CONTESTING REALITY IN BEIRUT
Meriam Soltan

*Narratives fabricated to promote the legitimacy of the Beirut
Digital District mask a reality of hostile, exclusionary spatial
strategies. This contention between vision and lived reality
is explored through an understanding of the built environment
as a product of fictions actively working to reformulate life
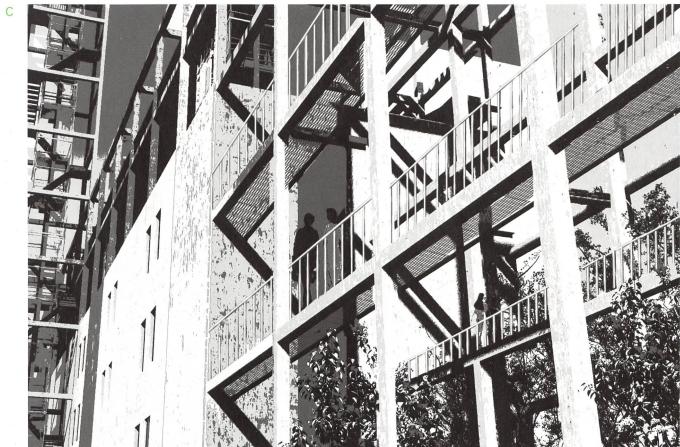across the city.*

A nationwide outcry against corruption in Lebanon sent thousands
to the streets to protest in October 2019. With the government's
failure to properly manage various environmental and economic
crises, the average citizen is challenged by an unforgiving political
climate that continues to manifest largely inhospitable living
conditions. The right to a fair wage, rent law reform, reliable water
and electricity distribution as well as reasonable loans policies
are among the numerous demands driving these protests. This
sudden defiance can be arguably attributed to a recognition
and rejection of the sectarian constructs that have constrained
political and economic activity in the country for decades.
A collective desire to challenge the status quo has encouraged
the conditions necessary for the contestation of the present reali
enforced by those in control.

Such contestation becomes relevant to design when it recognizes
the agency of dwellers as creators of the urban. Relationships
can be drawn between the people and the constructs meant to
govern them to highlight the real and lasting agency that con-
tinues to be exercised by locals negotiating life within the contexts
of inherently corrupt power structures. Aggressive corporate
and state-led planning and policy can arguably become the basis
for explorations tracing the tenacity of inhabitants in their everyday
navigations of the system.

The Beirut Digital District (BDD) and its forceful reconfiguration of
one of the city's oldest neighborhoods, Bachoura, is one such
development through which such instances of resiliency might be
traced. The aggressive nature of the development is justified
through narratives of technological innovation and heritage-based
nostalgia that work to frame Bachoura as a dilapidated, under-
performing urban center urgently in need of revival. Marketed as

A

B

C

A   Protestors passing by Bachoura on their way to
    Martyr's Square. Photography: Meriam Soltan, 2019
C   Proposal for rehabilitation of apartments along
    Tyane Street. Collage:Meriam Soltan, 2019

B   Sandwiched between two mid-rise towers,
    the Saint George Church on Tyane Street
    is dwarfed in both size and scale. Photography:
    Meriam Soltan, 2019

an extension of postwar reconstruction efforts and an answer to Beirut's ‹brain drain›, BDD projects a narrative of growth and inclusivity very different than the reality of social and economic disparity it perpetuates across the neighborhood. With entire blocks acquired, demolished, and consolidated into massive plots of land capable of hosting the entirety of BDD's proposed masterplan, the vernacular urban fabric of the neighborhood is challenged by the lucrative nature of a project completely alien to the working-class context within which it has situated itself. Parking lots, concrete blocks, and security infrastructure challenge a strong history of social interaction at street level by restricting pedestrian activity, while courtyards and public green space monitored by security personnel create an overwhelming sense of exclusivity both within and around the development.

The progressiveness and inclusivity promoted by BDD is thus arguably at odds with the reality of gentrification promoted by a largely exclusionary spatial strategy. This contradiction is made most clear across the six-meter wide divide that is Tyane Street. Acting as the border between these two communities, the street materializes mounting tensions by juxtaposing towering BDD construction with a low row of abandoned apartment blocks that now serve as the debilitated outermost edge of Bachoura. Tyane Street is an exceptionally concentrated manifestation of inequality and is telling of the extreme socio-economic disparity that has long since strained the nation. The new developments have inevitably caused the displacement of many working-class families due to skyrocketing rent, perpetuating the conditions necessary for any future acquisition of land by BDD. It is this very contention between vision and lived reality that emphasizes the necessity of understanding narrative as a legitimate means of analysis and design.

BDD has shown that fictions can actively shape the nature of the built environment and – through the social constructs they perpetuate – both engender and enforce tangible change. In recognizing the ability of narrative to facilitate spatial aggression, it thus becomes imperative to identify instances in which it can be employed in resistance. While protest can mobilize the masses against the state in defiance of the present circumstances, it can also be understood in the subtle resiliency exercised by those who have learned to live within and beyond the system. Therein lie the counter-narratives manifested by dwellers in defiance of injustice. Recognizing this agency can allow for reality to be reprogrammed in favor of conditions other to those that have long since been rationalized, formalized, and institutionalized by the state.

Exploring reality as a series of fictions – of fabricated constructs –
is thus key to understanding the people as creators – as agents
and makers of their own circumstances. By encouraging a reading
of reality – of the environment as it presently exists – not as
a series of absolutes but as actively constructed, fabricated, and
performed variables, the possibility for change is both suggested
and recognized.

Meriam Soltan, born 1995, has recently obtained her Bachelor of Architecture from The American University
of Beirut. She is interested in the intersections of language, design, and worldbuilding. She works to explore the
relevance of narrative to architecture, and how, as a tool, it is manifested in various contexts politically, culturally,
and otherwise. In doing so, she hopes to better understand how various lived realities are fabricated, and how the
parameters defining these stories might in turn be challenged.