

## **Stuck in a present-past moment: the Everyday urban life of public spaces in conflict**

Christine Mady

*Notre Dame University*

*christine.mady@gmail.com*

'Good' public spaces generate positive experiences, and encounters with a high degree of diversity within the urban context as explained by Sophie Watson. These public spaces are intrinsic urban components, which have the ability to span across time, and generations. They provide an aesthetic experience according to John Dewey, an enjoyable or intriguing experience, which gets imprinted in memory through the integration of the subject within the public space environment. Moreover, public spaces are conducive to direct or indirect interaction not only with the environment but also with other users as explained by Jan Gehl. Returning to such a public space in the present retrieves the past through memories, and gives the possibility of a repeated experience in the future. Also, public spaces are the mnemonic devices for collective memories as stated by Michael Hebbert; they knit a common ground based on shared social practices as indicated by Henri Lefebvre. In this manner, these spaces are a beacon of hope for social integration in divided societies, noting that divisions are caused by panoply of urban-based conflicts. Exploring contexts in conflict provides the opportunity to further understand the role of public spaces in volatile, unstable situations, which challenge the rights of urban inhabitants to use and shape their public spaces. Contestations among various actors about public spaces- including state authorities, property developers, and different groups of urban inhabitants- leave tangible and intangible traces that affect the past, present and future of everyday urban living. A fertile ground for conducting this exploration is the capital city of Lebanon, Beirut. This is a city that has witnessed a fifteen-year war between 1975 and 1990, and still witnesses different types of instabilities ever since. Beirut's urban fabric is a palimpsest reflecting different historical periods with their natural growths, deformations and happenings. Traces of urban open spaces including streets and

some squares persist and feed collective memories in this city. Other open spaces emerge through the post-war layer and inform about the everyday practices of Beirut's coexisting societies. This paper provides an overview of the state of open urban spaces in this city with the aim to establish an understanding of the role of those spaces in relation to memory, conviviality, and everyday urban life in present-time Beirut. The current state of life in Beirut is characterised by contrasts between instability, unpredictability, and segregation on the one hand, and the persistence of rhythmic, vivid, and diverse everyday urban life and activities, which are equally underpinned by real estate development, and market dynamics as well as individual, collective and group actions. Recent examples of collective actions redeeming rights to reclaim, use and shape public spaces in the city seem to generate spatio-temporal changes, which are redrawing the plan of Beirut in a more just manner. Several cases of streets, markets, squares, and parks, and their transformations across time will serve to illustrate the potentials, but also the challenges of collective actions to reinstate urban public spaces under conflict.