences.
Background

All of Lebanon has for the past few years been strongly affected by the crisis in neighbouring Syria. Faced with hopeless conditions in the countryside, many try to find jobs in the cities (Sanyal, 2017). The arrival of Syrian refugees has added to the strain on infrastructure and services (Boustani et al. 2016; Fawaz 2017) in low income neighbourhoods of Beirut. In areas like Burj El Barajneh, the high cost of materials for repairs, the practice of building additional floors to house the influx of Syrians, and pressures on infrastructure that was overtaxed already before the arrival of the newest refugees, have all led to rapidly deteriorating conditions for the camp inhabitants.

Like the other inhabitants of Beirut, people in Burj El Barajneh suffer from the effects of economic forces at the societal level, over which they have no influence (cf. Fawaz, 2009). Local production is outcompeted by cheap imports from China and other Asian countries, which reduces available jobs (Said, 2017). The large number of Syrian refugees desperate to find work has pushed wages down even further, particularly for the already poorly paid occasional jobs in service or construction. Both the influx of people hoping for a better future in the city, and the housing speculation driven by financial and political logic, combine to push rents up and increase the cost of living (Sakr-Tierney, 2017). Local authorities strive to make the city attractive to the wealthiest, and to entice investors. Speculation affects newly constructed apartment blocks, as well as older buildings in attractive central locations. At the same time, not only housing, but also prices for many services and commodities are driven up by rich visitors from the Gulf, as well as by Lebanese from other countries, and who are able to pay with stronger currencies. These tendencies create vulnerable conditions for large segments of the Lebanese population. As in other countries, refugees and undocumented migrants are even more exposed. Unfortunately also, the crisis which affects poor Lebanese, is fuelling resentment towards the even weaker groups, who are ready to work for wages far below subsistence levels.

Another, less obvious effect of the economic disparities in Beirut is how it affects the competence profile of professionals. Since it is less rewarding to serve the needs of the poor than to cater to the tastes of the richest, educated professionals will typically aspire to find employment in activities oriented towards the very rich. Their professional qualifications and specialisations therefore tend to be oriented in this direction. Since these are the qualifications with which educated young people can hope to find employment, the higher education institutions and the teachers who teach there will also offer such profiles. The large income disparities and the reliance on foreign capital have not only affected the kind of education that is available: it also has effects on the policies of policy makers, concerning infrastructure, public services or urban planning (Nucho, 2016; Verdeil, 2017). Many types of municipal services are lacking or inadequate (Mourad & Piron, 2016).

This has created a situation where professionals with university degrees simply do not have the skills needed to address the needs of poorer segments of the population. At the same time, very few employment opportunities exist in sectors of public interest. Since young people are driven by the hope that they will succeed and find jobs, the combined effect is that there are
many unemployed highly educated professionals in the city, including in the Burj El Barajneh camp.

One of the starting points for this project is therefore that these young people could potentially be a valuable resource for their communities, if only their competence better matched the needs of the inhabitants. The situation in Beirut outlined above is just an extreme case of a more general tendency. Professional qualifications, policy and planning practices are not primarily oriented to serve the needs of the poorest communities, and often policies are instead directed towards containing and controlling the negative effects of social disparities. Even potentially positive planning initiatives, such as attempts to green the cities, are not always adapted to local social conditions (cf. Makhzoumi, 2015). The mismatch between available professional knowledge and existing needs is aggravated by the fact that neighbourhoods like Burj El Barajneh have specific conditions and features, in ways that make it difficult to apply standardised solutions. Finding workable practices to address challenges in such contexts is not easy to achieve for outsiders, who would have difficulties perceiving the multiple layers of signification, the complexities of social relationships, and the unspoken functions of various features in the built and organisational structures (cf Halimeh, 2014; Halimeh & El-Daccache, 2014).

**Palestinian Camps in Lebanon**

The lives of Palestinians in Lebanon are regulated by special laws, that restrict their lives in many ways (Al-Natour, 1997; Hanafi & Long, 2010). For instance, Palestinians are by law prohibited from working in 78 professions. Similarly, an array of restrictions applies to the Syrian refugees, intending to prevent a permanent settlement of the displaced (Sanyal, 2017). Syrians need a sponsor to be allowed to work. Work and residence permits are expensive,
wages are low, and employers sometimes exploit the extreme vulnerability of the refugees to refuse payment altogether.

Many neighbourhoods in Beirut are built in conditions of informality (Fawaz, 2009; Sanyal, 2017) or semi-formality, which exposes them to demolition. Compared to the newer settlements, the old Palestinian camps like Burj El Barajneh are relatively privileged in this respect, since the land is officially allocated for the establishment of these camps, although the residents do not own it. UNRWA is responsible for the Palestinian camps and provides a wide array of services to the inhabitants (Mcloughlin, 2016; Hammoud, 2017). Nevertheless, these services and social projects do not suffice to meet actual needs. The scope and applications of measures organised by UNRWA are further limited by government policies aiming to ‘contain’ the refugee populations. On the other hand, Burj El Barajneh is home to numerous NGOs and community associations. This could be a very valuable asset to the community, but coordination is lacking. Importantly, each association focuses a limited goal, while insufficient attention is given to the overarching questions, such as infrastructure or the structural and systemic aspects of the local economy. Crucial questions are the electricity grid (cf. Ghanem, 2017) and water (Yamout & El-Fadel, 2005; Khoury, Graczyk, Burnham, Jurdi & Goldman, 2016), but also underlying conditions pertaining to livelihoods.

The Palestinian presence in Lebanon dates from the Nakba in 1948. The community is best described as one of protracted (long term) refugees rather than refugees fleeing from recent conflict. Despite their longstanding presence in Lebanon, Palestine refugees remain excluded from key aspects of social, political and economic life in the country. Indeed, they are barred from owning property or practicing in numerous professions, among which all liberal professions. Recent changes in labour regulations have yet done little to change this. In contrast, Palestine refugees residing in Syria and Jordan can work in all professions and own property. In addition, the Lebanese army controls access to Palestine refugee camps, restricting refugees’ mobility. This social exclusion physically extends to camps, the space inhabited by about two thirds of Palestine refugees.

Camps are enclaves outside the authority of the Lebanese state. However, the surface area of the camps has not increased with population and many have become cramped shantytowns, offering little privacy to residents and exposing them to health hazards. Although a total of 46 Arab organisations and 20 foreign NGOs assist Palestine refugees in Lebanon, the volume and scope of their assistance pales in comparison to services delivered by UNRWA. Within camps UNRWA provides housing, water, and electricity. These services do not extend to gatherings and camp surroundings, mostly also inhabited by Palestinians, and which suffer from irregular waste disposal and water and electricity supply, which officially are the responsibility of the Lebanese Government. UNRWA also provides education, health care services as well as some additional welfare services to Palestinians living in camps as well as gatherings.
Networks and Structures in the Burj El Barajneh camp
The camp corresponds to a unique structure that has evolved according to the everyday needs of its community through vernacular adaptation to political and social constraints.

Being limited in less than 1 square kilometre; 30,000 refugees are hosted in a compound virtually bounded and physically limited by the surrounding context (diag.01).

Understanding the ways people live at a micro scale leads us to discover a hidden network at the scale of the camp as a whole. Mapping the various networks, their interconnections, and physical distribution over the area provides a better understanding of core issues for the camp: dead spaces versus a lack of space, poverty versus limiting laws, and existing skills but with a lack of know-how.

Diagram 02: Diagram of Burj el Barajneh Camp ©

Diagram 03: Boundaries and political parties’ distribution ©
Many generations of the same family live in the same building or more commonly in a cluster of buildings, forming a private courtyard for the buildings bounding it. As ground level space is used up, stories are added to accommodate the growing family.

Observed weaknesses are largely a result of fragmentation: lack of connectivity between certain programmes of the same kind within the camp, as well as limited connections between the camp and its surroundings. Lack of coordination and lack of connecting structures keep these programmes from reaching their full potential. In instances where they are connected more efficiently, such as the case of Sahat Palestine (where the souk in it has a connection to the neighbouring souk), the programme strengthens the marketplace to become an integral part of the city's souk.

There is an extreme lack of space within the camp, with most rooms shared by three people or more. There is also a lack of public space. The only spaces in which people could gather are the residual spaces around markets and between buildings. These Sahat (Piazzas) are scattered around the camp and include spaces created by a souk on the periphery of the camp, and spaces adjacent to institutional buildings.

Other breathing spaces are ‘dead spaces’ within the building blocks that are left unused or used for technical reasons since elevating them to the roofs is rather challenging. These could be transformed into more usable spaces since open space is so scarce and could serve the communities around them (diag. 04).
Diagram 05: Metal and wrought-iron workshop exploring in creating a motorcycle out of Ferris-wheel cabin and other elements in Burj El Barajneh camp ©

The principal strength and resources of the camp derive from trust, a strong social fabric and solidarity. However, physical structures do not always support coordination and necessary connections. For example, the commercial streets that are ample in and around the camp are strong in their immediate locations, yet on an urban level are disconnected. Disconnection and fragmentation becomes a bottleneck, preventing existing programmes from developing further, networking with other organisations and receiving positive impulses (diag. 05).

Diagram 06: Syrian Spread in burj el barajneh camp ©

With the influx of Syrian refugees, the camp population has more than doubled, placing huge strain on infrastructure. Not only socially, but also the rising structures piercing through the urban fabric are negatively affecting the area. The spread of the Syrian refugee residency is
found most notably on the peripheral areas. Most housing used by Syrians in the more interior areas of the camp has seemingly followed the area around a path leading to a Saha (Piazza).

Diagram 07: Using the city elements according the systemic tools of Burj El Barajneh Camp©

Diagram 08: Collective System strategy ©
The mechanism has created a piece of the city born out of the functional needs of everyday life and developed from elements that are part of images and memories. These memories are there, hidden in the narrow alleys, between the walls and tiny glints of soft lights that define their type of public passages and make way to a very active and economic market, that is only limitedly connected to the city of Beirut.

**The Burj el Barajneh Souk**

The Souk project aims to empower an existing network of talent and craftsmanship among the camp inhabitants, thereby creating a metaphorical bridge that connects and brings together segregated divisions on the political, social and urban level. Based on an ethnographic and spatial mapping of existing networks, flows and structures within the Burj El Barajneh Palestinian camp, the Souk project aims to use architectural methods to address the economic and social relationships within the enclosed city and its surrounding neighbourhoods (diag. 07). By working together with craftsmen and other residents on the Souk project, professionals from the camp are developing skills that are relevant to the context. A new kind of knowledge is created through collective design processes. At the same time, by connecting with academic environments in Lebanon and abroad, with different professionals, as well as with some of the other camps locally, the group can share experiences and draw on new techniques and ideas.

In hyperdense urban contexts like Burj El Barajneh, space does not function as a neutral or open empty expanse within which new structures can be freely imagined and constructed. Each microspace already serves and negotiates multiple functions, affecting social relationships, livelihoods, health and wellbeing. Even small modifications will therefore have multiple impacts on vital aspects of society.

The current Souk will be renovated into a space that connects the camp to research circles in Lebanon for collective design and socially oriented urban planning. This will mobilise and utilise the camp’s local talent while developing and expanding on the current knowledge and concepts needed to support a sustainable economy (diag. 08).

**Change as risk and opportunity**

Strategies for innovation and development regularly frame change as something positive. ‘Interventions’ are made, to achieve ‘improvements’. Typically, such initiatives start at policy levels, to be implemented and applied in different settings. Even when the interventions are based on needs assessments, or comprise a participatory element, key aspects of the processes and agenda-setting are driven by people who are not themselves part of the concerned communities. But in hyperdense urban settings such as Burj El Barajneh, any intervention is more likely to produce disruption than empowering transformation. There are several reasons for this. Even under the most favourable circumstances, any innovation is a risk, since the short- and long-term impacts are not entirely foreseeable. But poor communities do not have
margins to operate with. With residents living at or under subsistence levels, even minor losses can lead to the collapse of entire families, or trigger a breakdown in systems of dependence and interdependence. Fragile balances between groups are destabilised. The surroundings are no longer comprehensible, predictable and safe. Changing the place can be lived as place destruction, with loss of identity (cf. Dixon & Durrheim, 2000; Bevan, 2016), as well as loss of sense of coherence, resilience and agency. When the setting is hyperdense, two additional risks arise: firstly, every space is already multifunctional, enabling highly complex networks of social relationships, supporting vital activities, shaping physical flows or protective boundaries. Spaces are so tightly interlocked and enmeshed, that any act is likely to impact the camp as a system. There is no open space to ‘move into’, if anything is built, modified or demolished. Waste or disruptions cannot be easily evacuated or externalised. The camp thus functions like a living organism, where changes affect homeostasis and the integrity of vital functions.

The second risk is that since indoor and outdoor spaces have been collapsed into an ambiguous in- and outdoorness, boundaries between the private/intimate/personal and the collective/neighbourly/public are also at stake. Interventions cut right into the intimacy of residents’ lives, and there is no protective personal home-space available to cushion the shocks. A final risk is that the larger the scale of the intervention, the more likely it is to be accompanied by corruption. Involving large sums of money will typically increase the divide between the haves and the have-nots, further weakening the position of the weakest. This is why it is vital to fully understand implications of any change. Even more importantly, all changes need to be coordinated within the community. Processes have to be negotiated, but also controlled by the community, so that any necessary micro-adjustments or reversals can be made. Expertise needs to be developed from within the concerned community itself (cf. Lindhult, 2016).

Crafting the future for flourishing communities

Design as a profession has to a great extent been shaped by an industrial paradigm (cf. Skjerven, & Reitan, 2017, p. 20 ff). With respect to contexts such as Burj El Barajneh, however, there could be arguments for new forms of craftsmanship. Craftsmanship in this sense is not a question of reverting to earlier modes of production, but rather of exploring how to use contemporary economic systems and technologies in more empowering ways.

It is frequently maintained that industrial paradigm lowers costs, and thereby gives the poor access to commodities that they could not otherwise afford. But in the context of Burj El Barajneh, we observe needs that are not met, coupled with unsatisfactory employment conditions. Some inhabitants have multiple jobs, struggling to make ends meet, but no longer have the time or energy to take care of children or the elderly. Many inhabitants have emigrated, or aspire to do so, since their present living conditions appear hopeless. Yet other inhabitants are unemployed, and lose motivation and sense of self.
Hornborg (2016) has argued that technologies as well as the corresponding artefacts co-construct social relationships, power structures and economic paradigms. Within the industrial paradigm, the enormous investment required to establish competitive industries creates insurmountable thresholds, so the technologies and modes of production not only determine the flow of profits and accumulation of capital, but also the ability to do the work that needs to be done – or even work at all. Authors such as Miriam Glucksman (2014) have discussed how the division of labour can shift in various economic configurations, moving between paid and unpaid work. She also points the shift from making to buying, giving the example of food preparation. Revalorising craftsmanship would instead lower initial investments, and enable shifts from buying to making. In a context where gaining any income entails disproportionate sacrifice, such shifts become significant.

Industry is based on economies of scale, mass-production and technologies that place the locus of strategic control in the hands of the large commercial actors. Craftsmanship is instead characterised by adaptability, creativity and sensitivity to the specific characteristics of the client. This provides a better quality of life for the people benefitting from the craftsman or woman’s work, but also a sense of agency and accomplishment for the craftsman him- or herself. By placing the locus of strategic control in a relational space where dialogue is possible, within the community itself, a crafts-based mode of designing and producing can also empower the community as a whole. Importantly, it allows collective reflection and decision-making on the larger issues. While both consumers and sub-contractors in an industrial model are reduced to accepting or rejecting the commodities or services that they are offered, developing designing capacity within the community opens possibilities to coordinate actions, envisioning and putting into action ideas for better structures.

Finally, the industrial paradigm is geared to the production of goods, and people are drawn from the sphere of ‘reproduction’ – including caring and nurturing – to be placed at the disposal of the labour market. Even caring becomes part of the formal economy, and services are bought. Thus, paradoxically, services become ‘expensive’. People need to leave the camp to earn the money to pay for the work they no longer have time to do. Elderly people are left alone while their children emigrate. Meanwhile, other camp inhabitants are unemployed, and become dependent on charities or remittances for survival.

The area of research and as well as practice of systemic design has produced a wide array of powerful tools, such as gigamaps (cf. Sevaldson, 2015), that allow groups of people to collectively vision, solve complex issues, negotiate and reach meaningful agreements, reframe problems, and collaborate across professional or other boundaries. For the context of Burj El Barajneh, key aspects are that effective teams can be rapidly formed, that the complexity of issues and causal relationships can be taken into account, and that creativity is supported. To be able to search for more fulfilling and dignified life opportunities, an overview is needed of the intricate systemic relationships involved. Systemic design can here play a catalysing role.
References


