

SPLACES: Reflections and Aspirations of Hope in a City's Leftover Spaces

Introduction

Welcome to a place where we unfold the birth and subsequent journey of SPLACES. We move on to investigate the spirit of the city, followed by an explorative glimpse into the possible interventions that may be applied in SPLACES. This writing is essentially a journey into our cities' in between left over spaces and their potential to overcome social and ecological adversity and disconnect. Throughout this writing, the choice of path taken to get to our destination is continuously opening and closing, revealing moments of clarity to quickly take an unexpected turn somewhere more serious and definite. While we casually skinny dip in and out of both the planned and unplanned, the predictable and unpredictable.

Moments of Deviation

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine yourself walking through your city. Do you traverse the main roads to get to your destination? OR

Do you take a shortcut through an alleyway? You are a little intimidated by the darkness. Do you decide to make your way across a neglected piece of land? The smell of the unexpected plant population, and a waft of something less desirable, encapsulates your senses. Do you squeeze yourself along a narrow non-intended path? You know it will get you where you need to in less time so you risk the slight grazes against the rough edges.

Is it time for a rest? Do you lean against a wall whilst taking in the latest 'Street Art'? You are temporarily entertained by some of the slogans and images. Do you possibly stop to listen to a random busker stationed along the side of the pavement? The electric sound of the music resonates in your ears.

Are you hungry thus far? Do you cross an uneven underpass to get to your favourite food truck parked under a shady tree? Munch! Yum! Do you journey along a pedestrian bridge, deceptively leading nowhere - other than exactly where you are - to buy a few veggies from a car boot for tonight's dinner? You pay the seller, who welcomingly receives the money, and carry on.

Along the way you may notice a gathering of boys playing football in an empty car park; a couple of seniors sitting on their deck chairs on the side of the street competing at Backgammon or chess; a waiter's legs

dangling from the bins at the back of the restaurant, taking a cigarette break while scrolling through their phone; or a teenage anarchist spray painting “*fall in love, not in line*”.

Perhaps this isn't your exact experience of your city; however these spaces, these moments, do exist in every city, if only in small doses.

The Birth

The very nature of a city is complex and multifaceted; continuously struggling to accommodate and cultivate a variety of traditions, cultures, political views, technologies and future aspirations. At times delicately, and at times not so delicately, striving to balance the intricate shift of authority and freedom in the everyday. Places and spaces in the city are physical ever-changing imprints of these complexities.

Back in 2004 while living in Beirut the term SPLACES was coined. Walking was my main means of movement around the city. While wandering along the multiple beating veins of the urban outdoors, an increasing number of 'lonely spaces' came to sight. A sudden spark of intrigue and wonder struck my somewhat catatonic being, awakening every sense and expanding every thought. There is something magical about walking aimlessly and un-apologetically through the everyday. In his book 'The Practice of Everyday Life', Michele De Certeau analyses - through poetic and semiotic language - the value of walking in the context of daily urban life:

“These (walkers) make use of the spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms. The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognised poems in which each body is an element signed by many others elude legibility. It is as though the practices organising a bustling city were characterised by their blindness...Escaping the imaginary totalisation produced by the eye, the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surfaces only upper limit outlining against the visible.” (De Certeau, 1984, p.93)

In an almost utopian manner he conceives of 'walking' as a channel to encounter spaces that otherwise cannot be seen. This is typical of cities that rely heavily on cars as a main mode of transport, such as Beirut.

The year 2004 was an exciting moment in time for urban life in Beirut, The city was in the midst of the post war era; regenerating, rebuilding, and redeveloping. An optimistic flare of excitement and opportunity cradled every fragile cell in the city. Many spaces in the city were previously abandoned and searching for

new life. Some spaces were disputed over as their owners were now long gone, they had fled abroad as a backlash to the civil war. These very spaces were left to absorb and ingest the city's social and political complexities. The frail line between private and public ownership was ridiculously ambiguous, thus these spaces retreated, falsely denying their worth and value. They became 'neglected' only housing temporary happenings and were sometimes even temporarily exploited; temporary paid car parks, make shift children's playground, a place to walk the dog, to hang out in hiding, to store things or oneself out of sight, and in some cases even occupied by squatters. Beirut, therefore, became the stepping stone into the world of SPLACES, and a journey into a more thorough understanding of what makes a city.

The City

As so eloquently verbalised in the book 'Invisible Cities', Calvino tries to grasp the meaning of a city that is ever evolving; "What is the aim of the city under construction unless it is a city? Where is the plan you are following, the blueprint? We will show it to you as soon as the working day is over (...) they answer. Work stops at sunset. Darkness falls over the building site. The sky is filled with stars. There is the blueprint, they say." (Calvino, 1974, p.127) In an attempt to unravel the essence of a city, Calvino explores the many faces the city paints, the many characters it plays, and the ever-changing way in which it represents itself.

Cities, therefore, are made up of several layers. In fact, Beirut is literally made up of seven layers; seven entire cultures, sandwiched together one above the other. As we peel away each layer we find frozen deep within its core; time, space, identity, language. Within each layer some of these core findings may be at conflict with one another, and some may live symbiotically, feeding the whole harmoniously. The city is indeed an ecosystem of its own, fragmented and connected in every way possible.

But who are the participants in this ecosystem? This is a question that has many answers: Is the city for the trees, for the weeds, the meadows, rivers, creeks, wetlands and seas, for the bees and butterflies, for the foxes, stray cats and dogs? Is it for the stars and all the planets, and for the rainbows, the rain, snow and clouds? Is it for the plastics, for the buildings, the factories, the statues, the monuments and landmarks? Is it for the cars, the planes, the busses and the trains, the satellites, technologies, virtual realities, and artificial intelligence? Is it for the people; people in power, people feeling powerless, people with homes or the homeless, the thinkers, the doers, the freedom seekers and the conformists? And so you see the list goes on... Of course we all know the city is home to all of these things and more, whether it is welcome or not.

Let us for a moment take precedence - without seeking to disappoint all the other vital stakeholders - secretly divulge ourselves into the anthropogenic city. The city is after all a human intervention.

The Body and the City

The physiological connection between our bodies and the outside world has somehow always existed, whether in the technology we design or the cities we build. The way our veins bump blood through our bodies creating networks of movement towards and away from the heart, is much like the multiple networks leading to the centre of London, Paris, Glasgow, and even Beirut. "Patterns that exist in the world outside the
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body exist also in the world inside the body.” (Cohen et al., 2021, p.66). The patterns used to design a city are simply a manifestation of what exists within us both in body and mind, and this is no accident. However, the design of the high-rise and the rapid speed of urbanisation has come with its shortfalls, creating a disconnect from the internal projection we sought to create.

This detached, disjointed approach suggests that there has been a lack of understanding between the living and the sterile. In this context the sterile is the introduction of the physical non-living object; the building, the bench, the wall and so on. Without the existence of the traditional biological definition of life, non-living objects are lifeless and are therefore sterile. Perhaps David Harvey in his 2000 book; *Spaces of Hope*, said it best in which he describes built spaces as creating a divide of the physical senses. In which sight is more routinely insulated from sound, touch and other human beings. The symbiotic relationship between the sterile and the living has become deadening. “...a man sees from his office window a tree blowing in the wind but cannot hear the wind blowing.” (Sennett, 1992, p.109)

The Authoritarian City

With the rise of smart cities, there has been a rise in authority over the individual. This is not to suggest that smart cities cannot and have not contributed to better urban living, they have just encroached heavily on the threshold of individual freedom and healthy collective relationships. As suggested by Short in *Three Urban Discourses*, cities have an authority embedded within. The layout of streets and location of things, the traffic lights, and police impose structure in our lives, behaviours, and chosen paths; power is both reflected and embodied in the city. Short agrees that urban society is an order in time and space and a discipline of space and time. The urban built form is then a “system of boundaries and transgressions, centres and peripheries, surveillances and gesture, gazes and performances.” (Short, 2003, p.19) The question is where do we draw the line?

The Right to the City and Ownership

The right to the city reflects on our previous question ‘*But who are the participants in this ecosystem?*’. Here we must remember that we’ve chosen to discuss the anthropogenic city; the human participants. However not all humans are truly welcome in the urban ecosystem. As well as hope, there is also hostility and a lack of acceptance towards many people and certain social practices. This of course is quite a generalised discourse,

and many arguments can be given as to why a lack of acceptance does and should exist. Nonetheless, let's take a moment to familiarise ourselves with people's social needs.

Lefebvre alleges that social needs have an anthropological foundation. These needs are both opposed and complimentary; the need for security and opening; for certainty and adventure; for organisation and play; for the predictable and unpredictable; for similarity and difference; for isolation and encounter; for exchange and investments of independence, even solitude, and communication; for immediate and long term prospects (Lefebvre, 1996, p.57). You see with so many needs, urban dwellers are already programmed with a set of inherent social practices that must be carried out, or else there becomes great dissatisfaction in urban living. By appropriation of public space - or of the ambiguous public/private space - within the city, urban dwellers are inadvertently practicing their needs, and in many instances changing the city's intended spatial configuration by doing so. Therefore the right to the city implies the right to fully engage in and make use of spaces in the city (Harvey, 2000).

The Experimental City

The city exists as a microcosm of a country's virtues and vices; the economic wealth and deprivation, the social equality and inequality, climate change control and climate change consequences - all chaotically and systematically contained in the physical and ideological foundations of a city. It is by way of right that the city becomes the dominant arena for creating change, specifically in the wake of challenges. In order to create and steer change we must first experiment (Evans et al., 2014). By explicitly staging experiments we change the way in which we build, manage and live in cities. Experimentation allow for the smart city, the happy city, the low carbon city, the sustainable city, the eco-city. These urban movements give life to the notion of better living. Thus it is the experimental city that is prominent across a broad spectrum of urban thought and practice (Evans et al., 2016).

Defining SPLACES

SPLACES are situated around or beside the functional places in the city. These undefined, uncontrolled margins offer a temporary retreat or hideaway from the more structured conforming spaces. They are momentarily possessed by their users; where they are free to plan, act, and practice their free will without the interference of factors beyond the SPLACE itself. If only for a short moment in time.

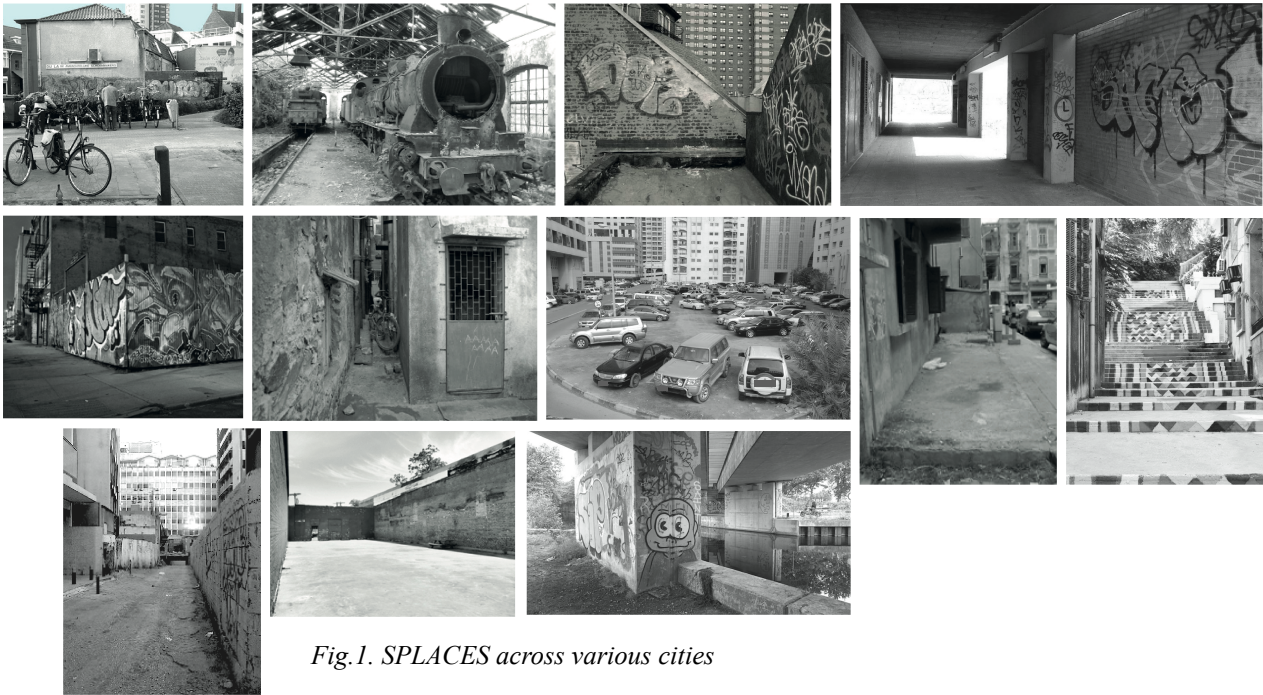


Fig.1. SPLACES across various cities

After some years of effort to delicately seize the free flowing spirit of a SPLACE an ever evolving definition - quite unlike the purpose of a definition - was poetically transcribed. Much like the experience of a child taking delight in catching and gathering the seeds of a dandelion flower after having blown them out into the unknown. A SPLACE is:

A disruption in the typical urban flow or a moment of deviation, they are an expression of the city's natural transcendence when left to its own will. What may sometimes be viewed as untidy, unplanned parts of the city, these spaces nurture an instant of fear, or hope, a happening(s) and a memory. If the city is a body and a being, then SPLACES are the entrails; unappealing to some, visually out of sight to many, yet a vital functional part of the whole.

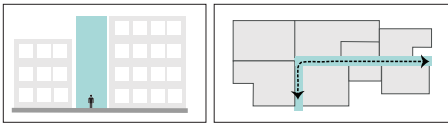
A Physical and Social Dimension

Take a moment to observe your city, you will begin to witness how Mother Nature and city dwellers - sometimes simultaneously - embark on a journey of appropriation. Creeping through the crevices of a SPLACE, to reclaim their right to the the city by defying authority and structure. Over several years of similar observation, in several cities, many SPLACES both alike in form and unique in number began to unfold. By identifying specific characteristics a global typology was created, ranging from abandoned or temporarily un-operated train tracks to narrow spaces in between buildings; commonly found in cities that have developed organically. A full, and by no means final list can be found below:

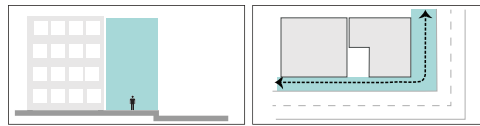
• Alleyway	• Side walk
• Back of house	• Stairs
• Car park	• Through road
• Dead end	• Train track
• Large space in between buildings	• Underpass
• Narrow space in between buildings	• Wall
• Pedestrian flyover	• Abandoned building

SPLACES Typology

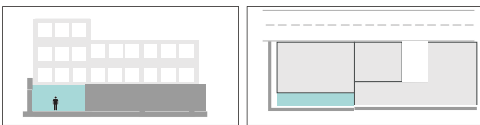
Alleyway



Sidewalk



Back of House



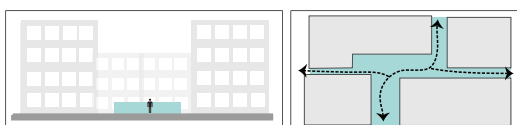
Stairs



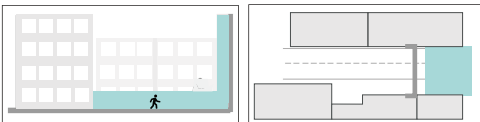
Car Park



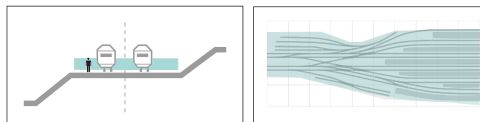
Through Road



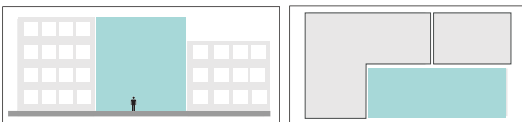
Dead End



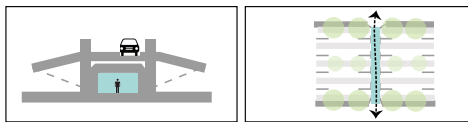
Train Track



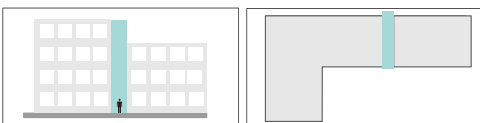
Large Space in Between Buildings



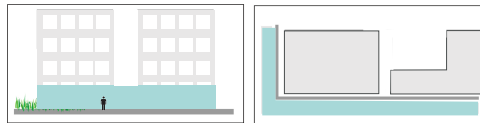
Underpass



Narrow Space in Between Buildings



Wall



Pedestrian Flyover

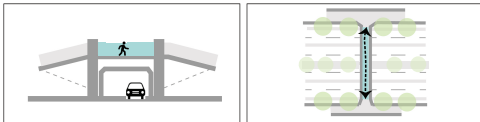


Fig.2. Spatial Typology of SPLACES

Contemplation and Design Interventions

As a designer we can all too often find ourselves in this never-ending loop of over designing, of no real understanding of the true 'nature' behind the space or the user, of compromising the better good with other less noble purposes, but the very essence of the profession is more humble. We have been given the vast privilege and responsibility to facilitate the lives of urban users, to seek out places of respite, imagination, creativity, opportunity and above all draw ones attention towards community and connection. SPLACES offer room for escaping the everyday urban bluster (noise) for those moments of deviation that we all desire. All the while they become part of a network of something larger in which everyday urban life can be, and should be diverse.

In the words of Kevin Lynch "Public open space usually means an athletic field, a beach, a lawn, with trees and shrubs, a woodland with trails and picnic areas, perhaps a central plaza. Many other kinds can easily be imagined: mazes, heaths, thickets, canyons, rooftops. Caves, marshes, canals, undersea gardens, yards for certain hobbies. We should design for diversity of city people and their values." (Lynch, 1990, p.92) With the effects of the pandemic still looming over us, now more than ever should we design for alternative public spaces in the city. Perhaps we will now realise that somewhere along our urban journey we lost touch of what it really is to be human, to be a part of the natural world, and what it means to find belonging and connection to ourselves. And more importantly what it is to be living alongside something larger, rather than the individual alone.

When we think in terms of the collective, imagine the numerous ever-expanding possibilities that may manifest when confronted with a SPLACE. By understanding the role of SPLACES in a city we begin to visualise the possibilities and opportunity for connection, to repair the disconnect that has so rapidly spread throughout body and build. Reconnecting the body to the city by allowing our senses to re-align; our ears can begin to hear, and our noses can begin to smell, and our hands can begin to touch what our eyes see. Through SPLACES we can claim our right to the city and welcome the right for other living things (fauna and flora) to dwell in the city, where we are free to create a temporary, adaptable and transient space. SPLACES can offer the opportunity for 'self-builds' through large scale modules - similar to giant lego pieces - free of digital connection so that we may truly reconnect to ourselves, and work together, heal together and with each other in person. Perhaps SPLACES can become the inverted smart city, the experimental part of the city where the signs read 'leave your phone at the door and reconnect'.

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