

Essay

One City, Two Guides – An Untimely Collaboration

What if Rani al Rajji
and Michel De Certeau
met in Beirut?

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Rani al Rajji

I never asked Beirut architect, theorist and artist Rani al Rajji whether he has been inspired by the words of Michel De Certeau, French Jesuit and philosopher who, in his milestone volume *L'invention du quotidien* (The Practice of Everyday Life, 1984)^[1], elaborated a philosophy – or even poetry – around everyday practices. De Certeau died in 1986 and I doubt he got the chance to encounter post-war Beirut or Rani al Rajji. But I am quite sure that these two could be 'untimely collaborators'^[2] today. Collaborators who, beyond the coordinates of time and space, might be able to exchange and absorb each other's thoughts and visions. In the following text, I therefore try to grant this synergy a place for such an untimely meeting to happen.

Each thing by its right name

I travelled to Beirut only to come back. You go there and you want more of it. You get overwhelmed by complexity and contradiction. You try to orient yourself through a constellation of differences that could eventually gather to compose a bigger picture. You start wondering how to frame the residual, the ruin and the leftovers, not to mention the will to move over and move on; how to reconcile

[1] M. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2011, (orig. 1984)

[2] This is a concept elaborated by Lebanese writer and theorist Jalal Toufic.



oppositions. You move around and can observe a reproduction of the 18 political and religious 'sects' onto urban 'sectors' forming a kind of urban chessboard: a counter-position of powers, identities, and traditions. These territorial divisions melt away on a portion of 'non-belonging' occupying the hearth of the city: a glossy, global-style downtown area with vague Arabic facade. Downtown is known with one word: Solidere.

'Why does everybody call the city centre Solidere? It sounds as if it was owned by someone!' I found myself asking. 'Yes, indeed!' was the reply. In fact, Solidere is not only a curious nickname for Beirut's downtown area. It is name of the real estate company that actually owns it.

Solidere (which stands for 'The Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut') was set up in 1994 to rebuild the city centre in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war. It is the brainchild of the multi-billionaire and businessman Rafik Hariri, who – when freshly appointed Prime Minister of Lebanon – decided to establish Solidere as a joint-stock real estate company that would oversee the planning and rebuilding of the city centre. The idea was to expropriate all the land in the area and substitute the land ownership with corresponding shares. But what in fact happened was that, nervous of a falling stock market, most of the Solidere's shareholders sold their shares back to the company, which is now the main stockholder in what is a public-private partnership.

Beirut Central District *alias* Solidere

After almost two decades of fighting (1975-1990), the civil war left behind a ruined, ghostly and unsolved landscape still anchored in the same pre-war sectarian scheme. Only the so-called 'Green Line', the tongue of green land separating the main two factions in east and west Beirut respectively, remain irreducible to a logic of appropriation. Being at the forefront of artillery bombardment

and house-to-house combat, the central area of Beirut became an interstitial space, divided and joined simultaneously; belonging to everyone and nobody. The new downtown of the city was therefore contextualized as a porous zone intertwining Beirut's complex grid of political and economic interests. On local, national and global levels, Solidere has become almost a mythological space: a downtown laboratory for the neoliberalisation of urban space based on 'market-oriented economic growth' and 'elite consumption practices'.^[3]

As an urban space, Solidere embodies the partition of political and religious powers in Beirut. There is a sense of familiarity with this concept in Beirut – that a neighbourhood could belong to a real estate firm. And, if the various districts of Beirut correspond to different communities, then Solidere is the central area. It is independent to local political and religious fragmentations and responds to a 'neutral' a-political and a-religious market driven will.

Beirut Central District,
Solidere, December
2012. Photographer:
Samon Takahashi.



Beirut through synechdochic glasses

I didn't know anything and I explored the city wearing synechdochic glasses.^[4] My gaze attempted to create an eloquent environment, investing components and particles of narratives, contents, and aesthetics into various contexts. Without being aware of it, this fragmented wandering happened under the guidance of Michel De Certeau. His influence became a little clearer when I met with Rani

[3] N. Brenner, & N. Theodore, 'Cities and the geographies of 'actually existing neoliberalism'', in *Antipode* Vol. 34, N.3, 2002, pp. 349-379, (p. 368).

[4] The scope of my journeys to Beirut was the organization of a five-day art event together with the artist's group 'OuUnPo'. The week of encounters, performances and workshops has been co-curated with London based curator Fatos Ustek. The event took place in Beirut and Batroun from the 4th to the 8th December 2012 and was entitled 'Quantum Fluctuations in a Synechdochic Universe'. More info here: <http://ouunpolebanon.blogspot.nl/>

al Rajji, an architect, artist and writer from Beirut who seems able to speak with the city's walls, streets, and objects. During performative tours across Beirut, he insinuates himself into the urban landscape, unpacks its systems and unveils its silent secrets in a way that Michel De Certeau would undoubtedly define as 'tactics'.

But tactics to what strategy? This is when this French acronym inspiring justice and solidarity started to resonate in my head; this is why *Solidere* is at the core of our special guided tour today. According to De Certeau, a 'strategy [is] the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power can be isolated from an 'environment.'^[5] Its establishment follows three operations:

1. The production of its own proper space;
2. The substitution of a synchronic system in place of traditions and rooted pre-existing temporalities;
3. The creation of a universal subject.

'Tactics' are instead those performances, practices and uses that pullulate within the system, take advantage of it, manipulate it and by doing so are able to subvert the given order: 'Tactic is a calculus which cannot count on a 'proper', nor on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality,' De Certeau notes. 'The place of a tactic belongs to the other.'^[6] Thus, if the creation of *Solidere* can be read as the urban embodiment of a strategic will, Rani al Rajji's itinerant performances and narrations can be read as tactics that appropriate and transform the topographical system. Rani penetrates and bridges Beirut's different structures by creating paths where meaning and form are caught in alternative reciprocalities.

To walk is to talk

De Certeau also writes: 'The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language.'^[7] This statement not only implies that our *mode d'emploi* of urban structures is equal to that of the speaker within the taxonomy of language, but also suggests a homeomorphism in kind between the two actions and the idea that 'every story is a spatial practice'.^[8] The spatial enunciation reconfigures and assigns new values to the asynchronous syntax and vocabulary of an urban system. It also introduces a narrative and therefore temporal dimension to the city.

This is how Rani al Rajji usually begins his performative tours throughout Beirut's several neighbourhoods:

[5] *ibid.*, p. XIX

[6] *ibid.*, p. XIX

[7] *ibid.*, p. 97

[8] *ibid.*, p. 115

Hello I'm your guide for today and I'd like to start by telling you that fifty percent of the tour's stories are blunt lies...Wait, let me rephrase that: they're drawn from a reality that I perceive as true and thus they are verisimilar...

Rani's itinerant narrations follow, at the same time producing a dispersion of micro-stories set in Beirut, a place where neither history nor geography can be found in singular. By combining the experience of both a spatial and spoken enunciation, Rani al Rajji's tours disclose a multi-layered, hyper-semiotic space, which enables that which is no longer there to emerge as a sign.

As we move across Beirut with Rani, we start re-enacting the many memories, parallel presents and possible futures inscribed in the city's architecture, axes and visual elements. He brings time back to space: the true realm of the strategic system. The 'city-teller' turns the city into a script: a script which is itself part of a bigger palimpsest.

Beirut Central District,
Solidere, December
2012. Photographer:
Per Huttner.



A first anecdote

I first met Rani in a warm evening of December in Mar Mikhael while preparing a five-day art event, which would have started a few days later. Mar Mikhael district in east Beirut has undergone a process of gentrification and is now home to the city's vibrant and fast growing artistic community. Together with cafés, restaurants and shops, it hosts non-profit art centres (98 weeks), art galleries (Gallery Tanit), experimental bookshops (Plan Bey) and artists' studios (Villa Fleming).

During our first conversation, Rani told me the local saying *el haqq alal telyan* (it's the Italians' fault), which refers to Italy's failed and catastrophic attempt to occupy Lebanon after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. While unsuccessfully trying to enter and take over the city, the Italian army managed to destroy the ancient city walls, whose ruins are now part of Lebanon's precious archeological patrimony.

This anecdote gives room for a twofold reflection. On the one hand, this is symptomatic of how Rani weaves invisible connections between aural knowledge, urbanism and rhetoric, deviating from the literal meaning or phenomenological appearance. He opens up a tropic and elliptic space, which transforms each spatial signifier into something else, invoking the idea that:

Memory is a sort of anti-museum: it is not localisable. Fragments of it come out in legends. Objects and words also have hollow places in which a past sleeps, as in the everyday acts of walking, eating and going to bed, ancient revolutions slumber.^[9]

On the other hand, the remains of the city walls – located in Beirut Central District – bring us back to Solidere. The ruins of the ancient city walls are at the core of Solidere's urban marketing campaign: 'Beirut: An Ancient City of the Future.'

Beirut: An Ancient City of the Future

At the time of its creation, Solidere was marketed as the only healing therapy to restore Beirut's pre-war identity as the 'Paris of the Middle East',^[10] thanks to the implementation of a trendy down town area designed in the style of Manhattan, Hong Kong or other Arab oil cities, complete with a world trade centre, luxury hotels, residential areas and shopping malls baptised as 'new Souks'.

The reorientation of Beirut as a 'global city', where social intercourse

[9] *ibid.*, p. 108

[10] S. Kassab, 'On two conceptions of globalization: the debate around the reconstruction of Beirut' in A. Oncu, and P. Weyland (eds.): *Space Culture and Power: New Identities in Globalizing Cities*. Zed Books, London and New Jersey, 1997, 42-55 (p. 50).

could be figured on the basis of economic transactions and entertainment, rests upon the invocation of a world of wealth and cosmopolitanism, a golden age with aesthetics and cultural paradigms modeled on a certain colonial taste. The western modernity and imperialism implied by a statement like 'the Paris of the Middle East' have been interiorised and reformulated for a contemporary global imagery of replica, simulations and reifications.

Beirut Central District,
Solidere, December
2012. Photographer:
Per Huttner.



This aspect becomes more evident when considering the above-mentioned slogan 'Beirut: An Ancient City of the Future'. The motto tries to draw a continuation line between Beirut's antiquity and destiny, therefore claiming a positive and affirmative value for two remote dimensions, eluding any form of presentness and factualism. Solidere's rhetoric celebrates a marriage between memory and dream, a state in which to hide, invent and forget. The ancient scent of Beirut Central District is increased by a double operation

embracing on one side the ‘museification’ of archeological findings and on the other the construction of architectures, which are (only) formally inspired by traditional Arab precepts. This ‘authenticity game’ is played on the surface of things, making the whole area a set of facades and labels, when an Arab-style shopping mall can be referred to as a Souk.

The collective memory has been erased in order to open up a hybrid space of pure semiotics between a global *déjà-vu* and local impressions. The creation of what De Certeau would have called a ‘concept-city’^[11] follows in fact a first moment of *tabula rasa* – hence the creation of a proper abstract space disconnected from history, traditions and anything external.

This particular selection, appropriation and invention of the past recalls another case located at the political heart of the European Union. Namely, the reconstruction from scratch of the old Hohenzollern castle in Berlin: the *Stadtschloss* will reemerge in the form of a simulacrum, from the vacuum left behind by the communist *Palast der Republik*, which was torn down because it was a reminder of a history that a reunified and capitalistic Germany could not accept^[12]. In both cases, we witness the removal of the wounded body in favour of a ‘brand new old’ that serves a mythical and even foundational purpose. It is something similar to Freud’s concept of ‘repressed memory’. Responding to a defense mechanism, the repressed memory keeps the unacceptable, often traumatic event, away from the conscious mind.^[13]

If the creation of identity always implies a rhetoric and imaginative component, this is even more true in a country like Lebanon where national identity can be compared to that ‘empty square’ – to use a Deleuzian term –^[14] always susceptible of being filled in by different subjects and whose occupation has already caused the loss of so many lives. In his introduction to *Beyroutes. A Guide to Beirut* (2010), Rani Al Rajji writes:

We are told that wars do not determine who is right, only who is left. Imagine a scenario where everybody is left and there are no victors, everything becomes subject to interpretation, even historical events (Lebanon does not have a common history book to this day).^[15]

[11] De Certeau, op. cit., p. 95

[12] A. Deuffhard, S. Krempf-Klieesen, P. Oswalt, M. Lilienthal, H. Mueller, *Volkspalast. Zwischen Aktivismus und Kunst*, Theater der Zeit, Berlin, 2006

[13] S. Freud, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis: Beyond the Pleasure Principle, The Ego and the Id and Other Works*, Albert Dickson (ed.) The Penguin Freud Library, Penguin Books, London, 1991.

[14] G. Deleuze, ‘De quoi on reconnait le structuralisme?’, in François Châtelet (ed.) *Histoire de la philosophie, Idées, Doctrines*. Vol. 8, Le XXe siècle, Hachette, Paris 1973, pp. 299-335

[15] J. Mounzer, R. Al Rajji, ‘Introduction: My City’, in Studio Beirut, *Beyroutes. A Guide to Beirut*, Archis, Amsterdam, 2010. (Studio Beirut is a research group which focus on architecture and urbanism founded by Rani Al Rajji.)

Solidere aims to achieve the task of creating a unifying national pride with international appeal so as to refill the identity void provoked by the opposition and co-existence of several different histories, identities and traditions that have been shaping Lebanon over centuries. The simulation of a coherent narrative, which would replace the polyphony of Lebanese collective memory, follows the coordinates of neoliberal urbanism, which, for the sake of economic growth, depicts a reassuring fictional identity, depurated by contradictions, dark corners, and contestations.

As Saree Makdisi explains,^[16] Solidere is not really engaged in a process of reconstruction or recuperation, but rather in one of novel construction, given the fact that more irreparable damage has been done by its bulldozers than by fifteen years of war. Solidere razed the architectural remains of the city centre, justified by a recurrent rhetoric of inevitability: labeled as 'beyond repair'. But this labelling was not only related to the physical witnesses and urban scars of the war, but also to the survival of a common yet fragmented past. In this representation, Beirut's history thus becomes an image that has no past at all.

The flattened, smiling face of the new Beirut Central District lost its memory with the promise of eternity. This is why narrating matters. Quoting De Certeau:

The verbal relics of which the story is composed, being tied to lost stories and opaque acts, and for this reason they form a symbolic whole. They are articulated by lacunae. Within the structured space of the text, they thus produce anti-texts, effects of dissimulation and escape, possibilities of moving into other landscapes.^[17]

The dentist, the Sniper and the Hairdresser

By Rani al Rajji

The intersection of Sodeco witnessed some of the fiercest fights during the year of the Lebanese war from 1975 until 1990. It was one of the vital points of passage during truces and a bloody nightmare during battles.

At one of the four corners of the intersection stands the 1920's Barakat building. The owner was a dentist (Dr. Barakat) who commissioned it from Mr. Youssef Aftimus, the star architect of that era. The current building is an eerie carcass of what was an atrium braced by two symmetrical limestone and concrete art deco structures united by a rotunda of columns worthy of an eastern lesser pantheon.

[16] S. Makdisi, 'Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidere', in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 23, No. 3, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Spring 1997, pp. 660-705 (pp. 674; 682).

[17] De Certeau, op. cit., 107.

Rani Al Rajji, *Green Line Tour*, December 2012, with the artists' group OuUnPo.
Photographer: Per Huttner.



It was there that Dr. Barakat had his clinic and his apartment. The man was Lebanon's Colonel Kilgore (played by Robert Duvall in Apocalypse Now) during the first half of the Lebanese implosion. He had the certitude that he couldn't be harmed by the surrounding warfare and kept on living in his wreck of a building, religiously observing his daily ritual of going out to the balcony and shouting at the young fighters in the streets below that they should go back to their mothers and to their schools. It went on for a full five years and it wasn't until 1980 that he gently departed during his sleep.

The part of Barakat's building that contained Dr. Barakat's practice was soon claimed by snipers (and squatters) who morosely plugged a concrete sniping stand next to the medic's dental chair. 'The story seems as if it came straight from the rabbit hole, but I assure you it's the truth,' said Mtanios. He was the hairdresser who had a salon in the Ground floor of the Barakat building and saved it from the bulldozer by sticking to his lease and not accepting the financial luring of the developer who wanted to level it and build a tower instead. Barakat's building is now known as Bayt Beirut (the House of Beirut) and it will house a museum and exhibitions that reflect on the above mentioned stories and other lost tales.

P.S.

'Its bullet holes represent everything Solidere has been fighting against: memory'.

This is what Rani told me about the choice of using the Barakat building for his contribution to our text. The Barakat building is located along the Damasco Road, the demarcation line otherwise known as the Green Line. Still connecting west and east Beirut, the building is located on a corner everybody drives by every day. As Ole Møystad states about the Green Line architecture: 'War makes forms erode. [...] Buildings are peeled. Their skin is ripped off. Structures are

uncovered. [...] They become matter, flesh, substance, skin.’^[18]

This couldn't be truer for the Barakat building. It offers itself to the eyes of the city as an almost melted candle – the impression I have always had of the city from gazing on the images of post-war Beirut by Italian photographer Gabriele Basilico. The Barakat building stands as a continuous reminder of the civil war, resisting the forces that have been trying to remove all traces of it. After years of debate, this iconic scarf is now waiting to become Beirut's official 'Museum of Memory'. The museum will host a permanent exhibition on the city's history since the nineteenth century and will specifically address the civil war. The building will be partly renovated, while the ground and first floor will remain as a testimony to the fighting.

About the author

Rani al Rajji is a Beirut-born architect and urban storyteller. Rani al Rajji is one of the founders of Studio Beirut. As a place for artists, activists and architects, Studio Beirut seeks to re-script public spheres in Beirut so that they become accessible for people from all walks of life to meet and interact. Started in 2007 following the July war, they have now hosted numerous events, and workshops. Rajji is co-editor of the book *Beyroutes. A Guide to Beirut*, a field manual for the twenty-first century urban explorer.

[18] Ole Møystad, 'Morphogenesis of the Beirut Green-Line: Theoretical Approaches between Architecture and Geography', <http://almashrig.hiof.no/lebanon/900/910/919/beirut/greenline/moystad/>, accessed on 04.04.2013