

Beyond the Organic Intellectual: Politics and Contestation in the Planning Practice

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Abstract

Critical scholarship often presents technical experts such as architects and urbanists as unidimensional “organic intellectuals” in the Gramscian sense. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork conducted among architects-turned-campaigners in Lebanon, this article argues that this portrayal of experts is partial, and inadequate to represent and make sense of the composite coalitions that animate contemporary urban politics worldwide. This will be clarified by a close examination of the Hakmeh Axis Campaign, where architects and urbanists have initiated a vigorous civic campaign to oppose the construction of a motorway bridge through a historical neighborhood in Beirut. By exploring the politics of planners—rather than that of planning—the article will show the alignment between expertise and authorities to be a matter of political affiliation rather than natural necessity. [Expertise; Civic Campaigning; Urban Space; Politics; Lebanon]

In the spring of 2014, a prominent Lebanese architect took to the pages of the country’s English-language newspaper to voice his opinions on the latest infrastructural plan announced by the municipality of Beirut (*al baladia*) a year earlier and expected. The Hakmeh Axis project was a decades-old plan for a bridge first conceived of in the 1950s and, after a forty-year hiatus, resurrected in hopes of easing some of city’s famous traffic (*‘aj’a*) problems. Justified as the ideal infrastructural solution to the chronic congestion of the city’s eastern area, the bridge would connect the upper side of the Achrafieh hill to the Sea Road (Charles Helou Avenue), cutting across the neighborhoods of Achrafieh and Mar Mikhael. The road would pass right next to the well-known high school *Collège de la Sagesse (Al Hakmeh)*, and its construction would substantially restructure the fabric of the area. Works would in fact cause the destruction of numerous residential buildings, many of which had historical character, as well as rare pockets of green—the last tokens of Achrafieh’s agricultural past. Many long-term residents would lose their homes and be forced to relocate.

The architect’s assessment was altogether not too positive.

Unfortunately, the problems with the Fouad Boutros Axis project persist

However, the responses heard in the past week reveal a much more serious set of problems that have led to this confrontation. They reveal an outdated understanding of the contemporary city and administrative thinking that is out of touch with solutions being used worldwide and with the ambitions of Beirut's citizens and their right to the city.

Hashim Sarkis, the *Daily Star*, 4 April 2014

Sarkis was not the only expert in Beirut to openly dislike the project. When in 2012 some academics and practitioners in the field of architecture first heard that the Hakmeh Axis project might go ahead, a number of them began mobilizing against it. Among these were Joseph and Atallah, two architects in their twenties and forties respectively. When I met the two in 2015, the group had been campaigning for the better part of three years. Atallah and Joseph's stories epitomized those of many of their colleagues and fellow campaigners. Apart from having helped kickstart the Fouad Boutros campaign, Joseph was engaged in other civic causes related to the built environment, such as the protection of historical buildings, including collaborating with a local heritage non-governmental organization (NGO). Atallah had not done any active campaigning in years, but he was far from being a novice in the field. After the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), when he was fresh out of university, he had mobilized together with many other professionals, academics, and ordinary citizens against the reconstruction of the city's Downtown. Led by a private-public company effectively controlled by the then-prime minister, the project was strongly criticized at the time because it would replace the socially mixed historical city center with an island of wealth and privilege made of new luxury developments with no soul (Makdisi 1997; Naccache 1998). Demoralized by the ensuing defeat, Atallah, like many others, abandoned open mobilization; however, alongside his career, he continued to work to protect the built heritage, teaming up with like-minded colleagues and the Ministry of Culture. Thanks to their efforts, many heritage buildings were listed and preserved. Yet for the past three years, he had returned to active campaigning, appalled by a project that, from his point of view, had no technical justification whatsoever and was likely to serve only the interests of those behind it. After years of quiet work behind the scenes, Atallah was thus drawn back in by yet another project that smacked of particularistic interests, but which was presented as the ultimate urbanistic marvel. In response, Atallah, Joseph, and their fellow campaigners advocated for a better management of the existing infrastructure, and for the building of a neighborhood park in Mar Mikhael instead of a highway. The municipality's understanding of urban management clearly had little in common with Atallah and Joseph's.

Anthropology's concern for urban change has grown in the past two decades, with a specific emphasis on the multiple forces that structure and restructure the physical and social environments of cities in the neoliberal era. Ethnographically, researchers have focused on documenting the ways in which inhabitants are affected by these disruptions and

relocations, and the ways in which they navigate the new socio-spatial arrangements (Ismail 2006; Elyachar 2005; Horst 2008; Holston 1989; Kanna 2011; Herzfeld 2009). State-led urban planning has thus featured prominently in this literature as one of the forces shaping cities, responsible for the top-down disruption and reconstitution of urban life. In this, anthropologists have been largely inspired and influenced by critical scholarship on space, such as Lefebvre (1991), Castells (1977), and De Certeau (1984), whose work has exposed the strong alignment between state planning and elites' interests, and planning's strong tendency to benefit the middle and upper classes at the disadvantage of marginalized city dwellers—planning's “noir side.”

Yet, anthropologists have arguably shown remarkably little ethnographic interest for architects and engineers themselves.¹ This might be explained in part as a professional inclination, since anthropologists are committed to learning from the marginalized and the voiceless, and thus tend to foster an interest in forms of local knowledge and expertise that are not institutionalized or officially recognized (Harvey & Knox 2015). Moreover, researchers might face issues of access to planning agencies and architectural studios (Barthel 2010; Baxstrom 2013).

Beyond this, and more importantly here, anthropologists have regarded architects and engineers as an integral part of the planning machine that, as Abram and Weszkalnys (2013) have remarked, they have tended to demonize. Experts do appear occasionally as interlocutors in ethnographic studies, but they are primarily examined for their function within the planning process, as the minds and hands drafting the plans that authorities will then implement. In these analyses, the state, bureaucracies and their effects are often the actual object of study. By extension, experts are seen as tacitly advancing the interests of their powerful patrons through their work, agreeing to disguise self-interested projects as technical solutions dictated by scientific necessity that it is claimed rests at the heart of planning. The technical expert assumes the role of “the villain in the critical social sciences” (Harvey & Knox 2015, 9), the prototype of the “organic intellectual” (Gramsci 2006).²

Notable exceptions to this general trend do exist. Two such instances are Harvey and Knox (2015) and Evans (2016)'s ethnographies, analyzing the construction of a motorway in Peru and the planning of the legacy of the London Olympic Park respectively. All such works confirm and elaborate on the inextricable entanglement of politics and planning but also present richer pictures of experts—as well as some bureaucrats—as complex, tri-dimensional characters.³ These ethnographic engagements also remind us that accounts emphasizing engineers' ordering capacity “capture a key dimension of the modern engineer's self-image, but as descriptions of engineering practice they run up against the limits of their own presuppositions and pay scant attention to the anxieties and internal critiques that have *always* been integral to modernist thinking” (Harvey & Knox 2015, 8, emphasis added).

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Such critiques are exemplified by Davidoff's (1965) "advocacy planning," the spirit of which has inspired experts to stand with communities and against authorities (Checkoway 1994). The construction of the Narmada River Valley dam (Turaga 2000; Routledge 2003) and the redevelopment of Berkley's People's Park (Allen 2011; Mitchell 2016) are two such cases. More recently, "radical planning" has also encouraged experts to develop a critical attitude toward neoliberal participatory practices that promise inclusion but often fall short of that target (Miraftab 2009; Tooley 2017). Against this background, Harvey and Knox's (2015) approach is helpful and particularly important because it acknowledges these kinds of self-critiques and takes them seriously, while simultaneously examining the nuances of the engineering practice ethnographically, thus complicating the relationship between discursive rhetoric, politics, technical expertise, and the concrete realization of engineering projects.

This article builds on such work, with the aim of problematizing assumptions about the relationship between technical experts, their expertise, and power. Particularly, the following pages will question the "organic" relationship between experts and political power that seems implied by much of the work on planning in the critical social sciences. After a more in-depth exploration of the notion of "organic intellectual," the argument will be articulated by drawing from two main sources: in the first section, the rich critical architectural literature that exists on the historical development of Lebanese urban planning; and in the second, ethnographic data collected among experts-turned-civic campaigners. Focusing on an instance where technical skills are directed against central planning, the third section suggests that the subservience of professional expertise to the state and its ruling elites is not a matter of natural necessity but rather one of political affiliation, and that expertise can be a weapon to attempt to curtail the interests of the ruling elites as much as it can be a vehicle for their enhancement. This acknowledgment will in turn offer some room to reconsider architects' social commitments and role in the public sphere.

The final point put forth by the article is in fact that focusing our attention on the changing positioning of experts within urban politics offers a vantage point from which it is possible to better explore the reconfigurations of power geographies that are taking place in cities today. Especially at a time when urban life under neoliberal modes of governance is constantly "creatively destroyed" and restructured (Harvey 2007; Peck & Tickell 2002), I suggest that an ethnographic outlook on professionals of the built environment might help critical scholarship to acknowledge and examine the full diversity of actors, coalitions, and forms of opposition to top-down urban governance that are emerging on the ground. Assessing the strengths, fragilities, strategies, and potentialities of these coalitions, I argue, might be key to sharpening our analyses of contemporary urban politics.

High-modernism, Gramsci, and Urban Planning in Anthropology

The management of urban spaces has held a central role in the development of the planning practice, and cities in colonized and non-colonized worlds have served as open-air laboratories for social engineering, designed by experts and endorsed by authorities (Rabinow 1989; Scott 1998; Abram & Weszkalnys 2013). Modern urbanistic efforts have sought to impose a coherent rationality and a homogeneous, geometrical, and formal order, to enforce a “concept city” (De Certeau 1984, 95) and an abstract plan over the otherwise spontaneous chaos of the urban (Lefebvre 1970; Merrifield 1993) in order to regulate it, shape it, and renew it according to ostensibly scientific principles. From Baron Haussmann’s retrofitting of Paris (Harvey 2013) to the openly modernist construction of Brasilia (Holston 1989) and Portmore (Horst 2008), urbanism has served as a political tool to attempt to create a new, perfected social urban order, one that was supposed to improve citizens’ lives while simultaneously making populations and space more easily controllable. Experts have often espoused this technocratic project eagerly, as it combined well with their own “pious aspirations” (Rodwin 1981, 231) about the utopian promise of planning. If only the anti-scientific demands of politics could be kept at a distance, planners would have been able to finally make good use of their near-infallible technical expertise. Political constraints and meddling, and failures and their consequences on local populations were, of course, routinely hidden from sight, downplayed, and concealed via denials (Ferguson 1990; Mitchell 2002).

As the material creators and executors of plans, experts appear as organic intellectuals in the Gramscian sense: fully involved in the statist practice of planning, they act as “the dominant’s group ‘deputies’, exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political governance” (2006 [1994], 88). This black-and-white perspective on planning experts locates them squarely within the state’s planning machine: designers and executors of the sociopolitical elites’ projects, submitted yet aligned with the power designs of rulers. Few anthropological works have presented a more nuanced picture. Among these, one interesting instance is Ahmed Kanna’s (2011) work on the development of Dubai, and particularly his detailed discussion of “starchitects” work in the United Arab Emirates. There, Kanna argues that, even when they embrace some of the insights offered by radical planning, “starchitects” working for local elites risk reinforcing the latter’s political hegemony. This, architects do by uncritically incorporating official narratives about the history and character of the nation in their projects, thus reproducing and legitimizing these narratives and their creators; however, this is presented by Kanna as a pitfall of the architects’ clumsy attempt to include the local “culture” in their work rather than a conscious decision to side with authorities.

The argument can be pushed further still to suggest that the relationship between power and experts may in fact take different shapes. A close examination of urban planning in Beirut provides us with an opportunity to explore one such alternative articulation and the implications that this analysis might carry for anthropological theory more generally. A focused review of the vast literature on the historical development of this relationship since the post-WWII era offers some initial material.

Governments in early Independent Lebanon displayed little interest for urban planning. In the decades following Independence from France in 1943, Beirut grew dramatically in size and population, making the management of the sprawling built environment a rather pressing issue (Bourgey & Pharès 1973; Kassir 2010). However, successive plans were commissioned and immediately shelved (plan Ecochard 1943; Egli planning report 1950; Ecochard-Egli masterplan 1954). Some of the measures taken by such plans clashed with powerful interests, particularly those of the powerful and politically well-connected construction industry. The fortunes of planners began to change in the late 1950s, with President Fouad Shihab's reformism (1958–1964), based on the centrality of the state, giving planning a new central position within public action. If issues of urban management were still seen by the administration as being of secondary importance (Verdeil 2014), the concerted pressure of architects and engineers—collectively called *muhandesun* in Arabic⁴ and established as an official Order in the early 1950s—gained some victories. Administrative bodies in charge of overseeing urban planning, such as the Planning Ministry, the General Directorate of Urban Planning (DGU), and the Higher Council for Urban Planning, were all established at this time (Ghandour 2003). Moreover, the 1954 Ecochard masterplan was finally adopted in 1964, albeit heavily amended. The most significant alterations related to the realm of zoning, since the final plan allowed higher floor-area ratios (FARs) than what was originally set.⁵ In practical terms, this meant that a higher density of construction was allowed in the different sectors of the city, itself a gift to landowners and real estate developers (Verdeil 2014).

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If the adoption of the masterplan depended on architects' lobbying, changes to FARs within it were evidence of the continued and successful pressure exerted by the construction industry on policy-makers. This version of the masterplan was openly disliked by many local planners. At the same time, given the circumstances, compromising on some aspect of the project was deemed unavoidable by most, if any plan was to be approved at all (Verdeil 2012). In the end, the masterplan was only applied discontinuously. In the absence of state proactivity, it was largely private initiative that confronted Beirut's rapid urbanization and gave the city its shape. Atallah summarized this history best when he told me that:

The problem is that there is no masterplan for the city that tells you what the city needs, and there is no vision of what city do we want one generation from now. It's all ad hoc, most big decisions are taken by

developers, through cumulative actions they decide on density. I mean, they don't even decide: the result of their work is the decision on density.

(Interview with Atallah, August 2015)

The *laissez-faire* approach adopted by the Lebanese state, and the free reign that this left to the construction industry, meant that the latter was the true urbanistic force in Independent Beirut.

The traditional Lebanese “loose approach” to planning (Kassir 2010, 417) has certainly not waned in the contemporary period. First, the legal framework regulating the built environment has been gradually modified to favor the interests of private developers, who are often directly involved in the drafting of new legislation (for instance, the 2004 Building law in Krijnen & Fawaz 2010; see also Geisser & Pieri, 2014). Secondly, the practice of public agencies overseeing the granting of planning permissions has been increasingly informalized, meaning that the application of regulation is often suspended, so that decision-making based on ad hoc exceptions to the law has become a *de facto* planning practice (Fawaz 2016). As eloquently stated by architect Hicham El-Achkar (2012, 6), in the field of the management of the built environment:

[. . .] the dominant political elite exercises two kinds of interventions on the public authorities: a formal one, via regulation, exemption and extension of implementation; and an informal one, by politicizing the administration and exerting pressure. [. . .] the inactive actions' aim is to preserve the status quo, while the active actions serve the enlargement of real-estate development. From another side, the dominant elite invest heavily in real estate, through their companies, or as silent associates.

Urban planning thus was and indeed still is marred by political and economic interests, something that is common knowledge among experts and that, as we have seen, has often attracted their staunch disapproval, too. As became clear during fieldwork, if the hold of developers on public decision-making has not abated in the post-war period, the disagreement from sectors of the country's experts has not faded, either.

Expertise in Action: The Fouad Boutros Coalition

The Fouad Boutros campaign, the full name of which is the more lengthy “Civil Coalition against the Highway project ‘Hakmeh-Turk axis’ (Fouad Boutros Road)” (*al intilaf al madani al rafad ‘ala tariq muhdur ‘al Hakmeh- al Turk’* [shar‘a Fouad Boutros]) represented the continued professional disapproval and deep frustration felt by some *muhandesun* in Beirut. While in time the campaign had gained the active support of many local residents, its first impulse had come from a mixed network of professionals and academics.⁶ Much in the same way as the reconstruction of the Downtown twenty years earlier, the Fouad Boutros project was seen by campaigners as an example of public works subjugated

to economic and political interests, but presented as a project devised to better citizens' lives and justified by the logics of technical expertise. My interlocutors deemed it a perfect example of the infallible hegemony of private interests and political motives in contemporary Beirut—and they did not shy away from expressing their views on the matter, in private and in public.

At some point in the autumn of 2012, a number of academics heard that the municipality was preparing to implement the project. Quickly, some of them took initiative and contacted other colleagues; an initially small group grew quickly. All sorts of experts joined: they were environmentalists, architects and engineers, academics, and practitioners, living both in Lebanon and abroad. Many of them had mobilized against *Solidere*, not only by joining protests but also by publishing newspaper articles and editing academic books on the topic. Some also supported other causes surrounding public space management in the city, and I heard their names or pieces being mentioned across different campaigns. The rate at which the campaign grew shows how much frustration experts in Beirut felt at the way authorities—who they have to deal with regularly—manage the urban environment. Soon the group began lobbying the municipality to stop the project—as Joseph put it, to “talk some sense into them.” The campaign’s main argument was that the project followed an outdated, flawed, 1950s rational that urban planning had long abandoned in favor of more efficient approaches. Throughout the winter, professionals tried to convince municipal planning “experts” to abandon the project. Perhaps unsurprisingly, my interlocutors always stressed the inverted commas in “experts” in this context, to clarify their lack of belief in these people’s professional credentials, since in their view municipal plans displayed no trace of actual professional expertise.

With this initial pressure unsuccessful, campaigners began talking about the project publicly, contacting the press and TV channels to spread the news. Between 2012 and 2015, three different waves of public outrage hit the municipality via the media: as the news spread and the scandal grew, all kinds of broadcasters, regardless of their political affiliation, turned sympathetic to their cause. This was documented by the Coalition’s large and growing news items archive, which they patiently gathered and then put online for people to browse. A large proportion of these consisted of statements by experts, as well as detailed technical analyses and counterplans. All the while, campaigners continued to directly lobby the municipality whom, under the sudden public pressure, felt forced to invite a select group of experts—including some belonging to the campaign—to a meeting in the spring of 2013, to try to convince the skeptical amongst them of the worthiness of the project.

The meeting at the *baladia* was a catastrophe for the municipality. Previously, the nascent coalition had put together a sixty-page technical dossier detailing the many technical issues found in the project, complete with pictures, however, their municipal hosts seemed somehow unable to

match the documentation they had produced. As I was told, a representative of the planning unit went on a whiteboard and drew a sketch of the grid of the city's highway, then commented, with reference to the trajectory of the proposed bridge: "Look, there's a missing link, we have to complete the grid, that is why it's [the highway network] not working!" As Joseph explained to me, while a similar explanation might seem logical and justified, the reality was that the promise of speed brought by a new highway would simply attract more cars, and this would counterbalance the initial advantage in a short couple of years. The "solution" would soon create more of the same problem. In addition, the audience was shown a tri-dimensional simulation of the bridge, with mirrors along its sides, and told that the construction would fit in with the "hipster" character of the Mar Mikhael neighborhood, where that section of the bridge would pass. Justifications that might have worked with the general public surely did not go down well with the professionals in attendance. Unsurprisingly, the audience tore the project apart with a cascade of objections.

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After this first debacle and a new wave of media pressure, the municipality was forced to announce that they were choosing to conform to the Minister of the Environment's guidelines and would undertake an environmental assessment. This, according to campaigners, was the campaign's first victory. In the spring and summer of 2014, experts met twice with the private company in charge of the project. Each time, the latter were said to have left the meetings "overwhelmed": professionals in fact came with their own reports, highlighting all the technical flaws of the company's plan, as well as the limited empirical evidence underscoring the scoping project presented. Eventually, the company fell silent, and as of spring 2015 no one had heard from them in months.

Exposing the fictitious legitimacy of the highway project was the strategy that campaigners employed in public gatherings involving non-expert audiences, too. Technical arguments were difficult to put across effectively to a non-professional audience, but this remained the Coalition's way forward. When I was conducting fieldwork in 2015, the media's attention had faded and the project appeared to have been halted. Campaigners, however, continued their awareness activities, delivering the odd public talk. It was at one such event that I witnessed Atallah and Joseph in action, as the two architects addressed the alumni of an English-speaking university. Atallah was physically present at the event, while Joseph, away for work, would Skype in to give his part of the presentation. The talk was held in a quiet corner of the university campus, and was part of an ongoing series of monthly cultural activities organised by the Alumni Association.

The event took place in a small room on the ground floor. All but one light had been lowered in order to enable guests to see the images on the screen, enveloping the room in a soft penumbra. Unsurprisingly, since this was an Alumni Association, presenters would talk to a fairly mature public, with most of the twenty-odd attendees seemingly in their

fifties or older. Although nobody wore formal attire like suits or *tailleurs*, all looked quite distinguished. Atallah sat at the desk, initially speaking to the audience from behind the screen of his laptop, as he struggled with Lebanon's notoriously temperamental Internet connection. Once a Skype link was secured, Atallah pushed the laptop aside, and he and Joseph finally introduced themselves to their audience. Atallah was the first to speak. He announced that they would try to keep the talk to an hour but, he cautioned, "We're architects, we digress sometimes!" a remark that drew a number of amused chuckles from the audience. His opening was suggestive:

Places follow ideas that evolve over time. Cars, highways, tunnels: this is [in the collective imagination] the stuff of cities. But it's changing quickly. Today re-designing is being abandoned in favor of managing. With denser cities and thus more people, we need more public spaces, for pedestrians. Our inspirations are Jane Jacobs and Kevin Lynch, in the 1970s in the US. Lynch's seminal work is "What time is this place?" from which we get inspiration for our presentation's title: "What time is this highway?"

Over the course of an hour, Atallah and Joseph took turns describing the different aspects of the Hakmeh Axis project, aided by a PowerPoint presentation. Slides included detailed plans of Beirut, and particularly of the hill of Achrafieh; it was through those that the speakers explained to their audience traffic patterns, congestion points, building laws, and different possible solutions to traffic problems in the area. Diagrams were detailed yet clear; Joseph had told me more than once that they took great care to simplify professional material enough for non-experts to understand it. Their aim was to enable the average citizen to easily access otherwise complicated technical information.

Two interlinked propositions rested at the heart of the presentation: that the Hakmeh Axis project had no scientific basis, and that the reason behind its resurrection had nothing to do with technical expertise and all to do with political-economic rationales. Firstly, the project was described as outdated: the city had changed, the architects said, and an old solution such as this highway bridge would be unable to cope with the monstrous traffic flows of contemporary Beirut. The idea rested on obsolete models that were popular in the 1950s, but modern urban planning had abandoned them for quite some time. By resurrecting the project, campaigners said, the municipality simply refused to accept this truth. The lack of alternative proposals to solve the congestion issue was described by speakers as further evidence of the municipality's utter lack of professionalism. Considering only one possible solution was completely extraneous to correct norms of good urban planning, the two architects said. Accepted good practice in the profession demanded that first of all, a number of plans must be drafted. Each of these would be assessed by means of an individual, independent impact study before any

final decision could be taken. “Usually, there is an option a, and then an option b, c, d,” Joseph clarified. “Here we only have someone one day saying, ‘We’re doing a highway.’”

Disregarding all technical common sense, officials played on the Lebanese collective imagery, where roads remained a symbol of state presence, in the hope that this would give their project some appeal. Atallah and Joseph suggested that since the project so completely lacked technical legitimacy and value, the motivation for the realization of the project may lay elsewhere. More realistically, they argued, the building of the bridge was driven by the new potential that the project would offer for real estate development in an already densely built area. As Atallah later eloquently explained to me:

The bottom line is that the highway creates access and visibility to an otherwise dormant area and it opens up the potential to real estate development in ways that have not been seen in Beirut. I mean, the release of accessible and developable land is significant by Beirut standard

(Interview with Atallah, August 2015)

This meant that in terms of business, contractors of all stripes and colors would benefit from the works. A similar commentary on the project was given to me by architect friends who were not directly involved in campaigning but shared Atallah and Joseph’s keen interest in urban affairs. It was commonly understood that the mayor, who belonged to the Sunni Future Movement, had been playing with local sectarian politics in this instance. He in fact tried to present the highway, which was expected to pass in the vicinity of the Greek-Orthodox Archdiocese (*al Batriarkia*), as a “gift” to Christian-majority Achrafieh. After all, the bridge’s new name honored Fouad Boutros, a prominent Greek-Orthodox politician. Reportedly, the mayor had lamented during a semi-public talk at a local university that opposition to the project was itself sectarian in nature, since it was a political strategy to prevent the municipal council from helping the Christian area. “They won’t let us!” he had apparently declared to his audience. Experts seemingly had little faith in politicians’ willingness to prioritize good urban management and residents’ rights over profit-making.

The presentation ended with a small exploration of how the Coalition imagined the future of Achrafieh, as they did not limit themselves to simply criticizing the Hakmeh Axis project. In a bid to show that other options existed for the management of the city, the campaign had proposed the establishment of a public park on the portion of land that the municipality had already expropriated before the onset of the civil war. As an architectural artefact, the plan had been designed and looked exactly like any other professional project: the area that the park would cover was superimposed in green on the map of the neighborhood,

complete with red squares to mark all the expropriated buildings that would be preserved, and dotted lines to indicate the new pedestrian foot-paths that were suggested. As if they were presenting their proposal to a client, campaigners had also produced a number of visuals to promote the alternative project—from aerial pictures to street-level simulations. At the alumni association, Joseph and Atallah projected these images at the end of their presentation, in order to allow their audience to visualize their vision of a different Achrafieh. Many in the room nodded in agreement when the images appeared on the screen: in a city as congested and lacking in green as Beirut, the vision of a garden must have been, to some, as enchanting as a highway.

The Politics of Planners

Anthropologists might not have readily acknowledged this, but planning experts have long begun to question the nature of the relationship between power and their practice: committed and ideological high-modernists are no longer a hegemonic voice in the field. When Rodwin pointed out that the most fervent technocrats might pray that “someday planning and management might be liberated from the thrall of politics” (1981, 239), he implicitly recognized that planners are well aware of the entanglements between power and their practice. Plans are ultimately always a compromise between what experts would ideally want to do and what they are allowed to do, for reasons that are material and financial—what is possible to do with the given environment and available resources—but that are also dependent on what is politically allowed.

Beirut’s urban planning policies are an illustrative example of this, since political logics routinely overrule experts’ preferences. This history is, however, also an illustration of the fact that planners are not only aware of this reality but that they do not necessarily hide it—quite the contrary. If in fact some professionals—those employed by the municipality, for instance—seem prepared to rubber stamp whatever plans politicians might desire, some are not. For the latter, Beirut’s urbanistic history is in fact a history of endless frustration that has often produced more criticism than praise in professional circles.

If in Beirut this historical trend seems to endure, so does the discontent of many *muhandesun*. Not only did campaigners target politicians whom they saw as invoking technical merit as a mere façade; they also criticized municipal planners for their ineptitude, and their unwillingness to accept the advances of scientific knowledge and defend an indefensible project at the expense of inhabitants’ health and their right to their homes and neighborhoods. It was not clear whether technical staff was thought of as being merely incompetent, actively politically aligned, unwillingly coerced, or a mix of all three. What was clear was that their performance and the products of their efforts simply did not live up to

the standards that campaigners deemed professional. It was the lack of professional merit that opened the way to accusations of other interests lying right below the surface. These observations, I believe, serve as ample evidence that planners and architects are not necessarily mere technocrats willing to pass off political interest as technical worth, possibly in order to see their own grand plans implemented.

Such professional discontent has oftentimes translated itself into concrete mobilization. The recent history of protests against urban projects in Beirut is punctuated by civic campaigns orchestrated by professionals. Together with environmentalists, *muhandesun* were the most populous professional group amongst them. At the time I was conducting fieldwork, at least half a dozen different campaigns led or eagerly supported by architects and engineers were active in the contestation of different projects. These included the privatization and redevelopment of two sections of the littoral, Ramlet al-Bayda, and Daliet ar-Raouche, and the construction of a football stadium inside the only large city park, Hursh al Snawbar. These activities were also preceded by a long history of similar campaigns following the end of hostilities in 1990: not only the fight for Downtown and the built heritage across town but also mobilizations for the safeguard of public beaches from privatization and the preservation and management of the urban green, such as the René Moawad Garden in Sanaya. One campaigner, who had been active since the end of the civil war, once showed me photos of a crowded conference held at the Order of Engineers in the early 2000s, where attendees heatedly debated new legal provisions that would regulate building on the coast from then on. Experts were not always necessarily the first or only actors to mobilize. Generally, *muhandesun* seemed well informed about any upcoming infrastructural or real estate development because of their involvement in professional circles: they heard about projects in the making before they were made public, at times before residents themselves were informed. In these cases, residents would often join later. In other occasions, the opposite occurred.

Although overall only a numeric minority of professionals actively mobilized, it was clear that there was much interest in discussing projects around urban planning and management among their colleagues. A number of architects I knew in Beirut were not directly involved but supported these mobilizations, kept themselves updated, and often discussed the latest developments. The number of events organized in Beirut based on these themes, together with the high degree of expert participation, is a testament to the lively debate that exists within professional circles. These events varied in size and nature. The various departments of architecture, engineering, and urban planning of universities in the city often organized conferences and talks on such matters. Panels of experts—academics, policy-makers, practitioners—were invited to elaborate on pressing issues such as public transport, the liberalization of rents, or water pollution along the coast. Often, campaigners only participated to these events as members of the audience: they asked questions,

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agreed or disagreed with speakers, and problematized approaches. In other instances, they were invited as panelists or individual speakers by associations as diverse as the Order of Engineers and the alumni association mentioned above. At times, campaigners organized such events directly with these associations. Even when these meetings were not organized with professional audiences in mind, interested professionals would attend eagerly.

The professional dimension of the debates over urban management is crucial in understanding architects and engineers' relationship to politics and technical expertise. Faced with projects like the Fouad Boutros highway bridge, campaigners felt that it was their professional and civic duty to raise objections, and they fought their campaigns with what weapon they had: their expertise. Through this, they could tear the curtain of the apparent technical merit of the project, to expose publicly the political and economic interests that lurked behind. Similar to Atallah's opening remark during his talk—"we are architects"—a great emphasis was usually placed on one's professional identity, on their skills and expertise, which opposed the lack of legitimacy of municipal's "experts" and what plans they presented.

Categories like "citizens" or the "public" are of course heterogeneous and encompass multiple socioeconomic groups, and one project rarely benefits or damages all of them at once. In this particular case, however, the project would negatively affect a rather diverse collective of urban dwellers. First, the area affected by the project embraces a socially diverse space. While some of the traditionally more modest neighborhoods are being increasingly gentrified, a portion of their less-wealthy inhabitants have remained, also thanks to the so-called "Old Rent" law, which has maintained affordable rent and preserved a degree of social diversity in central Beirut. Buildings set to be demolished range from ancient heritage homes from the Ottoman period and well-kept middle-class blocks of flats to much more modest dwellings, some of which are vestiges of Achrafieh's rural past. Joseph was horrified at the way the mayor had reportedly slammed some of these buildings for being "ugly," and hence not worth keeping. Stopping the project would preserve inhabitants' homes and quality of life. Secondly, easing the congestion that envelops Beirut would translate into a significant improvement to the everyday life of the many commuting daily to the capital or moving within it. Easier road mobility would improve the quality of life of all such travelers, from passengers of overcrowded public transport to more privileged individual drivers.

Interestingly, professionals-turned-campaigners openly described their actions as political—not in the sense that they were aligned to political parties, one of the common understandings of the word in Lebanon, but in that their mobilization sought to impact the way the city was managed and public authorities acted. They did, of course, hold on to their belief in technical expertise, but this seemed rooted in a practical, rather than purely theoretical, approach to planning. Particularly, campaigners

constantly underlined the necessity in testing the feasibility of a number of different plans before any one of them could be endorsed—traffic studies must be done, the environmental consequences assessed. And such studies must be up to a certain professional standard; the Hakmeh Axis contractor's own study for instance, as we have seen, was deemed to be based on insufficient empirical data and thus did not count.

Thus, planners' expertise was employed politically in the sense that it could be used to meet and advance the needs, interests and rights of urban dwellers, in a sociopolitical context where neglect of these was usually masked by invocations of technical necessity. Professionalism and expertise were thus mobilized by both parties, campaigners as well as the municipality, but were in fact mobilized in opposite directions, with opposite aims and interests at heart. Of course, experts would argue that municipal plans had nothing to do with expertise, hence they must be motivated by political and economic rationales. On the other hand, as the mayor's alleged comment suggests, the municipality's counteroffensive seemed to rely on accusing opponents of acting for political reasons themselves. What should be noted here is that expertise is not a stable notion, but rather a category that shifts and is reshaped through time and additional practice. Therefore, if planning expertise is to be seen as scientific, this scientific character must be regarded in terms of a trajectory of constant revision and improvement of previously accepted standards of practice, which also adapts to external conditions. For instance, campaigners maintained that urban designs thought of in the 1950s belonged to that era, when cities were much smaller, as was the number of cars on the roads. Since Beirut and its traffic conditions had changed so dramatically, 1950s solutions simply no longer applied. Expertise might thus become outdated not necessarily because of some inherent flaw but because of changed circumstances, and it should be seen not as a form of ultimate, unchanging knowledge but rather as dynamic, evolving, and constantly updating. Since expertise can be discarded or updated, as well as used in opposing political planning rather than endorsing it, critiques should perhaps not focus on expertise *per se*.

What is political in central planning is not expertise itself but its employment; it is perhaps on this fact that analysis should concentrate. Technical expertise itself is *used* by authorities via the political claim that certain projects are justified by technical necessity, while in fact expertise is simply used *through* that claim to justify political projects and mask other interests that may be behind them. Plans themselves fail or work, promote the good of citizens or hinder it, not only or simply because they serve a political end but because they technically fall short of their objective: the feasibility study was flawed, the architect was incompetent, the premises outdated, materials were of poor quality, and some of the concrete characters of the environment were overlooked or simply made the project impossible to realize. Often, as anthropologists have clearly demonstrated, planning is lacking in some of these respects because of the arrogance of experts, their overlooking of essential local

What is political in central planning is not expertise itself but its employment

knowledge, and their overconfidence in a delocalized, abstract technical expertise (Mitchell 2002).

Yet, even if technically flawed, plans that are designed with the good of the citizenry at heart—maybe even in collaboration with them—are equally destined to fail and have negative consequences on the population; it is not simply the fact that a project is politically motivated that causes it to succeed or fall into ruin. Rather, plans that are sure to fail—due to any of the above reasons and beyond—may be adopted regardless because of political interest. In addition, it should be highlighted that well-designed and collaborative plans that have a positive impact on citizens might also be approved and supported by an administration with political gain in mind. Value-laden dichotomies do not work well in these circumstances: the multilayered relationship between politics, planning, and “public interest” should not be oversimplified.

Conclusion

There was a diffused sense amongst Lebanese campaigners that politics was ubiquitous in their practice and that planning had nothing neutral about it: plans—or their absence—were always entwined with the interests of the elites. The history of Beirut’s growth, which experts could explain to me as well as any academic article, was a glaring example of the inseparability of urbanism from politics. Many campaigners, like Atallah, had lived part of that history themselves.⁷ The notion of technical expertise was routinely manipulated: its invocation served to disguise such interests rather than actually improving the lives of the Beirutis. In the specific case of the Hakmeh Axis, politicians added to this claim a coating of infrastructural promise, hoping that the project of a road would work its “enchanted” magic on the Beirutis (Harvey & Knox 2012).

Yet, I argue here that the frequent talks and debates over proposed public works that routinely take place among professionals of the built environment in Beirut index the eagerness of many of these experts to discuss and question projects announced by the authorities. There seemed to be no automatic, blanket endorsement of central planning from their part. More, some of them turned campaigners, albeit retaining their identity as professionals and their commitment to their practice, and mobilized, *as experts*, against the municipality’s plans. Campaigners’ precise critique, based on the technical inadequacy of plans, was not solely a mark of their professional background but also a strategic move: once the claim of scientific legitimacy was demolished, this would expose the underlying political and economic interests that it concealed. This was hoped to protect residents’ welfare in the end. Belief in technical expertise did not necessarily mean alignment with elite power. In this sense, campaigners reported few of the “pious illusions” Rodwin (1981).

Curiously, these observations are more readily acknowledged in critical architectural studies than in anthropology.

More poignantly, these considerations imply that expertise and planning may themselves live in opposition to official urbanism. No architect I came across in Beirut would be troubled by the observation that, in principle, planning might be lacking and technical expertise might be outdated or bring about ruinous consequences for inhabitants. In the case of the Hakmeh Axis, this was precisely why my interlocutors mobilized. Those who did reject this possibility were seen as inherently unprofessional and politically driven, whether because of personal necessity, political opportunism, or genuine ideological alignment. The point here is not to demonize professionals who work for central authorities, either, as the analytical worth of positing a sharp dichotomy based on value is dubious. Rather, the aim of this analysis is to establish that experts of the city have their own politics, no more and no less than anyone else, and that this cannot be established *a priori*.

While it is true that in a wealth of cases experts do indeed act as organic intellectuals, whether eagerly or begrudgingly, this does not mean that this alliance is natural—or necessary. If the anthropology of planning has usually found a direct correlation between expertise and the political effects of planning, recognizing the non-necessary nature of this relationship forces us to reconsider and ultimately complicate our understanding of that relationship. Campaigners in Beirut positioned themselves squarely within the realm of the citizenry, rather than with municipal power. Conscious of the existing political cleavage, they chose to align themselves with what they perceived to be the interests of the city dwellers and not those of developers and politicians. Unlike the experts described in other works on urbanism (Lefebvre 1996; De Certeau 1984), architects in Beirut did not solely desire a God-like view over the city. The argument might be made that an important factor behind this positioning is that professionals are *citizens as well as experts*. In the case of professionals-turned-campaigners, actors readily recognize this fact without any contradiction. In fact, this double self-identification forms the cornerstone of their mobilization, which aims to operate with the citizenry in mind, and not politicians and real estate developers.

The point here is also not to idealize the figure of the city professional. Of course, civic movements in Beirut were never an exclusive prerogative of experts; rather, the latter often gained the collaboration of local residents and neighborhood associations, as well as volunteers and sympathizers from different social groups and political camps. In the case of the Hakmeh Axis highway, for instance, the campaign was felt by local residents, so much so that a number of them got actively involved.

Moreover, architects, engineers, and other similar professionals are, overall, usually in a more privileged position than most in society, including those affected by the plans they draft—whether these plans are drafted for central authorities, private companies, or civic campaigning. Their counter-plans might—wittingly or unwittingly—favor the urban

Yet professionals of the city can become powerful advocates for new kinds of urban management

vision of a particular section of “the public,” whose socioeconomic background and outlook is similar to their own. Yet professionals of the city can become powerful advocates for new kinds of urban management, actively proposing new plans, and forming coalitions with different local and transnational actors according to a diversity of principles, strategies, and projects. Instead of writing them off in a facile way, I propose we investigate them in this context, and ask questions about their mobilization. What kind of projects do they propose, and who participates in their drafting? Who is involved, and who is excluded? What are the strengths and shortcoming of such mobilizations, and what are their possibilities and potential outcomes? Can they be sustained in time, and at what cost? And lastly, what kind of notion of “public good” do they support, and is it shared by broader sections of the citizenry?

Gledhill (2013) rightly reminds us that even if more architects and engineers are joining forces with residents and community campaigners, state planning has not significantly changed. Yet focusing on planners-as-campaigners and answering these questions might enhance our understanding of emergent notions of civic engagement and participation and political marginalization, as well as the multiple political projects that are being developed by different actors: not only central authorities, but different groups of urban dwellers equipped with different visions and varying degrees of influence on the decision-making process. It seems reasonable to suggest that in a rapidly changing global environment, and at a time when even widely accepted models of collaborative urban planning bend under the pressure of political and economic power dynamics (Tooley 2017), it is imperative that the critical social sciences examine all emergent initiatives attempting to reconfigure established modes of urban management and urban politics itself, ethnographically and wherever they might manifest.

Notes

¹Throughout the article, these professional figures—architects, urban planners, engineers—will be referred to collectively as “planning experts,” “planning professionals,” “experts of the city,” or simply “experts.”

²In his important work on state planning, Scott (1998, 4) is careful to distinguish between legitimate scientific practice and ideological, uncritical faith in technical skills and scientific progress, which he calls “high-modernism.” Despite this distinction, anthropological writing on urban planning has arguably focused on planners as high-modernists.

³Other noteworthy examples, which I leave out due to space constraints, are Baxstrom (2013), Boholm (2013), Murdoch and Abram (2002), and Yarrow (2019).

⁴The Arabic term refers to both the two categories that in English would be distinguished as “engineers” and “architects.” Verdeil (2007)

observes that in Lebanon there is also little distinction between *muhandesun* and urban planners, and that in practice, professionals in the field routinely work in both capacities over the course of their career.

⁵The floor-area ratio indicates the relationship between the total floor area of all floors of a building and the size of the land on which the building stands. If comparing two buildings standing on areas of the same size, a higher FAR will usually indicate a taller building with a greater number of floors, hence the possibility of more living units and thus residents. Consequently, higher FARs allow developers to exploit land more, potentially making more profit, but also create a very densely populated and built urban environment.

⁶Academics in fields like architecture, engineering, or landscape design are often active practitioners as well as scholars, or have practiced in the past, so the two designations often intertwine.

⁷It should be noted in this regard that some of the most critical works on the problematic relationship between politics and urbanism in Lebanon are written by architects—for instance Fawaz (2016) Sarkis and Rowe (1998).

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