

Planning and Crisis, Planning in Crisis

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Abstract

How does a profession that prides itself on standing for the common good and working through action –not mere analysis or gesturing– demonstrate its effectiveness in a city devastated by intractable political, economic, financial, health, and social crises? In this essay, I dive into the current context of planning in Beirut (Lebanon) where I have been deeply engaged for decades. Recognizing that planning is deeply embedded in the making of the ongoing overlapping crises in the country, I propose three pathways for thinking about a possible positive role for planning in these circumstances: (i) to (re)construct a source of legitimacy for planning by reconsidering who has custody over the planning process and how the legitimacy of planning is secured; (ii) to accept a “tactical” practice in which grand schemes are replaced with tentative, experimental, and incremental micro-interventions that may succeed or not in reaching an integrated vision and, (iii) to activate the performative dimension of planning, its ability to imagine shared spaces and allow for transgressing contemporary limited realities.

Keywords

Planning, Post-disaster, Crisis, Beirut, Performative, Southern-turn, Planning otherwise

On April 1, 2020, the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies published an op-ed titled “*You Can’t Imagine a More Perfect Storm*”. Pointing to the health crisis as an added challenge to the already crumbling economic and financial conditions in Lebanon, the author predicted a possible tipping point for the stressed political system. Later months would prove that what the article described as *the perfect storm* was only the tip of the iceberg. In August 2020, a massive explosion in Beirut’s port gave another massive blow to an already devastated population, shattering the lives and livelihoods of thousands and

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damaging at least one third of the city's housing stock. Almost two years after the port blast, Beirut's neighborhoods still bare the heavy marks of the port explosion, and more than half the apartments in the zones affected by the blast are uninhabited. At the national scale, the intensity of the country's meltdown is as striking as its speed; in less than two years, 75% of the Lebanese population and 80% of the estimated one million refugees living in the country have slid [below the poverty line](#). Meanwhile, the [GDP has contracted "brutally"](#) according to the World Bank while the national currency has fluctuated in the past month at 10-20% of its previous value and the minimum wage has dropped to about 40USD/month. The perfect storm is still unfolding, with no resolution in sight.

Where does planning and its practice stand in such a reality? What can planners deploy from the repertoire of action and reflections that the profession has to offer if they want to be more than distraught citizens, if they want to position themselves beyond those who, in Charles Blow's terms (2021), act as "the supposedly woke", those who "render beautiful meditations and deliver blistering orations to build a case without an action, diagram a problem without a solution?" How does a profession that prides itself on standing for the common good and working through action –not mere analysis or gesturing- demonstrate its effectiveness in a city devastated by intractable political, economic, financial, health, and social crises? In this short essay, I begin by taking stock of the practice of planning before proposing a few pathways for thinking about a possible role in Lebanon.

Planning in Crisis

To be sure, a first step in defining a role for planning in Lebanon is to recognize the complicity of the profession in fostering the ongoing overlapping crises. The actions of those Henri Lefebvre has called 'the urbanists' might be more benign than those of other actors in the country (1995). Yet it is clear that a critique of the sphere of professional planners, urban regulators, building developers, architects, the journalists who celebrate their work, and the universities that train them resonates with much of the critique of planning articulated in other contexts. This critique first recognizes planners as complicit with the commodification of land and its increased financialization, both of which are powerful triggers of Lebanon's contemporary financial crisis. In earlier work, I documented how the introduction of planning in Lebanon historically coincided with the adoption of the cadastral map as the default mode of spatial organization. It was hence through planning that natural landscapes were normalized as propertied and consequently traditional livelihoods undermined and social distinctions exacerbated (Fawaz 2017). Moreover, the tools of planning (e.g., land use zoning, building law, property law) have been integral to the organization of a speculative land market in Beirut (and beyond) [for the past three decades](#). Planning, consequently, has contributed to the current state of a city in which the housing crisis worsens while at least [one in five apartments is empty](#), hijacked by financial investments that use housing units as safety deposit boxes instead of as homes to live in. Furthermore, in line with Kanna's analysis of the role of planners in Dubai (2011), urbanists in Lebanon have contributed to the bestowal of a veneer of success upon financialization schemes. For years, glitzy development projects were used to demonstrate the supposed success of an economic project that otherwise hollowed out the city of its

residents. The most notorious of these planning interventions is undeniably the redevelopment of Beirut's historic core as *downtown*, a playground for the rich and their starchitects; a redevelopment, one that in turn inspired projects in other places such as Jordan (Hourani and Kanna 2014) and Morocco (Bogaert 2018) to similar effect. With the bust, downtown Beirut is largely abandoned and the massive investments seem to have gone to waste.

Planning, in sum, has contributed to the crises. Pages and pages of planning theory either flesh-out post-disaster planning recipes in good faith (Berke and Campanella 2006) or more modestly call for us to *learn* from crises in order to improve cities' resilience in the future (Ponzini 2016). Yet it is evident that planning, as it has been practiced in Lebanon, *is part of the problem*. In other words, planning *is in crisis* and there is a need to reinvent its practice if the profession is not to turn into what Flyvbjerg (2013) has described as a "zombie institution", an institution that conceals weaknesses and wrongdoings while it continues to reproduce the same discourse and make the same promises, irrespective of its demonstrated shortcomings.

Planning Otherwise

As I recognize the culpability of planning in the making of the overlapping crises, well in the tradition of what has come to be known in planning theory as *the dark side of planning* (see Yiftachel 2000), the basic promise that planning holds for creating collectivities is still seductive. The promise that collectivities can come together and organize how they will *live together*, to imagine, shape, and occupy the future shared spaces in which they will conduct their everyday lives is an aspiration that I am not prepared to drop. It is also clear that I am not alone in maintaining this position. This was evidenced in the aftermath of the Beirut port blast, in August 2020, when other colleagues and I were recurrently solicited *as planners*. Numerous residents in the devastated neighborhoods, as well as journalists, students, friends, and others, approached us *as professionals* asking: "What can be done? How will we rebuild the city?" Distrustful of state agencies, weary of the municipality, terrorized by the prospects of a reconstruction model that would replicate the experience of Beirut's historic core and displace neighborhood residents forever, people in Beirut still aspired for "planning" to recover their neighborhoods.¹ Similarly, non-governmental organizations and activist groups involved in the post-disaster repairs rapidly realized that for residents to return, it was not enough to fix individual homes. In line with other post-disaster recovery experiences, attention had to be paid to the collective spaces, and for those, *some form of planning was needed* (Al-Harithy 2021).

I suspect that this aspiration for planning to foster more livable spaces also motivates many planning theorists today (see, for instance, Jacobs 2019, Sager 2016, Sletto 2021), particularly scholars committed to the southern theorization project, the project of building planning theory *from the South* (Watson, 2016) Perhaps the most critical aspect of this *turn* in planning theory is its imploration to speak *from a place*, its call for scholars to recognize the importance of historical and geographic contextual factors, and to account for the nature of the planning system in the specific contexts where the possibilities of planning are being gaged. As such, a southern turn in planning theory is necessarily one

that defines planning as a “practice of knowing”, as proposed by Simin Davoudi (2015). To conceive of planning as a *practice of knowing*, Davoudi argued, is to recognize the complex interrelationship of four levels of learning: knowing what (cognitive/theoretical knowledge), knowing how (skills/technical knowledge), knowing why –or to what end (moral choices), and knowing how to do (action/practice). In a southern tradition of theorization, one may however need to extend this definition. First, we have to shift *knowing* from the all-encompassing universal approaches of the scientific model that traditional planners adopted to the incremental acts of *learning*, where knowledge is a project in the making, where *what counts as knowledge* is consistently reconsidered. Furthermore, each of the elements of knowing has to be historicized and contextualized, both in relation to place and to the interaction with global practices and traveling ideas (Healey 2012). In addition, the legitimation and justification of planning is required to shift from the assumption of a universal common good upheld by a single public custodian who speaks on behalf of a citizenry in matters of fact (Latour 2004) to an engagement with an ethos of care, in the feminist tradition of “matters of care” where learning is necessarily relational, about building a community rather than positioning oneself against it (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012, Jacobs 2019). Finally, the conception of the collectivities in whose name planning is practiced needs to account for the diversity in today’s societies where citizens with unequal rights rub shoulders with refugees and migrant workers, within communities rife with tensions and divisions (Watson 2009).

The task is daunting, but it seems that this reconsideration of the profession and its theorization is necessary if one is to reconstruct an aspirational model of planning, one that can support a new spatial imaginary and a modality of planning otherwise (Bates 2018). The project requires a reinvention of the categories of thinking and organization. In the remaining space of this essay, I articulate some elements of this project. I specifically build on my own engagement through and with the *Beirut Urban Lab* over the past three years to *recover* planning through processes of learning that investigate three elements of the practice: (a) legitimacy, (b) process, and (c) vision.

Pillar 1: [re]Construct a source of legitimacy for planning

My first pillar for how to think planning *otherwise* is to reconsider who has custody over the planning process and how the legitimacy of planning is secured.

An important contribution of the southern turn in planning theory has been to demonstrate the biases embedded in the assumption that the state is the benevolent custodian of a “shared good” (Yiftachel 2000). Thus, scholars have shown that state planning has often been driven by political projects and reproduced social inequalities along lines of, for example, race, ethnicity, and gender. These contributions are important, and they can lead to constructive critiques of the profession as *ineffective*, *outdated*, or *dark*. Yet the assumption that the practice of planning is necessarily limited to public state agencies carries undue biases that universalize the centrality of the state to all planning contexts.² In cities where informality is deeply entrenched in the everyday practices of the urban, it is reductive to limit planning practice to the compilation of a few dusty plans hidden in the drawers of poorly paid municipal officers. Instead, numerous studies have

shown that public agents intervene *among* other (more or less powerful) actors in planning. Consequently, practices of shaping territories towards a desirable collective future have been shown to extend to insurgent communities (Miraftab and Wills, 2005), militias (Fawaz 2009, Bou Akar 2018), powerful market agents, non-governmental organizations, and other actors who formulate visions for urban spaces, articulate them into plans, and sometimes implement these projects within and outside state institutions. In sum, a southern turn for planning theory needs to recognize that in some contexts, state agencies do not monopolize the practice of shaping territories in the name of the supposed common good of specific collectivities.

To think planning otherwise and recover its most inspiring promise, namely the possibility of living together *well*, it is important not to take the existence of a custodian of the planning process for granted. *Planning otherwise* may rest on setting in place processes through which the legitimacy of planning visions is gradually constructed *with the plan*. This requires that we trade debates about the objective nature of the “common good” (Moroni 2018, Campbell and Marshall 2002) with ethical considerations for specific values (e.g., inclusion, ecological viability) whereby the collective good is gradually built through the consolidation of shared platforms and constructive collaborations. In this context, the goal of planning otherwise is less to advocate for policy change in the traditional notion of advocacy planning and more to work at propelling radical system change (Sager 2016). It is also to recognize that societies are deeply fractured, a reality which renders potentially impossible a convergence towards a single custodian of one common good (Watson 2009).

At the Beirut Urban Lab, one initiative that falls under the title of building legitimacy for the planning process has sought to form a planning unit within the premises of the Municipality, but outside its hierarchies. Set up as a temporary, ad-hoc unit that seeks to support the organization of planning debates and the coordination of multiple NGOs, designers, and communities working in the post-disaster recovery of the city, the planning unit is imagined as a space of dialogue where a common ethos or doctrine for planning can be shaped.³ It also aims to build alliances among actors who converge on the same vision. Its location within the Municipal building is deliberately designed to rope in public actors involved in the city, to instigate and influence debates about the future of the spaces of Beirut, without subjugating the practices to the hierarchical structures of the municipality. Still in the making, this project is at the same time disruptive of existing ways of doing in the municipality, since it imposes the process of dialogue, but also constructive in empowering actual collaborations. Unimaginable when the Municipality of Beirut controlled prior to the financial crisis huge monetary flows, it has become possible today because international organizations and non-profit bodies can possibly support through its actions the activities of city authorities.

Pillar 2: Accept a “tactical” practice of planning

My second pillar for how to plan *otherwise* is to trade grand schemes with tentative, experimental, and incremental micro-interventions that may succeed or not in reaching an integrated vision, without the luxury of agreeing on a shared plan beforehand.

Among planning theorists, incremental planning (or “muddling through”) has played a critical role in forcing planning outside the claim that it can realistically operate within the framework of the rational scientific method (Lindblom 1996). By advocating an approach of muddling through, however, I am not thinking of Lindblom’s white men who deliberated behind closed doors on approaches of “limited rationality”. Instead, the proposal here is for micro-projects that act as disruptions but stitch across bodies of knowledge, worldviews, and positions to carve out possibilities and exploit temporary openings and short-term alignments. Through these short term interventions, one seeks to bring new forms of engagement through shared practices, new forms of mutual obligations that are shaped around particular paths. These engagements induce, in turn, new perspectives, and they generate a sense of belonging that can only occur when individuals share in the action and the effort (Simone 2015). As such, “a practice is more than a particular way of doing something, more than simply technique, for it entails obligations to others who have also practiced” (Simone 2015: 18).

Ironically, post-disaster recoveries may well offer such windows, as we witnessed recently in Beirut where the recovery of the neighborhoods affected by the port blast brought a flow of financing and experiences that were channeled towards the recovery of public spaces in shapes and forms that Beirut’s most progressive planners had not been able to implement in decades of plenty. Thus, the recent engagement of the Beirut Urban Lab, along with other NGOs and private agencies, advocating for donors to channel aid to public spaces and working together to stitch small scale micro-interventions so they work to create a meaningful urban intervention presents an inspiring example. In this experience, Beirut may not be unique. One can point out here, by way of example, to the experience of [Alejandro Aravena in Chile](#) where the post-earthquake recovery allowed the architect and his team to recover shared spaces in the city and build collectivities where tensions and divisions prevented such possibilities earlier. The main task is not to introduce some form of “deliberate planning”, but to capitalize instead on opportunities to assemble, establish networks across disparate worlds, make provisions within contexts that are rife with inequalities and injustices and among actors who may not agree on the ultimate goal but share a temporary goal.

As a research center seeking to foster this form of practice, the Beirut Urban Lab has sought to support the exercises of micro-planning by first building shared platforms of knowledge. Such platforms that generate the basis on which a common understanding of the city can begin to form.⁴ This shared knowledge, in turn, helps in forging spaces of collaboration, and it allows for smaller design interventions (often developed independently) to fit within one integrated vision that is built collaboratively over time. Such initiatives require unusual partnerships and sometimes difficult intersections with city-dwellers weary of what planning can bring, to build trust gradually while recognizing that individual worldviews are often constructed through personal experiences that cannot be uncritically channeled as *participation* into projects.

[3] Pillar 3: Appeal to the performative dimension of planning

My third pillar for how to do planning *otherwise* is to activate the performative dimension of planning, its ability to imagine shared spaces and allow for transgressing contemporary limited realities, to activate the aspirational political dimension of the practice.

Until recently, the proposal that planners could imagine “ideal” or “model” cities and/or propose visions of the future was faced with considerable resistance. Bruised by decades of modern planning that displaced populations and reproduced social injustices in the name of science and the common good, societies and professional planners alike have looked wearily at this proposition. In the past decade, however, planners have resorted back to visioning. Recovered through deliberative planning to facilitate debate, visioning has now expanded as a necessary practice to widen horizons in contexts ravaged by forces such as neoliberal planning (Gaffikin and Sterrett 2006) or colonialism (Hilal et al 2010), where spatial imaginaries are limited by the confines of property over landscape, for example, or nationality over society. Moreover, planning theorists looking to expand the knowledge from traditional professional practices as pointed to insurgent performances of reshaping space as inspirational to the practice (Miraftab 2009).

In Beirut where society is severely splintered and belief in a shared common good dismissed as impossible, the 2016 experiment of the Municipal Campaign of Beirut Madinati allowed tens of thousands of city dwellers to project themselves *through planning projects that would reshape the city* as a collective (Fawaz 2019). The numerous visuals and animations as well as the deliberative community meetings held in public spaces that the campaign staged to redraw Beirut as an equitable, inclusive, and ecological city allowed city-dwellers to identify in a common future despite the numerous hurdles that stood in the way of its materialization. As such, imagining planning as a vehicle towards a better city unraveled the political potential of the profession, its ability to create a platform in which individuals could gather and identify as a collective. The planning imaginary allowed for a shift from oppositional politics in which the rhetoric concentrated on denouncing what doesn't work to a constructive exercise of imagining *what could be*. In this space, it became possible to explore new spatial imaginaries around notions of urban citizenship, for example, where non-voters were still entitled to dream and enact the city's future as one where housing is a right and ecology matters. It shifted (in Yiftachel's terms), “the struggle to the materiality of urban life, its identity and politics, rather than the legal and bureaucratic realms of state institutions” (Yiftachel 2015: 17).

Since then, we have been experimenting at the Beirut Urban Lab with several projects that build on the specific appeal of planning, its ability to bring people together to discuss the shared spaces in which they could live. Much of our effort has been about gathering planners and other professionals of the built environment with whom we hope to share a new ethos of what is a desirable spatial future that speaks of continuous landscapes and shared commons instead of exploitation factors and building height restrictions. To give a couple of examples, the Lab has put forward new regulations for Beirut's coast in which this privatized and illegally occupied commons is recovered. The proposed plans have spread like wildfire in the city and brought invitations for discussions from numerous citizen groups, parties across the political spectrum, and interested residents. The plans have also been appropriated and spread by activist groups. As such, without being

effectively enacted, the visions of the shared commons transformed the ways in which many imagined what the city should be. Planning had performed a collective, without the actual planning happening. In the aftermath of the Beirut port blast, it is again through such an exercise (this time around a green park) that the Lab and other partners have sought to reinvent the planning conversation. We are still at the beginning of this planning exercise, but the hope is to again appeal to planning as a performance of a collective where the right to housing, the protection of urban cultures and histories, the cohabitation of groups, and the building of a more convivial city can occur.

Looking forward

In closing, due to its implication in the making of the overlapping crises that contemporary societies endure, and that we in Lebanon experience acutely, planning needs to recognize that it is in *crisis*. Its legitimacy and practices are questioned and this is for good reason. Yet it is possible to think of the crisis as a possible tipping point in which planning could recover its aspirational side, the promise that collectivities can come together and organize the modalities in which they will imagine, shape, and occupy shared spaces in the future. While planning cannot alter the fundamental relations in society (Parnell et al., 2009; Kunzmann 2016), it still is capable of holding a space for social justice, a space that “needs to be actualized” (Jacobs 2019, p. 26). In this essay, I have recounted the efforts deployed to take that space seriously. Yet major challenges remain. Decades ago, planning theory accepted incrementalism in planning approaches. Can we accept incrementalism, today, for the very premise of the planning practice, the gradual articulation of a common good and the actors and institutions that will act as its custodians? And are performative practices sufficient to infuse hope when dire needs are unmet? These questions are yet to be unanswered.

Notes

1. See also Bou Akar (2018) about the aspiration for planning in Lebanon.
2. Yiftachel (2000), for example, defines planning as “the public production and regulation of space”.
3. For more on planning doctrine, see Faludi (2000).
4. Aside from the Beirut Building Environment Database cited above, the City of Tenants and Precarious City also offer inform about housing conditions while the Beirut Urban Observatory has sought to share knowledge about the Beirut port-blast recovery.

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