The absent vision within multiplicity

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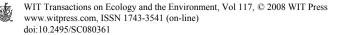*University of South Australia, Louis Laybourne Smith School of Architecture and Design, Australia*

Abstract

The old city is an extension of the new, both contained within one spatial and temporal realm creating a multiplicity of cultural urban history and identity. This multiplicity is based on the 'hidden city', which exists in people's anecdotes and experiences with their surroundings, presented through the verbal, written and architectural history passed from one generation to the next, leading to the sustainability and continuity of the city. Therefore, this paper will examine the multiple cities contained within Sahat-Al-Borj in Beirut, Lebanon, that houses traces of various temporal and spatial events, which depict its hybrid identity and multiplicity. Traces such as the ancient archaeological findings discovered in 1990, the old architectural landmarks from the Golden prosperous Beirut era of 1950's and 60's, the war torn buildings of the 30 year Lebanese War and the ephemeral tents of the latest events of February and March 2005 (after the assassination of the Former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic-Al-Hariri).

   Each of these traces are unique events that passed through the Square to form different but similar hidden cities within the Square that contains a lifetime of stories and anecdotes, which still remain present in people's imagination, a vision of their city that is absent in reality but present through the physical presence of landmarks. Therefore, this paper will offer a reading into the various lost and hidden cities of Sahat-Al-Borj that coexist in one spatial and temporal realm through Italo Calvino's invisible cities book, concentrating on the City of Eutropia, as described by Marco Polo. "When he enters the territory of which Eutropia is the capital, the traveler sees not one city but many, of equal size and not unlike one another, scattered over a vast, rolling plateau. Eutropia is not one but all these cities together; only one is inhabited at a time, the others are empty; and this process is carried out in rotation." Similar to Eutropia, and to every city, Sahat-Al-Borj Square contains multiple individual cities each representing different epochs, unique in their experience and history, but collectively they are the city and form its urban identity.

Keywords: multiplicity, hidden city, Sahat-Al-Borj, architectural issues, trace.

1   Stage set

Beirut's Central Square, Sahat-Al-Borj, in Lebanon, is a stage for many milestone events that influenced and continue to influence the Lebanese national identity, creating multiple complex urban layers that are experienced by people daily. Each layer is a hidden city formed due to ordinary and extraordinary events. As time goes by, these cities are revealed and or concealed affecting, changing, and transforming the Square's character and people's perception. This paper will explore the multiple tangible and intangible hidden cities found in Sahat-Al-Borj through Trading Cities 3 of Eutropia, in Italo Calvino's book Invisible Cities. As narrated by Marco Polo to Kublai Khan, Eutropia represents the story of every city through the city of Venice. Therefore, both Eutropia and Sahat-Al-Borj exist in Venice, through their physical and virtual multiple hidden cities stage set, as depicted in this quote: "When he enters the territory of which Eutropia is the capital, the traveler sees not one city but many, of equal size and not unlike one another, scattered over a vast, rolling plateau. Eutropia is not one but all these cities together; only one is inhabited at a time, the others are empty; and this process is carried out in rotation." (Calvino [2]) These spatial qualities of both Sahat-Al-Borj and Eutropia offer a plateau of 'connecting events' (Lee [5]) to these 'trading cities', embodied in the urban landmarks exchanging memories, and narratives, offering inhabitants an escapism from the reality of the everyday into the multiple hidden cities, through their own personal vision. Therefore, Similar to Eutropia, Sahat-Al-Borj inhabits the tangible through architectural landmarks, and the intangible, through the absent vision, which exists in people's memories and imagination developed from their own interaction with their city based on events.

   Sahat-Al-Borj is receptive to many milestone events that shaped and moulded Beirut's urban qualities and characteristics, adding new meanings and layers redefining the Square through its physical, cultural, political, and social identity. The Square is vast and open to the Mediterranean Sea, it contains many old, new, modern, war torn architectural landmarks and monuments, which are multiple hidden cities that offer a reading into Beirut's history. The open nature of the site as well as its unstable and unpredictable history contributes in the formation of its hybrid identity, inviting change, through its physical traces, which represents and commemorates historical events that ultimately led to the creation of the multiple hidden cities. Commonly known to many Lebanese as The Bourj, Sahat-Al-Borj represents Beirut's pre-war prosperous Golden Era in the 1950's and 60's, which was transformed during the Lebanese War between 1975 and 1990 into a battlefield that housed the Green Line and divided Lebanon between East and West. During reconstruction, initiated by Solidere, (a private company established by the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic – Al – Hariri), between 1990 until present the Square went through a transitional period, where most its Golden Era iconic landmarks were demolished, leading to further physical, cultural and historical changes. Therefore, the Square became 'devoid' of function, and open to new possibilities until the famous Demonstrations 05

where more than one million Lebanese gathered to protest against the assassination of Rafic-Al-Hariri and demand Lebanon's independence.

Travelling into Sahat-Al-Borj's multiple layers inhabitants cross several historical epochs aware or unaware of the temporal and spatial transitions, defying the boundaries and thresholds of time and space, experiencing multiplicity, as Marco Polo narrates of Eutropia "Since their society is ordered without great distinctions of wealth or authority, the passage takes place almost without jolts." (Calvino [2]) It is through this virtual and physical experience, in both Eutropia and Sahat-Al-Borj that the inhabitants of the hidden cities gain a new context through escapism that becomes a history within another history adding to the complexity of the urban layers, relaying the same stories of war and peace. Therefore, this paper will navigate through the multiple hidden cities found in Sahat-Al-Borj, such as the Martyrs' Statue and the ephemeral tent of Demonstrations 2005, the war torn Barakat Building remaining from the 1975 Lebanese War, and from Beirut's Golden Era, and the archaeologies discovered in 1993 during the reconstruction project. In addition, the paper will examine the relationship between these multiple hidden cities as 'connectors' of the above events, through the absent vision based on the city of Eutropia, exploring the multiple influences that each of these cities have in shaping and preserving Sahat-Al-Borj's identity, as more urban layers are adapted and appropriated into the current urban stage set. The paper will navigate through the following headings, Multiple visions, Plateau of events, and 'Always the same'

2   Multiple visions

Multiplicity lies in between the tangible and the intangible, based on factual events that occurred in a specific place and time, therefore multiplicity is "… a network of connections between the events, the people and the things of the world." (Lee [5]) These connections are a collection and a recollection of events that come together in order to create a whole, through looking, observing, analysing, interpreting, imagining and experiencing the details of the everyday practices in order to understand and rediscover the multiplicity within the hidden cities as people move across the urban 'plateau'. This movement of events rejuvenates the urban identity through the connection of the told and untold stories, which generates escapism from the everyday, creating an absent vision of the city that inhabits multiplicity, which is the continuity of the city. Therefore, the absent vision is the in between based on multiplicity, based on events that occurred in the past and thus affects the present and the future, through the hidden cities represented in the abandoned buildings, the ancient ruins, the transitional places, that embody a lifetime of stories and anecdotes.

Urban movements are activities that continuously lead to the creation of the absent vision, virtually transforming the stage set in an instance, offering an insight into a visionary city, lasting only for a small period of time, with endless stream of events. Based on multiplicity, the vision travels back or forward in time, rejuvenating the urban scene, fabricating a city with streets, buildings, cars, shops, sounds, smells, even with people performing activities and conversing.

As Marco Polo Narrates of the city of Eutropia "On the day when Eutropia's inhabitants feel the grip of weariness and no one can bear any longer his job, his relatives, his house, his life, debts, the people he must greet or who greet him, then the whole citizenry decides to move to the next city, which is there waiting for them, empty and good as new; there each will take up a new job, a different wife, will see another landscape on opening his window, and will spend his time with different pastimes, friends, gossip." (Calvino [2]) A Lebanese man (now living in Adelaide) who revisited Beirut in August 2005, narrated his escapism from Sahat-Al-Borj 2005 to the 1960's, when he recounted his first impression of the Square during reconstruction, he said: "Everything is different, the streets are different, some of the old buildings are being renovated, but it's not the same thing. But you know what, while I was there I closed my eyes and I could describe to you the old Beirut and I can tell you where every street and building was." (Daou [3]) The Lebanese man could no longer relate to the current tangible qualities of Sahat-Al-Borj, for war and violence transformed its physical and cultural qualities. Eventhough, the Square no longer represented The Bourj, during the Golden Era, the Lebanese man's eyes still searching for the hidden cities he once knew and experienced escaped into the intangible, into the absent vision. The Square was perceived through the Lebanese man's memories, extracted from his imagination, triggered by the now, and by the living moment and the presence or even the absence of the multiple hidden cities remaining from The Bourj. Thus the absent vision appears, and disappears again, reclaiming its place as being absent in reality, like Eutropia transforming into a conceivable place, 'a non-place' that exists in between times, inhabited by memories, a virtual place that cannot be physically touched or experienced for it is continuously changing, and searching for a new place that is yet to be found. It is through these tangible and intangible multiple hidden cities that the current urban stage is appropriated and adapted, playing a different function, and fulfilling a new role, corresponding to Eutropia where the Square "Repeat the same speeches with variously combined accents." (Calvino [2])

3 'Plateau' of events

3.1 Corresponding landmarks

Marco Polo recounts, "So their life is renewed from move to move, among cities whose exposure or declivity or stream or winds make each site somehow different from the others." (Calvino [1]) Sahat-Al-Borj is made up of diverse tangible and intangible multiplicities each containing 'multiple narratives' emerging from a certain events in time, space or place; collectively they create the Square's hybrid identity. These multiple hidden cities, which are neither old nor new, neither dead nor alive, neither present nor absent, allow the past and present events in Sahat-Al-Borj to melt and merge together in order to create a new place and new cities build on the ruins of the old, experienced through the window of time similar to the inhabitants of Eutropia. This escapism is lived through the absent vision, which is an intangible hidden city, a hidden desire or a

wish that exists in people's imagination representing a lifetime of their memories and experiences, containing an infinite number of other cities inhabited in a different time and space. The traces of the absent vision in Sahat-Al-Borj, are depicted in Figure 2 through the stage set of two major landmarks located at a close proximity to each other in the Center of the Square, Martyrs' Statue and the ephemeral tent remaining from Demonstrations 05. These different but similar urban landmarks embody a cultural and historical importance through spontaneous and sequential events that influenced and continue to influence people's relationship with their surroundings, affecting their perception and experience with their city. Therefore, these landmarks offer a new experience, which might or might not lead to the creation of new hidden cities, altering and exchanging the old with the new through people's movements stimulating new possibilities and probabilities.
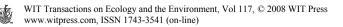

Figure 1:   Rafic-Al-Hariri's burial site in Sahat-Al-Borj.

Figure 2:   Martyrs' Statue and the ephemeral tent of Demonstrations 2005.

Similar to Eutropia, Sahat-Al-Borj is "… a machine for multiple narratives." (Lee [5]), where inhabitants navigate a 'plateau' of unpredictable historical events and ordered urban chaos, derived from the diversity of events, and generated from each of the urban landmarks, which are and contain multiple hidden cities. Therefore, similar to Eutropia the Square's history is continuously repeating itself, with new actors, new time and new narratives, producing new spaces and multiple hidden cities, "This the city repeats itself, identical shifting up and down in its empty chessboard, the inhabitants repeat the same scenes, with the actors changed;". (Calvino [2]) Martyrs' Statue and the ephemeral tent

of Demonstrations 05, (Figure 2), are hidden cities that offer escapism into 'multiple narratives' of Beirut's history connected by a chain reaction of corresponding and repetitive events of independence, freedom and protest.

Martyrs' Statue was erected during the French Mandate, in commemoration of the 40 martyrs' that were prosecuted during the Ottoman Mandate who were demanding for Lebanon's independence. During the Lebanese War from 1975 – 1990, the Statue witnessed brutal fighting in the Square and as a result it still bears traces of the bullet and shrapnel holes as a reminder of these violent events, which are hidden cities in their own right. After the Lebanese War ended the Statue was removed from its central location to the American University of Beirut, in order to be renovated and maintained, and was returned only few months before the assassination of Rafic-Al-Hariri, which occurred in February 2005. Therefore, Rafic-Al-Hariri's family decided to hold a public funeral in Sahat-Al-Borj in order to bury the prime minister and seven of his friends that died with him, in humble white tents in the Square near the Martyrs' Statue, and Al-Ameen's Mosque (which Rafic-Al-Hariri finished renovating only few months before his death). Consequently, on the 14th of March 2005, more than one million Lebanese gathered to protest against the assassination and to demand Lebanon's independence, same place, same story different times and different role players, separated by time connected by similar but different events.

The Demonstrations led to the creation of the 'tent city', where public political forums of 'getting to know the other' were created and inhabited continuously for more than a month in the centre of the Square around the Martyrs' Statue and near Rafic-Al-Hariri's grave. After the protest ended, the first tent, (Figure 2) which was erected near Martyrs' Statue remained in commemoration of the Demonstrations 05 events. Therefore, these two landmarks are linked by events and by remembrance, they share similar national iconic historical, cultural and political symbolism, depicting two different periods of Lebanon's history. The tangible and intangible proximity of these two different but similar urban landmarks reflects their geographical, historical and cultural link where history repeats itself, 'shifting up and down in its (Eutropia) empty chessboard' linked by the chain reaction of events, portrayed through the hidden cities and the absent vision. Each of these hidden cities is as narrated by Marco Polo "open alternate mouths in identical yawns" (Calvino [1]), they are different in materiality, experience and anecdotes but connected by the repetition of similar events, outcomes and location. The mere presence of the Martyrs' Statue in the centre of Sahat-Al-Borj predetermined the location of the ephemeral tent, influenced by the events of the assassination of Rafic-Al-Hariri and the subsequent Demonstrations 05. In addition, the actual narration of these events in this paper offers escapism into new possibilities to unveil further 'multiple narratives' of hidden cities present in Sahat-Al-Borj, where only part of the story is revealed and the other is left for contemplation, intrigue and the imagination.

3.2 One and the same

The hidden city of Barakat Building in Sodecco Square contains 'multiple narratives', a multiplicity of events that is based on a personal experience, transformed into an absent vision, which collectively narrates the overall national history of Beirut. Barakat Building was designed as an apartment block by Youssef Bey Aftinos in 1924 and was nearly demolished in 1997 by its owners (Now Lebanon [1]). Due to its strategic location the Building was transformed into a snipers' nest, and after the war, it became a symbol of both the Golden and War era of Beirut, and currently the Building is in transition awaiting its new function. Therefore, these 'multiple narratives' of Beirut's history are read through Barakat Building's history, which bears witness to many events that passed through the Square, escaping into a different city every time where the Building was performing a different role. These 'multiple narratives' become an absent vision where the inhabitants experience temporal and spatial transitions, triggered by personal memories and anecdotes and the tangible qualities of the Building itself, and its surroundings. The Building's scared façade and gaping interior, along with its beautifully ornamented columns and its presence in its current state even after the war ended, provide a paradox of connecting events of 'multiple narratives', which offer an insight into three main epochs of Beirut's history of peace, war and reconstruction.

Figure 3:   Barakat building.

Each narrative in Barakat Building is an absent vision, an escape from the everyday that influences the perception of the Building and the city where "variety is guaranteed by the multiple assignments." (Calvino [2]) based on the multiple events that inhabited the Building, stimulating multiple identities. For those people that lived through Beirut's Golden Era they might still perceive the Building as an expensive apartment block, despite its weathered state. While for someone that lived through the war experience, they might remember the fear of passing by the Building. However, for the new Lebanese generation who never experienced the Lebanese War or the Golden Era of Beirut, the Building might offer an intriguing narrative and a curiosity towards its original identity, imagining new probabilities according to the Building's typology inspired by

various anecdotes heard from the older generation. Each of these experiences, reflects a hidden city, a multiplicity of experience that inhabits one singular structure that has different meanings to different people and is appropriated according to their experiences and visions. Therefore, the Building offers an escape from the everyday, into the multiple hidden cities, which cross time through the events of peace, war and the transitional post-war period, continuously transforming its identity, according to its 'multiple assignments' that is only relevant to the reader of its narratives and the beholder of the vision.

3.3 Revealing narratives

Travelling into or passing through Sahat-Al-Borj people escape into various hidden cities as they encounter clusters of archaeological landmarks scattered around the urban 'plateau', which are successive movements of events of different civilisations that passed through the Square, and influenced its current identity. Sahat-Al-Borj is the agglomerate of all these archaeological hidden cities, which escaped from history into present in order to narrate the story of Beirut's creation, as Marco Polo said "Eutropia is not one, but all these cities together…" (Calvino [2]) Similar to every city Sahat-Al-Borj is currently inhabited by both the dead and the living; it exists in between time and space not belonging to the old or the new, offering a collection of 'multiple narratives' based on the archaeological tangible evidence. These multiple stories contained within the ancient ruins summarise Sahat-Al-Borj's identity, connecting the evolving historical events from the Bronze Age until present, where even the discovery of these archaeological sites generates a multiplicity of events, movements, and consequently further hidden cities. The traces of various civilisations were unveiled after the Lebanese War by accident during the reconstruction project in 1993 while excavating for an underground car park (Khalaf [4]). The findings included foundations, mosaics, ceramics, coins, glass and Neolithic flint tools belonging to the late iron Age, Ottoman, Mameluke, Crusader, Abbassid, Omayyad, Hellenistic, Byzantine, Roman, Persian, Phoenician, Canaanite. Each of these civilisations constructed their cities on the

Figure 4:   Canaanite Tell and the Roman Cardo Maximus.

ruins of the previous, as a statement of power, changing the topography and the development of the city as wars, evolution and natural disasters shaped and formed the current Sahat-Al-Borj. This section will explore the archaeological site, (Figure 4) of the Canaanite Tell and the Roman Cardo Maximus found under what used to be known during Sahat-Al-Borj Golden Era as the Souks, which is another hidden city that vanished in reality but still exists in people's memories as an absent vision, as they remember The old Bourj.

   Samir Khalaf said "… the Canaanite Tell and the Roman Cardo Maximus will form part of the public open space design. The exceptional interest of this Tell (about three hectares) is that it represents the site where the continuous urban history of Beirut is remarkably preserved from its inception in the third millennium bc, during the Early Bronze Age." (Khalaf [4]) Therefore, the incorporation of the archaeologies into the daily public life, offers a matrix for the imagination, to construct an absent vision, of the ancient city that was never physically experienced in its original context by the current inhabitants. However, the inhabitants of Sahat-Al-Borj virtually and physically exchange the ancient memories with the new, the real city with the unreal, escaping back in time to ancient Beirut, through an absent vision, which offers the inhabitants an insight into the past, affecting future and present perception of the city. This escapism, embodied in the multiplicity of the site, is able to transform the original function of the archaeologies, which is adapted into the current urban scene, and in turn transforms the identity of the site as more hidden cities are revealed, connecting events, and adding diversity.   The traces of the archaeologies offer interpretations and a continuity of the historical events, making the new city an extension of the old, adding new layers, a never ending process, of movement, events, actions, and reactions, revealing further layers. Other hidden cities still exist underground, silently influencing the current city, awaiting new events, which may or may not lead to their discovery in order to merge into the current urban scene. Therefore, as further hidden cities are discovered new possibilities and probabilities emerge into Sahat-Al-Borj, growing from small discoveries of urban detail, created by its own inhabitants.

4   'Always the same'

Sahat-Al-Borj's is an adaptable protest site created by the repetitive historical movements of individual or collective events, across its urban surface. In order to understand the identity and the personality of the Square these repetitive events need to be read and narrated collectively through the tangible and intangible personal and communal experiences. Each of the iconic hidden cities discussed individually in this paper, contain a lifetime of anecdotes, an absent vision that connect the Martyrs' Statue, to the ephemeral tent of Demonstrations 05, to Barakat Building, to the archaeological sites. These events are inseparable from each other and from the Square; they contain the Square's eventful history, which similar to every city is based on movements of events across time. It is through these hidden cities that Sahat-Al-Borj and Eutropia trade and exchange roles, depicting a story of a city that exists in the imagination that is constantly

changing, according to the way it likes to be remembered. A city that belongs to a specific time, where people might or might not have existed, a space, a time, a city, with ever changing topography and typography, with ever changing role play. A city that never knows the concept of time, it travels from one role to the next, using time as a form of transportation into transformation, reconfiguration and re- emergence. In one era, the city lived as the glittering diamond of the region, and then suddenly became a dark hole onto which dreams shatter along its ruined coast and the city relinquished itself repeatedly. The city and the time are unidentifiable, for this is an ongoing story, every time a city rejuvenates a wave of destruction hits its beautiful shores and the city finds itself picking up the pieces of its lost identity and history only to recreate new layers. The story of this city is cyclical and repetitive, it is the story of every city where events occur every moments constructing, adding and erasing new layers. It is the story of every city that is continuously evolving according to its past and present represented in its plateau of events that depict various hidden cities that passed through it. This is the story of Eutropia, The Bourj, Venice, Beirut and of every city, its history is as old as time.

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