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Dead Spaces, Living Architecture and the Functionality of Death in Post-Conflict Settings

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Abstract: Death has the ability to influence an architectural site in such a way that it defines its identity. Bullet holes, political graffiti, and scarred buildings are evidence of past events that have involved death and continue to do so. However, recognizing death through these sites allows post-conflict nations a chance to construct a narrative that was once hidden away. These sites allow death to function in a positive manner—if amnesia-driven urban development projects do not erase them first, that is.

Keywords: death; architecture; memory; reconciliation; narrative; post-conflict; amnesia; urban development

1. Introduction

Death is a fact of life; it is the inescapable fate of the living. Even though it may appear to be universal, its representations and conceptualizations vary immensely among different cultures. Anthropology has always been interested in how people treat death as a cultural process with respect to its relevant context. However, instead of looking at death as a process through which the individual dies within their relevant cultural context, I aim to conceptualize it as a force that makes itself apparent through the social impact it has on the inanimate. The death of a human also involves elements beyond the body, for example the architectures and spaces involved in the process of dying and in the rituals surrounding it. Therefore, death impacts and alters how architectures and spaces are represented through its ability to imprint. In an attempt to move away from the overshadowing negativity of death, I aim to use death's ability to imprint spaces as a starting point in which activists can begin to address issues pertaining to transitional justice in post-conflict settings.

Death occupies space in such a way that it leaves both a physical and an imaginary mark. It becomes part of the infrastructural reality of a site—a defining element of the structure. Walls riddled with bullet holes, destroyed buildings, and old sites of combat are forms of physical representation of death-infested events. Death is then made obvious to the people, the community, and the state due to the architectural and physical evidence left behind by wars and conflict. The management of these markings governs the function and, perhaps, the identity of what I will term as “death-markings”: physical manifestations on architectural bodies emerging due to war, murder, or events involving death, all of which bear connections to the (still) living agents involved. In order for the markings to exist, we cannot neglect the human factor that projects meaning unto the physical, one that inserts subjectivity into the otherwise hollow architecture. I argue that these death-markings transform architectural bodies into sites where death can be recognized, and if it is, that recognition becomes an important part in attempting to achieve transitional justice. Death, if managed properly, has a function, a function intertwined with issues of transitional justice, remembrance, and reconciliation.

2. Death and the Body

Death is in the body, as put by Holm: “Death is the empty space that makes subjectivity possible, and when this emptiness leaves the subject, it leaves a solid body, a body without subjectivity” ([1], p. 40). However, the statement disregards the complexities of politicized bodies and treats them as neutral shells collapsing as death escapes. As social beings, death is never solely an individual matter. Death remains personal in terms of individual conceptualizations of what might happen or how the experience might be; however, the death *of the individual* still occurs within a social context. One’s death is broadcasted to those who are receptive, and what it means to die is constructed with respect to the living’s social fabric. By way of death, the deceased’s agency is transferred to the living who ensure that the agency is kept active, as if the person is still present. There is no death outside of the societal realm; without the social factor, life is reduced to a binary of existence/non-existence. When death escapes, it does not leave a body without subjectivity; instead, death fills the corpse with the respective cultural meaning. It morphs into other forms and extends itself into cultural practices, traditions, and philosophies. Death even has its own sites, ones that serve the purpose of recognition and representation, such as coffins, tombstones, and graveyards. Space then becomes a medium through which death can be understood, as Andrews states: “Space has become an essential mechanism for explaining social and political processes for non-architectural disciplines” ([2], p. 137).

Death does not neutralize the body; instead, it renders the dead as another medium for politicization: “Dead bodies have been conceptualized in such a way that a form of politics has been created around them, and since these dead bodies themselves have been politicized, the space they occupy is then dictated by their biopolitics” [3]. The ability of bodies to politicize space affects the architectures constructed as well, marking them as politically charged sites of contestation. In turn, death-defined events have the potential to mark the spaces in which they occur, to the extent that death politicizes these spaces. For example, massacre sites, mass graves, and cemeteries are politicized spaces and have some sort of a lingering memory of past atrocities and tragedy hanging above them. Death is a politicized force capable of influencing spaces and the interactions that govern them. This is due to the fact that dead bodies cannot be reduced to mere biological remains; instead, they remain rooted in their

past political self which exerts postmortem influence: “The dead body has the power of politically charging the physical space it encompasses because that corpse was once an active *bios*. The political self demands rights and recognition as a human being” [3]. The recognition of being human entails the recognition within a context, especially a political one, as noted by Gregg: “We have no evidence that human rights exist independently of human imagination and social constructions, which is to say: no evidence that humans are endowed with pre-political, universally valid rights *a priori*” ([4], p. 631). Therefore, the dead body, and death that inhabits it, is able to politicize and transform space due to the political construction of what a human is. The political self is able to maintain its influence even after the death of the biological self. If put in Foucauldian terms: the political self (*bios*) does not limit itself to the biological self (*zoe*); it instead exceeds the mortal limitations of the body and continues to practice its influences. Death does not render the body apolitical: “The dead body is assumed to have lost its *bios* by the process of death, that is, by losing its political activity. The dead body can no longer assume any political activity and is technically reduced to the biological bare. However, since the *bios* has already been enacted and recognized, it remains in demand for the rights of the bare life even after it is technically passive” [3]. A body is never a space of apolitical activity, but instead it is the space of co-existence of both the *zoes* and the *bios* in which the *bios*, which is the citizen, is established upon the recognition of the *zoes* as a “biological citizen” ([5], p. 50). The concept of the *biological citizen* “links the matter of the living (biological, whether as an irradiated or infected body) and the meaning of politics (citizenship, in terms of social as well as civil rights...)” ([5], p. 50). This concept extends to the dead body, which still contains the biological even though it is a dead form of biological existence. The dead body is then conceptualized as being a passive physical entity, which exists within a political structure that allows it to practice influences, as on space. Death does not take away the agency established during life; instead, the dead can claim it as well since it was already established by the past *bios*. Through this agency, dead bodies become objects capable of “reconfiguring space” [6].

Death-markings are constituted of two forms of spaces: physical and imaginary. The physical plane acts as the foundation through which the imaginary space exists; the imaginary is rooted in the physical, and these death-markings hold both. The geospatial confinement of death-markings may hold several planes of imaginary spaces, depending on the extent of the involvement of agents. The imaginary spaces are based on the physical sites that “were not purposefully created to serve as memorials. Rather, through tie, they form part of the memory of the past for individuals and communities traumatized...” ([7], p. 101). The physical evidence of past events may not be officially recognized as politicized sites; however, the individuals and communities have the ability to maintain the imaginary sphere of memory and emotions connected to the site. This “calls attention to the importance of the representation of space as a sort of archaeological work of memory that allows victims both to work through their traumatic experiences and to denounce the atrocities committed by their captors” ([8], p. 161). These contested sites are established through events that are thought of as a sort of disconnection from the “normality” of everyday life, and most often they are stained with trauma. The “Otherness” of these spaces becomes apparent with respect to the normalized spaces and architectures of everyday life, *i.e.*, spaces not meant to accept “Otherness” as part of their identity. However, it is important to note that these classifications of spaces are fluid, such that through acts of genocide, for example, a site can be transformed into a contested space. These contested spaces are termed as “Heterotopic” spaces, which is briefly elaborated on by Foucault as being:

...something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted ([9], pp. 3–4).

These sites physically exist within reality and alongside normalized spaces, yet their “heterotopic” nature marks them as being volatile and highly politicized sites, rendering them inhospitable for the banality of everyday life. For Hetherington, the “Otherness” of these sites is established through transgressive social practices that differentiate them from other spaces ([10], p. 51). The differences are emphasized, furthermore, when sites become representations of human rights violations and are incorporated into the fight for transitional justice in post-conflict settings.

3. Post-Conflict Zones

Nations have emerged from their dark histories of civil conflict, atrocities, and authoritarian rule and have aimed to develop a more peaceful and just way of life through the implementation of transitional justice mechanisms. The recognition of death as part of the national history enables communities and nations to reconcile with their pasts in order to move forward. In a briefing paper for the Institute for Democracy & Conflict Resolution, Villalba states that: “The key assumption in such periods of change is that any state where mass atrocities have taken place should engage in processes (judicial and non-judicial) that will achieve justice for past crimes, peace, a democratic society and an established rule of law” ([11], pp. 2–3). There is a large body of literature that discusses the different transitional justice mechanisms and the ways of implementation; however, I am interested in the *absence* of transitional justice and its implications and dynamics in post-war nations that have failed to reconcile with their pasts. Within these nations, death-marked architectures can be used as a positive trigger to, perhaps, push for a collective recognition of past atrocities.

I take Lebanon as an example of a post-war nation that has failed to acknowledge the gruesome events of its past. I use this country as an example to ground my theoretical framework due to my personal relations to it and my experiences growing up with and within its post-war architectures. In the 1970s, various internal and external factors contributed to the breakdown of the Lebanese government’s authority, all of which led to the eventual outbreak of the civil war in 1975 (See [12,13]). Agents of the 1975–1990 war were granted amnesty and, in turn, full-scale amnesia governed the reconstruction efforts as well as the prospective lives of the population. A way amnesia was established was through the inability to construct a narrative of the past. War-criminals-turned-politicians naturally fought against establishing a common narrative that held them accountable for their crimes. National history books that are used in schools end narratives just prior to the war and do not mention any of the events of the 15-year war. As well, other than silencing narratives that hold the political elite accountable, downtown Beirut’s reconstruction gave the amnesia its physicality. Solidere, a private real estate project, erased all traces of the downtown’s identity as a battlefield and a line of division between East Beirut’s Christians and West Beirut’s Muslims. Haugbolle describes Solidere’s reconstruction as a privatized corporate attempt to render the local narrative absolute, detaching a story from its setting ([14], p. 93). The new architectural reality of downtown Beirut inhibits the materialization of the collective memory and, instead, treats the city as a blank canvass.

The state-sponsored amnesia does not allow one to reconcile with the injustices that have occurred and instead forces citizens to move past the events without closure. Yet this amnesia cannot erase the death-markings found across the city. They have become a normal phenomenon in the architectural present of the post-conflict city of Beirut. However, the absence in official and governmental memorialization does not entail an absence of individual and communal memory. Instead, memory, which remains relevant to present life, can be managed as a nonofficial form of recognition through these death-markings. Death-markings can engulf an entire city, they can resist the amnesia by simply continuing to exist as they await recognition. They keep memories alive despite the attempted repression by the government. Laleh Khalili, a professor in Middle Eastern Politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, states, “the absence of monuments in places one would expect—for example, on massacre sites—reveals extant contentions that silence particular commemorative narratives in the context of the uneasy post-civil war power relations in Lebanon” ([15], p. 8). This invisibility of memory on the public sphere clearly indicates the perpetuation of a sort of post-war hegemony over the nation’s politics and identity. The tragedies were scattered as if the horrors of the past were a mere infliction upon individuals rather than communities. Death-markings constitute a part of the identity of the city, and they represent a past that has been built on, be it recognized or not. In *Rhythm and noise: the city, memory and the archive*, Kevin Hetherington states, “A collection of artefacts, signs, sedimented patterns of activity and practices embedded in the fabric of the built environment, the city lends itself to being read as an archive built up over time as a collection and a record of the past that continues to resonate in the present” ([16], p. 18). The city’s architectural dimensions can be treated as layers through which either individual or collective narratives of the past are constructed. The materiality of the post-war architectural presence remains “part of the urban fabric” and holds the “evocative power of the past to engage active subjects” ([16], p. 21). Therefore, amnesia that threatens the materiality of these sites also threatens the ability to construct a valid narrative, one that is vital for a community searching for accountability and justice.

4. Living Architecture in Dead Spaces

In *Invisible Cities*, Calvino states:

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space ([17], p. 165).

Accepting the “inferno” renders the post-war architectural reality, which should be a provocative starting point for recognition as a transitional justice mechanism, invisible and part of the banality of everyday life. In post-conflict settings, the living seem to have no option but to build on top of the dead and coexist with the politically charged physical remains of the past. Cities, even after events of horrific chaos and war, are not abandoned; instead, they continue to be inhabited. Post-war architecture whose current purpose is to house the living seem to be stuck in “dead spaces”, which are spaces rich

with events of death and death-markings. Architectures that have witnessed and acted in the civil war now exist in post-war Lebanon as part of the citizen's everyday life: buildings infested with bullet holes, political graffiti, walls that once acted as barricades, roads that acted as division lines. These sites, based in dead spaces, have been reintegrated back into daily life especially because the 15-year war occurred in these everyday spaces. These architectures are naturally part of everyday life, regardless if they are lived in or abandoned, and they constitute a part of the city. Even huge blocks of deformed concrete are easily made invisible due to the state-sponsored amnesia. An example of a post-war architecture that has been rendered invisible is Holiday Inn, an abandoned hotel. It acted in a battle dubbed "the war of the hotels" in October 1975 during the Lebanese civil war [18]. It now stands still, its scars open for the public to witness, and yet it does not represent an unusual siting for the locals. At times, the architecture does come alive when youth hold underground parties in these dead spaces, amid bullet holes and walls stained with political graffiti. The heterotopic nature of these contested sites shifts as the relationships surrounding them change. As established previously, the heterotopic nature is dependent on the relations the contested site has with other spaces. This allows us to infer that sites that were once battlegrounds for a civil war and have been adapted to be habitable spaces have a duality in nature. The fact that these sites are habitable, or a part of everyday life, does not take away their heterotopic nature, but rather veils and suppresses it. The recognition of the heterotopic nature of these sites defies the impending government-sponsored amnesia.

Unlike the everyday architectural sites whose death-markings have not been recognized, Beit Barakat makes these death-markings a central narrative to understanding the city. This four-story house not only acknowledges the narratives it holds, but it also emphasizes its heterotopic identity. The house has a strategic location in downtown Beirut, "with vantage points in all directions" making it a "sniper's nest" during the civil war [19]. Youssef Haidar, the lead architect of Beit Barakat, has kept all the death-markings in the house, and by doing so he resists the state-sponsored amnesia. He has utilized the architectural scars as evidence of the civil war narrative that has been silenced ever since amnesty was granted. Haidar states in an interview with Lepeska that the amnesia "ultimately trickled down to policy and urban planning. If you say nothing happened, and everyone is innocent, nothing can be kept. How could you preserve any traces if nothing happened? Traces of what?" [19]. Beit Barakat, through emphasizing its deformed physicality, establishes a narrative that defies and upsets the continuation of daily life in a government-sponsored amnesia setting. There have been no truth and reconciliation commissions in Lebanon for the fear of promoting sectarian tension. However, Beit Barakat is an example of how death-markings can be utilized to construct a narrative that would unify instead of divide. The bullet holes, scars, and architectural injuries are common to all of the Lebanese households, so by drawing the common element of physical distortion, Beit Barakat recognizes death in a positive manner. Death that once occurred, and that has become integrated in the architectural site, now functions as an alternative to truth and reconciliation commissions. The museum/cultural hub has not opened its doors yet, but once people start walking through the scarred walls they will be offered a chance to connect to a past that has been unsuccessfully hidden. Unlike truth commissions, such a manifestation of death-markings can be both personal and communal since it relates to the individual, who had witnessed the events of the war and had encountered death and its markings, and the entire community regardless of what side they fought on. "What's happening here is no mere restoration", explains Haidar, "but a reckoning with the past", a start of a catharsis [19].

The amnesia is hindered when architects become aware for the need of a narrative that recognizes death. Bernard Khoury, a Lebanese architect, built a nightclub that not only physically resembles a bomb shelter but *is* in fact a bomb shelter. BO18 was built post-conflict, and its architect had the option to accept the amnesia but instead chose to resist it. BO18 is a form of living architecture in dead space: built on a massacre site for the purpose of entertainment. The site, during the war, “became the abode of Palestinian, Kurdish and South Lebanese refugees (20,000 in 1975). In January 1976, local militia men launched a radical attack that completely wiped out the area” [20]. Its physicality cannot be removed from the past narrative of the civil war. The party venue is built on a contested site and this manifestation of living architecture is allowed because the Lebanese government has implemented no official means of memorialization. Khoury states that “BO18 refuses to participate in the naïve amnesia that governs the post-war reconstruction efforts. The project is built below ground. Its façade is pressed into the ground to avoid the over exposure of a mass that could act as a rhetorical monument” [20]. BO18 is not an authentic death-marking, yet it mimics one in order to assert the recognition of death, even in the late hours of a party venue.

In *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*, Katherine Verdery states: “Because human activity nearly always has affective and meaningful dimensions and takes place through complex symbolic processes, I also view politics as a realm of continual struggles over meanings, or signification” in which dead bodies and death-markings participate ([6], p. 24). Forces such as the economy and the urge for urban development projects heavily affect death’s struggle over meaning, or towards constructing a narrative. Beirut’s buildings that have endured the war are being swept away in order to feed the amnesia. Verdery states that “bodies have the advantage of concreteness that nonetheless transcends time, making past immediately present,” and the same can be said for the architectural scars caused by the events of war ([6], p. 27). However, death-markings face the risk of being erased prior to recognition as part of the amnesia-driven urban development projects. These sites, unlike dead human bodies, have the ability to make way for new, unscarred architectural living spaces. However, the development that is taking place does not reconcile the past and therefore adds to the inauthenticity of life in the post-conflict city.

5. Conclusions

Recognizing death, mainly through the physicality of the city, could be a potential stepping-stone for reconciliation in post-conflict settings. The relationship between death and architecture lies within a politicized system which the inhabitants of the post-war setting continue to exist in. Post-war architectural sites, due to their obvious presence in daily life, hold the power to command recognition of death and the events that revolved around it. Their heterotopic nature must be tapped into and revealed in order to rightfully treat the post-war setting, or rather the post-war city, as an archive rich with narratives. Some actors do not wait for official recognition to be granted; instead they revitalize memories and identities through architectural practices that commit to the site’s heterotopic nature. Through recognition a nation can begin to construct a new narrative that respects the past and could ensure a collective form of reconciliation. Therefore, death, even though a grim part of life, has the ability to give architectural materiality power to contain a narrative and release it when recognized.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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