Finding Room in Beirut: Places of the Everyday

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Enough room for the everyday

The act of walking, said Michel de Certeau, is to the urban system what speech is to language.\textsuperscript{147} While language is an agreed-upon system of meaning, speech is what allows language to come alive through intonation, fluency, and articulation. In the same manner, walking is a space of enunciation\textsuperscript{148}: it allows for an appropriation of the city’s spaces with rhythm, diversion, and purpose. The connotation between speech and walking as means to play with and around the fixed and established order supposes that we all are aware of the systems (linguistic and urban) and that we all use them on a daily basis. This being said, while we all share the same systems, some of us, perhaps more aware than others, perhaps more willing than others, more inventive or simply more naive or playful than others, choose to divert the rules, to bend and push further what they initially might seem to allow. When thinking about the playfulness of language, great figures of literature, poetry or actors breathing life into texts come to mind as obvious examples of what can be achieved when digressing from the initial system. When thinking about the urban, bending the rules may imply illegality or exclusion—each potentially bearing significant consequences—but it may also imply a more subtle appropriation of the city. The simple act of walking, aimlessly or with a purpose, but without a clear and final destination or a need to be somewhere, is a practice of its own, one that reveals topographical and cultural variations, possibilities for action, unsuspected corners and uses of the city. The practice of walking, a practice that is genuine and frequent, is what allows us to draw connections between places and people, between times and habits, so that alternative narratives of the city may be woven in and around, through and with the urban system in place. While de Certeau opposed the view of the city seen from above—the view of planners, urban designers, architects, and developers—to the view seen from within—the view of the dweller and of the practitioner—walking appears as a hybrid possibility, a view that is informed by the all-encompassing yet fully immersed in everyday trajectories. Walking is a practice which, while in full awareness of the grand discourse, still seeks for the relevant details that make the city what it really is. The act of walking is a manifesto for intentional deviation, enacting a terrain of continuous negotiation.

The same could be said about the vague: though immobile per se, the vague is always in movement, wandering across the city as it is driven away from one area by urban development, to reappear just a little bit further along. Despite the efforts of planning and urban renewal, the vague inevitably reemerges in the vicinity of newer fabrics and, with it, undesired and unfit practices. A certain form of nomadism thus shares the city with what is perceived as fixed and sedentary; these form a dynamic equilibrium, that is to say an equilibrium that has to negotiate its terms anew every time a vague is taken away and forced to reinvent itself in

\textsuperscript{147} Certeau, \textit{L’invention du quotidien}, 148.  
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
the process of its reappearance.

Though the vague urbain shares very similar characteristics, its time and mobility are slightly different. Indeed, while it is only temporary, its scale and endurance permit an impression of durability in its parallel coexistence with the formal city. Because it has time to develop and hold an active life of its own, the vague urbain is a demonstration that the non-ideal city can coexist and thrive within the determined and help maintain the delicate balance between the city of the conqueror and that of the dweller. Growing out of the remains left by the planned city, it offers a landscape whose value can only be recognized by the practitioner, be that its inhabitant or a devoted walker. Walking the vague urbain, becoming acquainted with its subtleties, drawing links between its denigrated practices and similar ones scattered across other neighborhoods, grasping the details that inhabit its narratives, and devoting time to transcribe the findings of such walks, is more than a flâneur’s wandering: it is an active and engaged practice that seeks to transform our perceptions from a dismissive glance to an involved eye. It is a practice that seeks to include uncertainty, resilience, contingency, and the likes, within the unattainable desire for fixity.

In search for an archeology of the line, Tim Ingold states that: “for the inhabitant, the line of his walk is a way of knowing. Likewise the way of writing is, for him, a way of remembering. In both cases, knowledge is integrated ‘along’ a path of movement.” Because they both require a strong acquaintance with and keen observation of place, the movements of body and language are thus two active methods to build knowledge about place. Very much like the construction of a story as the storyline develops, walking finds its way along the walk: it is only when it comes to a stop that the walker can claim to have found his route. Similarly, writing about the specificities of a given place or situation in the hope of a precise remembrance requires the writer to be inscribed in place, that is, to have spent enough time walking to trace a similar path with words.

Drawing is certainly a third active method for forming knowledge about place. As the path of the walk draws itself while walking, and as images arise as words flow from speech (whether spoken or written), drawing happens as one draws. As the drawing appears on the page, details gather, accidents occur, and it falls back onto the ability of the drawer to find his or her way through the drawing to tell the story of the place he or she set out to draw. Drawing narratively requires an acute observation of what is to be drawn: built forms, shadows, passers-by, the time of day, smells, sounds, distances, memories, encounters, and other stories told. As one can walk without truly walking, as one can talk without truly speaking, one can draw very precisely yet without truly drawing. The practice of drawing that is linked to true walking and writing is one where the path of the hand can be followed and where the presence of place can be felt. While the hand will sometimes take the initiative, as Juhani Pallasmaa suggested in The Thinking Hand, narrative drawings can only be shaped after the knowledge of place has been embodied through repetitive drawing, or after repeated encounters with the narratives to be drawn. More than a mere representation, the narrative drawing allows the eye to wander and walk through the story being told.

While the story may vary depending on the hand of the drawer and the transcription he or she may choose to project unto the page, the narrative drawing of the architect necessarily projects itself into the future: this is what we


are trained to do and possibly what we do best. Drawing, for an architect, is either to draw with close attention the existing as a way of learning from what others have done so that lessons can be transferred to later projects; or it is to draw an imagined construction, whether for a precise assignment or to satisfy the constructive imagination. In either case, the imaginative landscape of the architect is oriented toward the future. But according to Ingold, to imagine a landscape is to bring forth a present that is ever-emergent as the future’s past. So while one’s drawing may be conceived for a time to come in the future, it really pertains to the present. The drawing does not depict the future of the city per se but is rather an act of comprehension and of action unto the present: from what the present was, to what it is and to what it will become. Telling a story through drawing thus makes complete sense: the narrative drawing crystalizes the present, which implicates both the understanding of place (thus of the past) and a telling of the present, and “opens up paths in and through the world”—thus toward futures. The narrative drawing is an act of configuration that lets the eye roam through the lines, telling stories, as technical as they may sound, “rather than fixing end-points in advance.”

As in the promise of the everyday self-storification supposed by Charles Jencks in the unselfconscious tradition, the disclosure of potential appropriation of unclaimed urban space imagined in the temporary constructions of the late work of Cedric Price, or in the constructive details of Melvin Charney which fragment architecture to reveal past, present, and future memories, temporalities are embedded in the experience we make of the city. While it all might appear as a continuous sequence of events, each encounter is really temporary, as an experience always occurs to form the bed for something else to become. Because present experiences belong both to past and future, it seems fundamental to pay close attention to what the everyday has to reveal; small differences, hopeful-marvelous, may very well bear significance for how we perceive our environment and shape our desires for it. As Jean-François Lyotard said:

There are many events whose occurrences don’t offer any matter to be confronted, many happenings inside of which nothingness remains hidden and imperceptible, events without barricades. They come to us concealed under the appearance of everyday occurrences. To become sensitive to their quality as actual events, to become competent in listening to their sound underneath silence or noise, to become open to the “It happens that” rather than to the “What happens,” requires at the very least a high degree of refinement in the perception of small differences.

Needless to say, the degree of refinement Lyotard speaks of comes with practice, and only through an active practice does it acquire sufficient meaning to influence how we may be willing to reconsider our desires for the city. Paying close attention to the present everyday in all of its details supposes that we may be willing to act within and upon the city without predetermined expectations, to look where we are going without projecting a precise ideal, or to make room for other ideals to join.

I began writing this book wondering how the meeting of the everyday, the vague, and temporary architecture could influence or build a new narrative for areas about to

152. Ibid.
153. Ibid.
undergo transformation. I wanted to get my head around how an entire neighborhood could be in the middle of a city without participating in it or, perhaps more fairly, how it is kept out of participation. While these inquiries led me on a few detours, I hope to have shown the capacity of the everyday, the vague, and the temporary to produce narratives that can help us reflect on what it means to inhabit the city in its present time. Because neighborhoods such as Bachoura stand outside the agreed-upon ideal, they allow us to wonder about current circumstances; they enable practitioners of the city to underscore the possibility that other narratives might coexist. The vague urbain is a temporary condition, a movement really, a collection of actions within and upon the city. While it may appear out of place, anomalous and detached, it performs with a hidden punctuality and diffuse precision that sustain its presence. In reality, the vague urbain is an involved commitment to the informal, to a marvelously nomadic narrative whose path leads us to think that we might still find, hidden somewhere in the city, enough room for the everyday.
Saint George church
For many years the elevated section of the Fouad-Chehab highway served as the limit—or the gate, according to how we look at things—of Bachoura. This view, taken south of the highway and approximately a third of the way into Bachoura, bears witness to the incremental disappearance of the neighborhood: the days of its built form, its practices, and its community, are definitely numbered. By the summer of 2019, two towers, one on either side of the Saint George church, will both reach a good 20 stories, continuing the expansion of the Beirut Digital District all the while shrinking the space and capacity left for the vague urbain to resist.