Urban recovery at the mall: displacement and solace in Beirut's spaces of consumption

Naeff, J.A.; Al-Harithy, H.

16 Urban recovery at the mall

Displacement and solace in Beirut's spaces of consumption

Judith Naeff

This chapter begins and ends in the reconstructed souks of Beirut's Central District (hereafter, BCD). When 15 years of civil wars came to an end in 1990, this area of Beirut was severely damaged. Given its symbolic value as the cosmopolitan heart of an otherwise divided country, reconstruction of BCD was prioritized over other parts of the country and the private real estate company Solidere, a French acronym for the Lebanese Society for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut's Central District, was established to expropriate an area of 191 hectares for a decades-long mega-project, which has not yet been completed at the time of writing. From the very beginning, questions concerning expropriation, demolition, preservation, planning and design were subject to heated debates. Today, on the place where the traditional souks used to be, stands a well-designed fully pedestrian shopping mall, with shaded alleys and open plazas, punctuated by an abstract sculpture here and a fountain there (Figures 16.1 and 16.2). Excessively sanitized and highly securitized, the commercial floor space is largely occupied by international chains such as Gucci, Zara and Yves Saint Laurent as well as high-end cafés and restaurants. The residential floor space is largely vacant. When the apartments do have new tenants, they often do not live there year-round.

According to Saree Makdisi, we should see the souks as a synecdoche for the entire BCD project (1997, p. 686). Polished urbanism driven by profit resembles a shopping mall or entertainment park, more than a city, whether aimed at residential or commercial use, business or leisure. Following Makdisi, this chapter only loosely focuses on the shopping mall, zooming out to include other forms of sanitized consumerist urban spaces. The first part considers the role of displacement in the eerie nature of the sanitized mall in the heart of Beirut. The subsequent parts of the chapter explore forms of urban recovery that may develop within consumerist urban spaces like the Beirut Souks. Following a brief interlude on ethnographic studies of Middle Eastern malls, the chapter argues that in Rabee Jaber's *The Mehlis Report* and *Beyritus: Underground City* and in Hassan Daoud's *As She Once Was*, Beirut's spaces of consumption emerge as convivial sites offering solace in the face of loss, despite their implication in structures of displacement,

Figure 16.1 Beirut Souks, a pedestrian shopping mall

Figure 16.2 Beirut Souks, international chains

exclusion and exploitation. Building upon Walter Benjamin's ambivalent assessment of consumer capitalism, the chapter reads these works of fiction as attempts to recover the liberatory potential of human desire fostered in places wrought with inequality.

Beirut souks: A mall at the intersection of displacement and reconstruction

"Posh people occupy the restaurants and cafés; tourists stroll in the aseptic streets; the artisans of the old days have been dislodged; the regulars have lost their bearings; the memory places no longer exist" (Najjar, 2005, p. 458). This literary description of BCD ties together three interrelated forms of displacement: The expulsion of old tenants, the exclusive clientele and the erasure of memory places; in other words, actual displacement, socio-economic exclusion and cultural uprooting. Most residents and shop owners in BCD were displaced in the first two years of the civil war (1975–1976) and others in the subsequent years of violence, seeing their properties reduced to ruins. In later phases of the war, displaced families from other areas of the country moved into the damaged buildings. The first phase of Solidere's comprehensive reconstruction project involved the expropriation of all properties in the area and the eviction and relocation of approximately 30.000 squatters (e.g. Mango, 2003). Owners received shares in the company in return. This phase was a continuation, moreover, of previous rounds of demolition that took place illegally whenever there was a lull in the civil war violence (e.g. Verdeil, 2001). The experience of actual displacement was thus violently inscribed into the BCD reconstruction project, not only as its prehistory – the civil war destruction – but also in its history – the eviction, expropriation and demolition.

The second form of displacement at stake is socio-economic exclusion. Doris Summer explains that, in line with the neoliberalization of urban planning elsewhere, this exclusion concerns both the lack of citizen participation in the planning process and implementation, and the design of exclusive landscapes (2006, p. 8). Her fieldwork in Beirut and Amman shows that planners deliberately seek to exclude the lower strata of the population by designing the environment in such a way that both ambiance and pricing discourage anyone but the most wealthy residents and visitors to enter. In Sirine Fattouh's touching short video *Temps Morts*, a former bookstore owner returns to BCD complaining, "this is not a city center anymore. There are only cafés. In a city center there should be different shops, here a cobbler, there a… what's it called… anyway, a diversity of shops" (2005, min. 3:16–3:39). Likewise, in Yasmine Arif's ethnographic fieldwork, an old coffin maker responds to the architectural model of the new BCD that "one should be reasonable – they won't keep this kind of business here" (2002, p. 122). These shop owners have not only been displaced, but the reconstructed BCD also effectively casts them as outsiders along lines of age and lifestyle, as well as social class.

The third element of displacement is the loss of memory places and the concomitant sense of disorientation. I would like to argue for an understanding of displacement as a condition that emerges not only when people are forcibly removed from their place of belonging, but also when their places of belonging – whether residential, work or leisure – have transformed beyond recognition. While in some fields, such as in humanitarian aid provision, a more narrow definition of displacement might be desirable, I find it helpful to understand a shared sense of spatial disorientation and alienation caused by urban renewal in terms of displacement as well. The loss of memory places in BCD has of course to do with the large-scale demolition of buildings, many of which could have been restored (Fawaz and Ghandour, 2010). Many critics have understood this as part of what has been termed "collective amnesia," that is, as a deliberate attempt by the state to erase memories of a divisive past (e.g. El-Khoury, 1998; Tabet, 2001).

But it is not only the destruction and demolition of what was before, but also the type of urban design that came in its place, that is seen as profoundly unhomely. Described as "a strange impression to stroll in a décor" (Tabet, 2001, p. 56), "a 'mirage' of a new city" (Salam, 1998, p. 132), "a sense of Disney" (Cooke, 2002, p. 409) and "too artificial, like a theatre set" (Najjar, 2005, p. 458), the district turns city dwellers into consumers of a spectacle. Various critics argue that the district amounts to "nothing more than a postmodern pastiche" (Makdisi, 1997, p. 685), its cultural heritage reduced to "kitsch and sleazy consumerism" (Ragab, 2011, p. 111). Drawing upon thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson, these scholars draw attention to the ways in which postmodern urbanism commoditizes all references to history or cultural identity (Jameson, 1997; Baudrillard, 1994). How does this cultural critique of the postmodern shopping mall relate to displacement?

At the heart of this cultural critique is the Marxist notion of alienation, a sense of estrangement resulting from commodity fetishism. In commodity fetishism, the production process is obscured in favor of a mysterious intrinsic or transcendent value of the object. Commodity fetishism leads to a feeling of estrangement from the world by both laborers and consumers (e.g. Musto, 2010; Billig, 1999). Billig argues that the commodity fetishism of late capitalism is grounded in the habitual forgetting or repression of the exploitative conditions that produce our consumerist dream worlds (1999). If place is understood as a location firmly embedded in a web of social relations and historical roots, the habitual repression of those relations implies a loss of place.

Marc Augé developed his term "non-place" to refer to very specific locations of late capitalism: The airport, the hotel chain and the shopping mall. Characterized by transitoriness, visitors are temporarily liberated from social and identarian relations such as class, tribe and family (Augé, 1995 [1992], pp. 101–104). The design is deliberately generic and the layout stimulates movement and consumption. As argued above, profit-driven and

excessively polished urbanism could be seen as the expansion of the non-place specified by Augé to include parts of the city that offer residential, office and leisure facilities. Neoliberal urban planning thus inspires a sense of loss and disorientation that resembles displacement by repressing historical continuities and social relations, thus turning place into non-place. Processes such as privatization, commoditization and museumification, with their strategies of sanitization, polishing, atmospheric lighting, as well as securitization and high-end commerce, recast familiar surroundings as artificial. It invites temporary consumption, not durable dwelling. A sense of displacement is therefore fundamentally part of any shopping mall experience. Compared to suburban American malls, this process is imbued with heightened political, symbolic and emotional significance when entangled with other forms of often-violent displacement, such as in Beirut.

In late capitalist societies, this alienation is doubled by increased mediatization. Not the object itself, but the appearance of the object is fetishized. Walter Benjamin studied the nineteenth-century arcades as the moment where objects were no longer only fetishized as commodities-in-the-market, but also as commodities-on-display (Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 81). The arcades preceded the department store, which in turn formed the precursor to the shopping mall. If Benjamin described the spectacle of the nineteenth-century Paris as a phantasmagoria, a magic lantern show of optical illusions, Baudrillard describes the late-twentieth century as a world of images that no longer seem to refer to any reality outside of representation (e.g. Baudrillard, 1994). This, then, is the sense of Disney that the reconstructed BCD evokes (see Ragab, 2011, for a Baudrillardian analysis of BCD).

I understand urban recovery as the reemergence of urban liveliness after destruction; that is, the fostering of the peculiar sociality of cities, characterized by a multiplicity of sensual stimuli and fleeting encounters with strangers. How can a reconstruction project that expulses, excludes and alienates its residents offer the urban recovery so desperately needed by a city after the losses suffered from war violence? While urban liveliness is nurtured by commerce – the market, the café and the street vendor – it surely cannot be reduced to economic growth. Indeed, critics have argued that, instead of offering a site of recovery, the brutality of Solidere's reconstruction project forms a continuation of war violence (El-Khoury, 1998, pp. 183–184; Westmoreland 2008, pp. 241–242). In contrast, the following will argue that a space such as the Beirut souks, even if wrought by displacement, might accommodate and foster forms of urban life to which urban recovery aspires.

Shopping malls in the Middle East

The spread of shopping malls, or shopping-mall-like urban planning and design, is a quintessential manifestation of late-twentieth-century globalization. El-Sheshtawy argues that we should not look at globalization as

solely externally imposed, but as produced by, and firmly embedded in, local conditions (2004, p. 18). We have seen that the souks in BCD may be generic in its unhomely planning and design, but also that this uprootedness is given unique meaning in its historical context of frontline devastation, its symbolical value as a potential site for reconciliation, and its political context of general amnesty and collective amnesia. However, this unique context may also have led to certain blind spots. In this section, I will review a number of studies on shopping malls in the wider Middle Eastern region, to present a more ambiguous approach to shopping malls than the amnesiac hyperreal non-places presented in the previous section.

Mona Abaza, in her research of Cairene shopping malls signals displacement at the level of socio-economic exclusion similar to that experienced in BCD: "With [modernization], a *baladi* way of life and culture is quickly erased to cater to the new Cairene yuppies" (2009, p. 100). But, she proceeds to identify a paradox. While security guards are expressly instructed to ward off lower-class visitors and to keep out the "riffraff" from the streets, visitors repeatedly describe the mall as an inclusive space of social mixing (2009, p. 213). If some malls have acquired a bad reputation as a place where young men pick up loose girls, more upscale malls are seen as spaces that allow modern and independent ways of being for youth and women in particular (Abaza, 2001). The mall is protected from the hot humidity, dusty traffic, and, to some extent, crime and harassment, but it is less restrictive than a private club for which visitors need to pay a membership fee. A "disguise" is desired from visitors of a popular background so as to partake in the mall's upper-middle class fantasy space and employees "masquerade," for example, by taking off their Islamic attire, before starting their work (2001, p. 118). Nevertheless, they express appreciation for the cleanliness and class of the shopping mall even though salaries are often lower than those in shops on the street (2009, p. 213).

Similarly, scholars have pointed out how in Iran and Saudi Arabia, where social conduct in public space is strictly policed, the shopping mall has an ambiguous function. On the one hand, the mall's hyper-surveillance has a triple function: Responding to crime, maximizing profit and protecting morality. In their study of camera surveillance in a mall in Riyadh, Alhadar and McCahill narrate how elderly women sitting on the floor were asked by security to take seat on chairs (2011, p. 322) fully in line with the erasure of *baladi* culture in Cairo described by Abaza. Most of those targeted by CCTV operators are young male singles who are suspected of flirting. In both Iran and Saudi Arabia, private security companies work together with morality police. Yet, despite this intense surveillance, young people use a variety of strategies to enter the mall and make contact with singles of the opposite sex, from eye contact to exchanging phone numbers. Why would they choose the mall for this kind of social mixing?

As seen in the Cairene malls observed by Abaza, the mall offers a protected atmosphere that provides a measure of both convenience and respectability

that the hot and crowded streets of these Gulf cities do not. In addition, the particular layout of the mall is designed to stimulate constant movement as well as to entice shoppers to gaze at the commodities on display. Shahram Khosravi, in his study of the Gholestan mall in Tehran reminisces, "by being constantly on the move through corridors, floors, shops, stairs, we could not be stopped and separated from the opposite sex" (2008, p. 91). The fleeting placelessness of the shopping mall precisely offers the liberation from the restraints on social conduct that the Iranian youth seeks. Pedram Dibazar moreover observes in relation to Iranian shopping malls that the mall's "blurring of the distinction between the spaces for movement (corridors), purchase (shops) and display (window shops) [results in] the conflation between the subject positions of the stroller, the buyer and the commodity itself" (Dibazar, 2020, p. 126). Unlike the traditional shopping street with a more strict distinction between retail space and public space, the mall thus allows for a "scopic regime," i.e., the social configuration of modes of looking and being looked at, of which single young people in Iran can take advantage. While looking at objects on display, they can also look at each other and display themselves.

Despite various forms of exclusion and segregation, malls in the region are understood to have a democratic potential. Erkip suggests, for example, that malls in Turkey replicate social segregation according to the quality and pricing of the goods on offer, but nevertheless, provide "a more heterogeneous and democratic consumption site" by collecting these differences under one roof (Erkip, 2003, p. 1078). And similar to the way in which youth uses the mall to defy the rigid social norms of post-revolutionary Iran and Wahhabi Saudi Arabia, informal life unfolding in the cracks of the urban spectacle that is contemporary Dubai resists the highly commercial script prescribed by the urban lay-out (El-Sheshtawy, 2008).

What these studies from the region show us is that the critique of shopping malls as developed in Anglo-Saxon cultural theory and French philosophy fails to address the ambiguities of social life in the Middle Eastern mall. Far from the alienated consumer-zombie imagined by postmodern pessimists, those frequenting malls in different parts of the region praise it as a pleasurable site offering liberation and conviviality. Khosravi, therefore, dismisses the emphasis on false consciousness by critics following Jameson and Baudrillard. Instead, he follows Walter Benjamin's more ambivalent assessment of the Parisian arcades as simultaneously a capitalist dreamspace and a potential site for materializing collective energy (Khosravi, 2008, p. 92). While it has been suggested that Benjamin's notion of phantasmagoria is synonymous with commodity fetishism (Tiedemann, 1999, p. 938), it is also clear that Benjamin is not only interested in the more rigid Marxist endeavor of lifting the veil of false consciousness in order to show material objectivity. Inspired by the surrealists' faith in the liberatory potential of human desire, Benjamin is also interested in the progressive potentialities that the enchantment

of "the new" might harbor despite its inevitable cooptation by capital (e.g. Tiedemann, 1999, pp. 939–940; Buck-Morss, 1989, e.g. pp. 115–120, 143–145).

Beirut is a very different place than Tehran, Cairo, Riyadh, Dubai or Ankara, but the ambivalence highlighted in the studies of these places is productive in the Lebanese context too. Such an ambivalence acknowledges that displacement does not mean erasure and that social life can thrive despite conditions of exclusion and exploitation. The following sections analyze literary representations of consumer spaces in post-civil war Beirut. They demonstrate an ambivalent approach similar to the one emerging from these ethnographic studies from the region, but tailored to the specific context of Beirut, as introduced in the first section of this chapter. Far from the hyperreal non-place lamented by critics such as Saree Makdisi and Tarek Ragab, the malls and other spaces of consumption in these novels are ordinary urban spaces, in which social life offers solace, despite being marked by displacement. The chapter is interested in the potential of these spaces' phantasmagoric enchantment to offer pleasure and foster sociality without disguising its means of production.

Rabee Jaber: The solace of spaces of consumption

With a pace of one novel each year, Rabee Jaber (b. 1972) is possibly the most prolific writer of Lebanon. Yet, apart from his prize-winning *Amrika*, his work remains largely unknown abroad. After growing up in Mount Lebanon, Jaber moved to Beirut in 1989 to pursue higher education, soon after which the war ended and the city suddenly transformed as if "in an enchanted world" (Sierra, 2017, citing al-Maqarrī, 2010). Various critics have drawn attention to the intersection of urban space and memory in his work (e.g. Aghacy, 2015; Seigneurie, 2011). For someone like Dalia Mostafa, Jaber's work is typical for post-civil war literature, whose "estranged protagonists [… suffering] from the distortion of identity and the dissociation of memory become part of the story of a city ravaged by war and contradictions" (2009, p. 234). Zeina Halabi, in contrast, draws attention to "the ways in which Jaber appropriates the narrative strategies and themes of his precursors in order to subvert them" (2018, p. 75). According to her, Mostafa misreads Jaber's novel *Ralf Rizqallah* as an allegory for the grand narrative of trauma and the nation. The novel rather points to the ways in which people may simply suffer from clinical depression amidst and against the grand strides of history. Such a gesture may subvert the towering figure of the Arab intellectual, as is Halabi's main argument, but it does not deny how such personal struggles may intersect with those of the city or country. If his precursors, such as Elias Khoury, lamented the impact of violence in grand impressions of catastrophic erasure, Jaber narrates how everyday life continues to unfold in a city scarred by war, and how grief and anxiety may punctuate an otherwise mundane existence in such a city.

The personal psychology of his characters resonates with, and responds to, an environment charged with past and imminent violence, without being fully defined by it, and without merely symbolizing it. This is also Zeina Tarraf's conclusion in her thoughtful reading of Jaber's *The Mehlis Report* when she argues that "the tense political moment weaves its way into the patterns of the ordinary, becoming absorbed by the perpetuation of the everyday" (2015, p. 205). It is on the level of the mundane that we begin to see the contours of urban recovery too, as I will attempt to show here.

The Mehlis Report follows protagonist Saman Yarid in the aftermath of the 2005 bombings. The title refers to a special UN investigation into the assassination of Rafiq Hariri. Restless, moody, tense and distracted, Saman seeks release in watching television and drinking at bars – while his disappeared sister Josephine roams a parallel realm of the dead situated within Beirut's geography. At the end of the novel, Saman dies of a heart attack before the Mehlis report has come out. As I argued elsewhere, the novel is therefore about life in a limbo: For Lebanon in the wake of the attacks; for Saman who lacks purpose and meaning in life; for his dead sister who has left the living but is unable to join the dead (Naeff, 2018, p. 118). "In a novel where those who leave are forgotten by a city endlessly changing and relentlessly transforming, the desire to stay attached to this place becomes valuable in and of itself," writes Ghenwa Hayek (2016, p. 597). Yet, Saman's relation with urban renewal is ambiguous. Saman is an architect and in the wake of the 2005 assassinations, he thinks that "these rising buildings are a good omen" (Jaber, 2013, p. 114). The narrator and the novel are thus marked by an ambiguity between the desire for attachment and the confidence in urban change.

This ambiguity is captured beautifully in the following description of a shopping mall in Achrafieh (Figures 16.3 and 16.4).

> He'd turned onto the street in front of the entrances to the ABC Mall. The city was buzzing that night. Tomorrow was Saturday: a holiday. The people had come out into the streets. A group of women had appeared. They were young, and were laughing and leaning on one another. They'd gone inside the mall and hovered around the fountain. On the other side of the street, men were lined up at the taxi stand. They were eating warm sandwiches from Sheikh Shawarma and from Falafel Fareeha. The two restaurants were next to each other, and the line of men stretched between them. Juice was dripping from the sandwiches onto the edge of the sidewalk, among the wheels of parked cars and bikes. The streetlights shone on their hands and mouths, and were reflected in their eyes. As they ate, the sandwich wrappers fell to the ground. They stared at the girls and women coming and going from ABC. The mall was buzzing too. The restaurants were packed, as were the cafés – even those underground. At first, people were angry about the mall being built here, here in the heart of Achrafieh. People were

Figure 16.3 ABC mall, Achrafieh, rooftop

angry because the developers had bought the sports club that used to be here and tore it down to build this mall. Ever since he was in college, since before he was in college, Saman had gone to the Sons of Neptune Club on a daily basis. When he heard ABC had bought the place and that it would be torn down, he'd felt a lump in his throat. But here the mall was: electric, teeming with people, its gorgeous white marble standing against the night. And that beautiful moon filling all the bodies with energy. The city was hopping, as if it hadn't been rocked by

Figure 16.4 ABC Mall, Achrafieh, interior

> explosions just a few weeks earlier. As if there weren't a threat of it being completely upended at any hour.
>
> (Jaber, 2013, pp. 34–35)[1]

The description shares with Alexandre Najjar's description at the opening of this chapter a sense of displacement: The people were angry and Saman mourned the loss of his club. Yet, the passage celebrates the liveliness of the consumerist sociality in the present, even if it is acutely aware of the

inequalities of such a sociality. Significantly, the men at the shawarma restaurants are both separated from the ABC mall and implicated in its scene. The men are not only physically removed from the mall, but seem to belong to a lower class than the women who enter the mall. They are eating cheap food standing on the pavement at a taxi stand. At the same time, they are also implicated in the scene, as spectators looking at the girls and women walking to and fro, but also as part of the spectacle, because the author takes time to describe the men, the sandwiches, the dripping sauce and the positioning of the two restaurants. In Saman's experience of the city, and by extension the reader's, the men on the sidewalk are part and parcel of what makes the city vibrant and electric. Despite structural inequality running right through this spectacle, its extraordinary energy is expressly contrasted to feelings of loss and anxiety, to the "lump in the throat" when Saman's old club was demolished, and to the assassinations that charge the entire novel with a sense of numbed grief and imminent doom. The shopping mall in this section, therefore, offers solace in an imperfect world. The section encourages us to embrace life that flourishes within structures of inequality and violence.

Something similar can be seen in *Beyritus: Underground City*. The main narrator is a security guard, Butros, appointed by Solidere to safeguard a notorious civil war ruin in BCD. When chasing an intruder on a rainy night, he falls into a pit and wakes up in an underground city populated by pale-skinned people who once fled from the city aboveground. He spends a year with a host family in this parallel world, visited by memories of his life above, while he allows his body to recover sufficiently to manage the passage back to the other Beirut. Samira Aghacy reads the parallel city as an "oneiric place, an amalgamation of necropolis and pastoral, an antiquated and clandestine version of the upper city" (2015, p. 165). The function of this amalgamation is neither utopian nor dystopian. Like Beirut, Beyritus knows hospitality and distrust, care and neglect, grief for lost ones and fear for collapse. The underground city rather functions as Beirut's "shadowy double" (Aghacy 2015, p. 171). Elsewhere, I have read Butros's journey as the classical trope of the catabasis, with the underground space not so much a netherworld of the dead, as a combination of shelter and subconscious (Naeff, 2018, p. 209). Like his classical precursors, the hero descends to meet lost others, both in the memories that consistently haunt him, and in the climax when he sees his cousin Ibrahim, whom he thought dead, suffering among a group of blind beggars. But, as Ken Seigneurie astutely observes, unlike the classical catabasis, Butros does not speak to this lost loved one (2011, pp. 92–93). Instead, despite his sympathy, he remains silent and turns away, eager to return to his old world aboveground. His encounter with the dead is an encounter with the limits to his capacity to respond to the needs of others and an unambiguous embrace of his own life.

This chapter focuses on a specific theme of this journey: The ostentation, expenditure and noise of the world above in contradistinction to the

silence, austerity and sustainability of the underground society. The novel opens with the frame narrative in which the first-person narrator, who, like the author, goes by the name Rabee, is having dinner on a roof top terrace above the Virgin store in BCD. The scene is described as plentiful. The city lights shimmer; the terrace is humming with languages from all over the world; odors of food, perfume, bodies and the salty sea mingle. Rabee and his friends eat grilled meat and pizza. They drink cold white wine and discuss how Beirut thrives from the many tourists from the Gulf that have flocked to the city for Summer (Jaber, 2006, pp. 9–10). It is in this setting that a strange-looking, thin man approaches and introduces himself as Butros. The guard wishes to share his story with the author, because he knows his novels, which revolve around real people and events (p. 15). With this opening, the author firmly positions himself within Solidere's district, enjoying the view, the food and the international audience. In contrast, Butros occupies a more ambiguous position. Employed by Solidere, he takes his duty to secure private property seriously. At the same time, he feels excluded when passing through the splendid nightlife of Rue Monot (Jaber, 2006, pp. 42–43) or when peering through the windows of an expensive restaurant (p. 72). Yet, as Seigneurie points out, during his time underground, Butros sheds his stupor and is reinterpellated as a desiring subject, which shifts his relation to urban spaces of consumption (2011, pp. 88–95). The following passage is exemplary for his transformation:

> That night I heard voices in Beirut, our city. Beirut above. I heard song and music (it was not foreign music. It was Arabic music. I am not sure which song, but it was a modern song. Not one of the old classics, not Umm Kalthoum, whom I love. Not Umm Kalthoum or Abdel Wahab or any of those. One of those common new songs which rise to stardom for two months, and the whole city pulsates with it, and after that we do not listen to it anymore. One of those songs I detested, with lyrics with no meaning – or with a meaning that was repeated endlessly until it no longer referred to anything but its own words, meaningless words, without spirit, senseless, with no value. It was a modern song, with music that did not resemble music, blending instruments and voices and I don't know what and I used to hate it, but then – while I was under the heavy, silent, dark earth – I thought it was the most beautiful song I had heard in my life.)
>
> (Jaber, 2006, pp. 68–69)

Like in the passage from *The Mehlis Report* on the ABC mall cited above, Jaber takes his time to describe the scene and uses this time to demonstrate an acute awareness of capitalist exploitation. If the mall is described in terms of class segregation, the song is described in terms of late capitalist acceleration. For Butros, as for cultural critics, such profit maximization of

inflated stardom comes at the cost of meaning, value and durability. And yet, this passage celebrates the human desire for temporary pleasure.

When Butros emerges to the world above, leaving the people in Beyritus to their suffering, the first thing he sees is the terrace of the seaside restaurant Dbibu.

> This time it didn't bother me that they were drinking late in the night and bothering sleeping neighbors. This time I did not detest the noise. No. This time, I wanted to go up and sit together with them, drink arak and eat hummus and fattouche, bread and fried potatoes, with labneh and cheese and tomatoes.
>
> (Jaber, 2006, p. 238).

The closing paragraph thus effectively mirrors the opening of the novel. Both scenes describe the animated laughter, bright city lights and good food with gusto. They stand in sharp contrast to the silent and dark underground city whose inhabitants eat the same dreary fish every day. "It is when he experiences the alterity, the premodern and archaic, that the full significance of Beirut's brand of modernity becomes apparent and makes him risk his life to be part of it," observes Aghacy (2015, p. 172). The lure of Beirut's pleasure industry does therefore not stem from false consciousness, as Marxist critics would have it. On the contrary, it is only after Butros reflects upon his own experience with displacement, loss and social exclusion, and after his encounter with the suffering of others, that he can truly appreciate the phantasmagoria of Beirut's nightlife.

Hassan Daoud: De-fetishizing the urban spectacle

Unlike the younger Rabee Jaber, Hassan Daoud (b. 1950) belongs to the "war generation." This is a generation of authors that started writing during the Lebanese civil war. They often play a role as public intellectual, combining the production of fiction with non-fiction and journalism, and their work still dominates the literary scene (e.g. Lang, 2016). Daoud's Shiite working class background and leftist convictions can be detected in his keen awareness for class and sectarian dynamics. Inspired by the French nouveau roman, his novels are much more sec in style and uneventful in plot than Rabee Jaber's. The authors, however, do share their close attention to the rhythms of everyday life, and its sedimentation in urban space, as the site in which we can read the layered and ambiguous inscriptions of historical change.

The novella *As She Once Was* was published in 2013 in a special issue of the magazine *Portal 9*. The magazine presented itself as an "Arabic-English journal of stories and critical writing about urbanism and the city." It celebrated critical autonomy and creativity, but was also fully funded by Solidere, which assured editorial independence. The journal

ran for several years with two thematic issues each year, but is out of print at the time of writing. The third issue of *Portal 9* was an experimental format: A carton case filled with separately bound contemporary short Russian and Arabic fiction, published in Arabic and English translation. Hassan Daoud's novella was especially commissioned for this edition of the magazine.

The context of the novella's publication is reflected in its narrative, which revolves around a first-person narrator, Qassem, who has recently taken on a job at a cutting-edge magazine, the office of which is situated in BCD. Nearing 60, the narrator feels out of place, both in the magazine's editorial office and in the neighborhood. In Qassem's view, the magazine consistently wastes time and money. The office is unnecessarily completely refurbished; designers take months to produce what his old colleague at the newspaper could do in a day; endless meetings circle around concepts without arriving at any concrete ideas or decisions. The chief editor, Talal, informs Qassem over Skype that the articles he has produced "are not what we are looking for" (Daoud, 2013, p. 90). In the district, too, he feels estranged from his surroundings.

> During my morning journey, passing through the scores of shops whose windows turn as I turn, I don't find myself looking at the clothes they display but at my own image, reflected in the glass. As if I am following my own shadow, step by step, observing how it walks, how my thighs move in that walking motion, wondering whether I appear like a transgressor to the hip pants designed for a generation no longer satisfied with the pants I always used to wear.
>
> (Daoud, 2013, p. 32)

The clean windows do not invite in, but, instead, reflect back Qassem's appearance, out of tune with the style and fashion of the surroundings, like the coffin maker from Yasmine Arif's ethnography.

The contrast between the narrator and his surroundings is presented as a clash between old and new. Qassem obsessively goes over the memories of his childhood love, Dalal. She emigrated before they even held hands and he has lost touch of her ever since. He has no physical reminder of her except for the abandoned ruin of her apartment building, which has miraculously survived the demolition and reconstruction of the surrounding blocks (Daoud, 2013, p. 152). He desperately calls back the minute details of their last encounters on a daily basis, which inhibits him from moving forward with his life and from committing to a new relationship. His clinging to an idealized past is mirrored by Talal's obsession in searching "the glow of the new, but without knowing what it was or what it looked like. Only the glow, or what he felt to be a glow" (Daoud, 2013, p. 108). Again, this reflects the district as a whole. "Everything is new here," observes the narrator about the souks (p. 18).

Despite the great gap the narrator experiences, both sides of the equation share utter stagnation. Qassem's memories of Dalal remain unchanged and he postpones any initiative to search for her. The magazine is stuck in a delusional pursuit of innovation, endlessly postponing deadlines. In the *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin writes that the new "is the quintessence of that false consciousness whose indefatigable agent is fashion. This semblance of the new is reflected, like one mirror in another, in the semblance of the ever recurrent" (Benjamin, 1999 [1927–40], p. 11). For Benjamin, the myth of progress – here represented by the editor and BCD – and the myth of the archaic – here represented by Qassem's desperate idealization of his childhood love – are the complementary antinomies from which "the dialectical conception of historical time needs to be developed" (Benjamin, 1982, vol. V, p. 178, D10a, 5; as cited in Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 108). If Qassem feels alienated, it is not only because of the hall of mirrors that is BCD's promise of the new, but also because of his own clinging to a mythical past of innocent love.

Yet, as much as Qassem may feel alienated, he is not tricked by BCD's dream image. Early in the novella, we read that "[BCD's] newness is a consistent effort, for the employees never stop wiping dust and polishing glass and oiling the metal of the escalators and hoisting up large billboards displaying provocative women dressed in lingerie or skintight pants" (Daoud, 2013, p. 18). Later, after repeating the theme of the glass façades as a hall of mirrors, he mentions that "workers are cleaning them as I walk past or have just finished cleaning them" (p. 40) (Figures 16.5 and 16.6). In truly Marxist fashion, the new is thus presented as a product of continual labor against inevitable decay. This de-fetishization of the phantasmagoria of the Beirut Souks precipitates the novella's central turning point, where the narrator finds his way out of stagnation (see also Naeff, 2018, pp. 156–157).

On his daily way to work, Qassem passes by three immigrant women sitting and chatting on a bench in the Beirut Souks. He assumes they are waiting for the shop where they are employed to open up. Qassem is fascinated by the confidence with which they compose themselves. "They even control their laxity, the way they free their feet from their slippers, swinging them from their toes, at once both shod and barefoot" (Daoud, 2013, p. 19). He admires their sense of style, which "differentiated them from the other girls who made the same journey," thus allowing them to work in this fancy district (p. 31). Most importantly, he loves "their indifference to that [the souks] which I still feel myself a mere addition to" (p. 32).

One day, Qassem decides to buy them croissants. The handing over of the box proceeds clumsily and he is so embarrassed that he tries to avoid them for the next few weeks. But when he finally does see them, one of them comes over and invites him to join them, taking his hand in hers and asking "where have you been?" (pp. 137–138). It is the start of an unlikely friendship. He discovers that the women are not working for a shop, but clean the district in the early mornings, and again after their long break on the bench. They are thus fundamentally part of the production of the district.

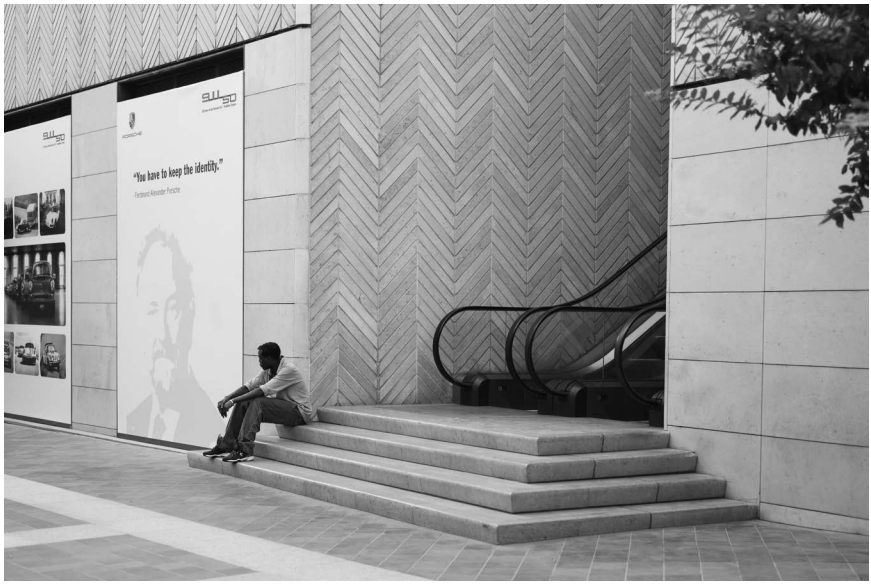

Figure 16.5 Sebastian Dahl, From the series Downtown Beirut

Figure 16.6 Sebastian Dahl. From the series Downtown Beirut

Qassem also realizes that their striking fashion is therefore not in the service of some shop owner to increase the sale of her products, but entirely of their own making (p. 164). This reflects Benjamin's ambivalent "metaphysics of fashion." If the editor's pursuit of the new is nothing but "the ritual by which fetish commodity wished to be worshipped" (Benjamin, 1982, vol. V, p. 51 [1935 exposé]; as cited by Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 98), then the fashion of these three women is conceived affirmatively as "irreverent toward tradition, celebratory of youth rather than social class, and thus emblematic of social change" (Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 98).

Confronted by the agency with which these women shape their own lives despite being part of the most vulnerable demographic of Lebanon, Qassem's disposition changes. He starts to like the district. He now takes initiative to visit one of the fancy cafés, to wander the alleyways, to enter the shops and look at the products on display without buying them (Daoud, 2013, pp. 160–163). His alienation has made place for a sense of positive anticipation, because he now knows "that it was possible to make the acquaintance of people I hadn't known before. And that there was the possibility of conversing further" (p. 163). Walter Benjamin predicted that dialectical time would emerge from the antinomy between the obsession with novelty and the eternal recurrent. For Daoud, such radical social change happens in the intimate details of everyday life. Qassem's transformation emerges from his confidence that it is still possible to forge meaningful social relations outside the workings of capital even if situated right in the middle of the most spectacular phantasmagoria of Beirut.

Conclusion

The three works of fiction discussed in this chapter show an acute awareness of the structures of displacement and social exclusion implied by consumerist urban spaces. Examples are the social segregation at the ABC mall, Butros's peering through the window of an expensive restaurant, and Qassem's feeling out of place. The novels also express the profound sense of loss that haunts these unhomely spaces in the context of post-civil war Beirut. Saman's city is in shock after the 2005 assassinations and the dead linger invisibly on the other side of the river. The underground city reminds Butros of the violence of his past and the people he has lost. Qassem keeps visiting the abandoned ruins of Dalal's old apartment. Yet, despite all of this, none of the novels rejects these spaces of consumption as the blank slates of forced amnesia lamented by many Lebanese intellectuals in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Rather, and more in line with Walter Benjamin's ambivalent approach to the phantasmagoria of consumer capitalism, they seek to recover the potential of human desire and social liveliness that are fostered in shopping malls and shopping mall like urbanism.

One way in which this ambivalence takes form is by denying the characters an outside position. The architect Saman, the security guard Butros

and the immigrant cleaning ladies in *As She Once Was* are all directly implied in the production of consumerist urbanism in the post-civil war redevelopment of Beirut. Precisely because of this implication, they have access to these urban spaces that supposedly critical outsiders have not. On the one hand, these characters show the labor invested in the production of spaces of consumption and thus de-fetishize the urban spectacle in a Marxist sense. On the other hand, they refuse easy distinctions between good and bad, or inside and outside in such a complex configuration as urban renewal. Most importantly, they show how life may thrive despite the loss caused by displacement. From the dripping sandwiches in *The Mehlis Report* to the fashionable haircuts of the cleaning ladies in *As She Once Was,* the narrators in these stories derive both solace and hope from the liveliness of these spaces.

We have seen how visitors and employees of shopping malls in the wider Middle Eastern region forge new ways of being that they feel unable to develop on these cities' public streets. If Beirut's climate is more kind than Dubai's, and its social spaces more liberal than Iran's, these three novels show that its spaces of consumption also have something to offer. The sight of fellow citizens of different social strata embracing life offers comfort in a postwar context of shared – if unequal – loss. This then, may offer a starting point for imagining urban recovery. In the words of Saman Yarid:

> Empty cars flock there from the four corners of Beirut and leave filled to the brim with food, more evidence that the Civil War has ended, fifteen years of peace seem inconclusive, but the sight of Monoprix's kitchen and all the orders coming in during Ramadan, that's decisive proof.
>
> (Jaber, 2013 [2005], p. 92)

Note

1. THE MEHLIS REPORT, copyright ©2005 by Rabee Jaber. Translation copyright 2013 by Kareem James Abu-Zeid. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

References

Abaza, M. (2001). Shopping Malls, Consumer Culture and the Reshaping of Public Space in Egypt. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *18*(5), 97–122.

Abaza, M. (2009). Egyptianizing the American Dream: Nasr City's Shopping Malls, Public Order, and the Privatized Military, in *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East*, edited by D. Singerman and P. Amar. Cairo: Cairo University Press, 193–220.

Aghacy, S. (2015). *Writing Beirut: Mappings of the City in the Modern Arabic Novel*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Alhadar, I. and McCahill, M. (2011). The Use of Surveillance Cameras in a Riyadh Shopping Mall: Protecting Profits or Protecting Morality? *Theoretical Criminology*, *15*(3), 315–330.

al-Maqarrī, Alī. (February 24, 2010) "Rabī' Jābir: Ikhtalaqtu qissa min ajl ta'shīra ila Amrīka [I Made up a Story for a US Visa] *Al-Ittihad*.

Arif, Y. (2002). Past Places/Future Spaces: Reconstructing Postwar Beirut. *Sarai Reader*, *2*, 117–125.

Augé, M. (1995[1992]). *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Trans. J. Howe. London: Verso.

Baudrillard, J. (1994[1981]). *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. S.F. Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Benjamin, W. (1982). *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6 vols., edited by Rold Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, with the Collaboration of Theodor Adorno and Gershom Scholem. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Benjamin, W. (1999[1927–40]). *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Billig, M. (1999). Commodity Fetishism and Repression: Reflections on Marx, Freud and the Psychology of Consumer Capitalism. *Theory and Psychology*, *9*(3), 313–329.

Buck-Morss, S. (1989). *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Cooke, M. (2002). Beirut Reborn: The Political Aesthetics of Auto-Destruction. *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, *15*(2), 393–424.

Daoud, H. (2013). As She Once Was. Trans. L. Mounzer. *Portal*, *9*, 3.

Dibazar, P. (2020). *Urban and Visual Culture in Contemporary Iran: Non-Visibility and the Politics of Everyday Presence*. London: Bloomsbury.

El-Khoury, R. (1998). The Postwar Planning of Beirut, in *Projecting Beirut: Episodes in the Construction and Reconstruction of a Modern City*, edited by P. Rowe and H. Sarkis. Munich: Prestel Verlag, 183–186.

El-Sheshtawy, Y. (2004). The Middle East City: Moving beyond the Narrative of Loss, in *Planning Middle Eastern Cities: An Urban Kaleidoscope*, edited by Y. Elsheshtawy. London: Routledge, 1–21.

El-Sheshtawy, Y. (2008). Navigating the Spectacle: Landscapes of Consumption in Dubai. *Architectural Theory Review*, *13*(2), 164–187.

Erkip, F. (2003). The Shopping Mall as an Emergent Public Space in Turkey. *Environment and Planning 35*(6), 1073–1093.

Fattouh, S. (2005). *Temps Mort*. Video 16 min. Beirut. https://vimeo.com/228545603 (accessed 10 July 2019).

Fawaz, M. and Ghandour, M. (2010). Spatial Erasure: Reconstruction Projects in Beirut. *ArteEast Quarterly*, spring. https://arteeast.org/quarterly/spatial-erasure-reconstruction-projects-in-beirut/?issues_season=spring&issues_year=2010 (accessed 10 July 2019).

Halabi, Z. (2018). *The Unmaking of the Arab Intellectual: Prophecy, Exile and the Nation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Hayek, G. (2016). Beirut, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Literature and the City*, edited by J. Tambling. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 587–597.

Jaber, R. (2006). *bayrītūs: madīnah taḥt al-arḍ* (Beyritus: Underground City). Beirut: Dar al-Adab.

Jaber, R. (2013[2005]). *The Mehlis Report*. Trans. K.J. Abu Zeid. New York: New Directions.

Jameson, F. (1997[1991]). *Postmodernism and the Cultural Logic of Capital*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Khosravi, S. (2008). *Young and Defiant in Tehran*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Lang, F. (2016). *The Lebanese Post-Civil War Novel: Memory, Trauma, and Capital*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Makdisi, S. (1997). Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidere. *Critical Inquiry*, *23*(3), Front Lines/Border Posts: 660–705.

Mango, T. (2003). *Solidere: the Battle for Beirut's Central District*, MCP book, Urban Studies and Planning, Cambridge MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Mostafa, D. (2009). Literary Representations of Trauma, Memory, and Identity in the Novels of Elias Khoury and Rabīʿ Jābir. *Journal of Arabic Literature*, *40*(2), 208–236.

Musto, M. (2010). Revisiting Marx's Concept of Alienation. *Socialism and Democracy*, *24*(3), 79–101.

Naeff, J.A. (2018). *Precarious Imaginaries of Beirut: A City's Suspended Now*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Najjar, A. (2005). *Le Roman de Beyrouth*. Paris: La Table Ronde.

Ragab, T.S. (2011). The Crisis of Cultural Identity in Rehabilitating Historic Beirut-Downtown. *Cities*, *28*(1), 107–114.

Salam, A. (1998). The Role of Government in Shaping the Built Environment, in *Projecting Beirut: Episodes in the Construction and Reconstruction of a Modern City*, edited by P. Rowe and H. Sarkis. Munich: Prestel, 122–133.

Seigneurie, K. (2011). *Standing by the Ruins: Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Sierra, F.R. (2017). Fictional Boundaries in the "Journalistic Fiction" of Gabriel García Márquez and Rabee Jaber. *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics,* 37, Literature and Journalism, 199–228.

Summer, D. (2006). The Neoliberalization of Urban Space: Transnational Investment Networks and the Circulation of Urban Images: Beirut and Amman. *Villes et Territoires du Moyen-Orient*, *2*, 1–9. Electronic journal. https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00139204 (accessed 15 July 2019)

Tabet, J. (2001). La cité aux deux places, in *Beyrouth, la brûlure des rêves*, edited by J. Tabet. Collection Monde HS 127. Paris: Éditions Autrement, 42–57.

Tarraf, Z. (2015). *Affective Landscapes: Re-negotiating the Ordinary in Contemporary Lebanese Cultural Production*. PhD dissertation. Alberta: University of Alberta.

Tiedemann, R. (1999[1982]). Dialectics at a Standstill: Approaches to the Passagen-Werk, in *The Arcades Project*, edited by W. Benjamin, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, pp. 929–945.

Verdeil, E. (2001). Reconstructions manquées à Beyrouth: la poursuite de la guerre par le projet urbain. *Annales de la recherche urbaine*, *9*, Villes et guerres, 65–73.

Westmoreland, M. (2008). Crisis of Representation: Experimental Documentary in Postwar Lebanon. PhD thesis, University of Austin, Texas.