



Disappearing Cities: Beirut and Berlin

A one-night event in Berlin this February brought Charlotte Bleicher to ruminate about the relationship between two cities - Beirut and Berlin. She writes about processes of cultural loss taking place in both cities, and about artistic acts of defiance against this disappearance.

Essay / Charlotte Bleicher April 30, 2020

Beirut is brown and Berlin is blue. Brown roofs, blue buildings, brown rocks, blue windows, brown buses, blue trains. Cities can become defined by certain characteristics, perhaps by a color. These traits might have also been found on a street of another city, but, for whatever reason they did not make it into the signature. There are blue roofs somewhere in Beirut and brown buildings in Berlin. It's a natural procedure to compare new surroundings to old, find comfort in familiarities and consider the unknown. The comparisons and contrasts help us to navigate a landscape. However, as much as personal affiliation affects encounters, there are also visible marks of a city's past that have a prominent voice of their own.

*"At the approach of his footsteps, the place has roused: speechlessly, mindlessly, its mere intimate nearness gives him hints and instructions."*¹ Walter Benjamin's account of the *flâneur*, in his book *Arcades Project* (1927-1940), portrays a city's memory expressed through material structures rather than purely individual or collective projections. But what happens to the memory of a city when both material structures and the human projections taking place within them disappear? Is disappearance a necessity for renewal and is renewal then a prerequisite for progress? How can we preserve our memories and avoid a sense of alienation and displacement in the context of rapid societal change?

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[1] Installation view of Disappearing Berlin. Image by Anna Dabdoub

These were the questions that arose from a one-night-only event in Berlin this February. The project, part of Schinkel Pavillion's '[Disappearing Berlin](#) [2]' series, brings performances, dance, and concerts to buildings that are about to be demolished, privatized, or converted, after having shaped the cityscape and cultural life for decades. For this particular iteration of the series, Algerian artist Mohamed Bourouissa (b. 1978 in Blida) was invited to take over the recently closed Clärchens Ballhaus, which had been running as a place for dance and dining since 1913. Under the ornately stuccoed ceiling, Bourouissa assembled a group of artists to create a visual poem about the connections between Beirut and Berlin within the context of disappearance and displacement, change and freedom, and the power of art in the development of these cities. The presentation included sound performances by Tony Elieh, Youmna Saba, Sina XX, Dorine Potel, and Paulina Greta, as well as simultaneously-screened videos by [2038](#) [3], an international collective of architects, artists, ecologists, economists, scientists, politicians, and writers, in which Bourouissa is also collaborating. The group came together for the first time in 2019, and will represent Germany in the 2020 Venice Architecture Biennale.

One film by the group 2038, titled 'New Serenity,' encouraged a view of today from a position in the future; the year 2038. The film is shown as a form of introduction to the larger project 2038 is planning for this year's Architecture Biennale. The project's curatorial statement reads:

"Today, in the year 2038, we have mastered the great crises. It was close, but we made it. The global economic and ecological disasters of the 2020s brought people, states, institutions and companies together. They committed themselves to fundamental rights and jointly created self-sustaining systems on a universal basis, giving decentralized local structures the space to maintain their individual way of living."[2](#)



2038, New Serenity, video

The protagonists of the film are two monkeys taken from the 1900 painting *Abelard und Heloise*, by Gabriel von Max. The animals remain predominantly static throughout with statements and ideas emerging around them as text. This text combines analysis of disappearance and destruction with a manifesto addressing the past, or, in the film's case, our present day. In the context of the evening's theme, the film stimulates an examination of the changing cityscapes of Berlin and Beirut. However, it gives a nod towards a change that is already in the past, instigating actions that must look towards a future model, rather than dwell on what has been lost, or, ways that could have been.

Berlin and Beirut share a history of interior divides created by two wars, one 'cold' and the other very aggressive, both ultimately splitting the cities politically, severing transport, and fractionalizing communities into East and West. During the 15-year civil war in Lebanon, this divider was an area that became known as the Green Line, given the foliage that grew along it after the concentrated conflict there made it uninhabitable. In 1962, the socialist East German government constructed a 140-kilometre wall around the entire perimeter of West Berlin, to stop its inhabitants from escaping to the West, or being exposed to Western ideas. These lines of division and their subsequent abolition have led to one particular similarity that is playing a big role in the cultural dialogue in both cities today - public spaces.

The Civil War in Lebanon caused mass destruction of buildings as well as the migration of families elsewhere, leaving many houses empty. In Germany, 1989 saw the fall of the Wall and crowds of East Germans leaving for the apparent freedom of the West. In their past socialist society, all property was owned by the state, and so, with the fall of the German Democratic Republic in 1990, buildings became uninhabited and unowned. In the years that followed, both cities saw many houses purchased for extremely low prices, with the cost of the renovation required often exceeding the value of the building by a considerable amount. Building owners or city councils suddenly discovered the benefit in artists and cultural practitioners maintaining their property.

In Berlin, during the 1990s and early 2000s, many cultural initiatives were offered spaces for no charge or highly subsidized rents, in return for the upkeep and safeguarding of these buildings. Opposite Clärchens Ballhaus is the [KW Institute for Contemporary Art](#) [4], founded by Klaus Biesenbach in 1991. The young curator was offered a 47-year free lease to renovate the disused margarine factory, which has become one of the most prolific centres of art in the country.³ In Beirut, one finds some mirroring features in the multifaceted cultural project of [Ashkal Alwan](#) [5], founded by curator Christine Tohmé. The project had functioned without a space until 2011, when the Philippe Jabre Association gifted it a vast old furniture factory. The building now hosts the project's programs, including [Home Workspace](#) [6] - an alternative arts school, artist studios, a library, and curated events. Ashkal Alwan's continuous experimentation and pedagogy of the arts since the 1990's has led it to be acknowledged as one of the key cultural voices in the region.⁴

Non-profit initiatives survive off of philanthropy, but when that action is affixed to the price of a property, cultural initiatives become vulnerable. A perpetual equation appears: non-profit initiatives rely on low property value; low-value property relies on cultural initiatives to raise its value; high-value property no longer relies on cultural initiatives, leaving the latter to either start at the beginning or cease to exist.

Over the last 20 years, Beirut and Berlin have experienced extreme cultural displacement, due to a rapid rise in property costs. In Berlin, this is the flight of cultural initiatives, which are moving from the capital to cheaper European centres, transforming their physical spaces to online or nomadic models, or, for some, seeing their displacement as a cause to put their project to bed, leaving just



the distant memory of a mystical golden era, almost forgotten.⁵ In Beirut, the displacement has often been rooted in the government's persistent rebuilding of the city since the war. This natural post-war concern has been tainted by the destruction of old Ottoman mansions, swiftly replaced by new, cheaply built, high-rises; the illegal selling of public coastline to luxury developments; and the financial gain of such developments ending up in construction companies owned by politicians. These actions not only leave cultural institutions vulnerable but also rightly angry.⁶

[4.Stop-Solidere-St-Georges-Hotel.jpeg](#) [7]



[8] 'Stop Solidere' St Georges Hotel, Beirut. Image by Charlotte Bleicher

Anger in Lebanon reached a new climax on 17 October last year, ignited by the government announcement of a new tax on WhatsApp calls. Protestors quickly filled the streets across the country, united by the call for an end to the corruption and clientelism of a political elite. Downtown, a modern complex of luxury shops and offices next to the old Green Line and Martyr's Square, became the centre of the action. The shiny walls became diaries of the protestor's frustration and the expensive window displays were replaced with shattered glass. However, amongst these scenes, two forgotten gems of the city's golden era reemerged - Le Grand Théâtre de Beirut and The Egg. Since the Civil War, these iconic buildings have been hidden behind wooden boards branded by the



name Solidere, the private company enlisted by the government to redevelop Beirut. The Egg, an old cinema, became a space for screenings, talks, and a photography exhibition, and protestors have been found using the old theatre as a stage for impromptu singing and performance. For the first time in 30 years, the people had reclaimed their right to these lost public buildings.

[5.The-Grande-Theatre-Beirut.jpeg](#) [9]



[10]The Grande Theatre, Beirut. Image by Charlotte Bleicher



[3.Beirut-Center-of-Photography-exhibition-The-Egg2.jpeg](#) [11]



[12]Beirut Center of Photography exhibition outside of The Egg, Beirut. Image by Charlotte Bleicher

Although amid very different circumstances, as the people of Beirut reclaim their right to lost public buildings, Schinkel Pavillion's "Disappearing Berlin" acts as an artistic protest against the cultural losses of its own rapidly changing city. Although making these comparisons and contrasts between two unique landscapes and cultural ecosystems seems as arbitrary as claiming that Beirut is brown and Berlin is blue, one thing rings true: these cultural initiatives and the acts of defiance against their disappearance are impossible without the persistence and power of the people's voice. Walter Benjamin's thoughts on a city's spirit remain profound, and create cause for concern in the contemporary climate of cultural displacement and physical destruction of buildings. However, as the statement by artist group 2038 encourages, in order to recover from devastating events we must position ourselves in the future so that we can reimagine and act upon the present. In their imagined scenario from the year 2038, communities have been brought together by their crises, re-emerging as a stronger, unified voice. Perhaps we can learn from this in light of the changing landscapes, and hold hope in the collective voice and its ability to preserve and recreate memories.



[1-Video still from Disappearing-Berlin-jpg.jpg](#) [13]



[14]'The New Serenity' by 2038, video still from Disappearing Berlin. Image by Anna Dabdoub.

Additional note:

As the global pandemic continues, it felt important to address this briefly here. The piece was first penned in February, a time when flitting between exhibitions and distant capital cities was not only encouraged but expected in the cultural field. Usually, we can prepare for changing landscapes to some extent by examining patterns within the context of our time. In the case of the COVID-19 crisis, the 'changing landscapes' was immediately changed. Although the future remains uncertain, we can still learn from the ideas expressed by 2038 to look beyond the now and reimagine models for the future. The disappearance of cities may encompass new issues today, but the necessity of persistent voices of the people that inhabit them remains.

- [1.](#) Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1999
- [2.](https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/315882/2038-to-represent-germany-at-the-17th-venice-architecture-biennale/) <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/315882/2038-to-represent-germany-at-the-17th-venice-architecture-biennale/> [15]
- [3.](#) Klaus Biesenbach, "Founding of KW in Berlin 25 years ago", *Art News*, 25 Nov 2016, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/klaus-biesenbach-recalls-the-founding-of-kw-in-berlin-25-years-ago-at-a-moment-of-radical-change-and-freedom-7370/> [16], accessed 12.03.2020
- [4.](#) Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "On the Politics of Art and Space in Beirut", *Tate Papers*, Autumn 2009,



<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/on-politics-art-and-space-beirut> [17], accessed 12.03.2020

- 5. Kate Brown, “‘It Becomes Impossible’: Why One Gallerist Says Berlin Is No Longer Hospitable to Contemporary Art Dealers”, Artnet, 17 July 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/market/exile-gallery-1318580> [18] accessed 12.03.2020
- 6. Habib Battah, “A City without a Shore”, The Guardian, 17 March 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/mar/17/rem-koolhaas-dalieh-beirut-shore-coast> [19] accessed 12.03.2020

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Links

- [1] <http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/unnamed1.jpg>
- [2] <https://disappearingberlin.de/info/>
- [3] <https://2038.xyz/>
- [4] <https://www.kw-berlin.de/en/about/>
- [5] <https://www.ashkalalwan.org/>
- [6] <https://www.ashkalalwan.org/program.php?category=3>
- [7] <http://tohumagazine.com/file/4stop-solidere-st-georges-hotel.jpeg>
- [8] <http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/4.Stop-Solidere-St-Georges-Hotel.jpeg>
- [9] <http://tohumagazine.com/file/5the-grande-theatre-beirut.jpeg>
- [10] <http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/5.The-Grande-Theatre-Beirut.jpeg>
- [11] <http://tohumagazine.com/file/3beirut-center-photography-exhibition-egg2.jpeg>
- [12] <http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/3.Beirut-Center-of-Photography-exhibition-The-Egg2.jpeg>
- [13] <http://tohumagazine.com/file/1-video-still-disappearing-berlin-jpg.jpg>
- [14] <http://www.tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/1-Video%20still%20from%20Disappearing-Berlin-jpg.jpg>
- [15] <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/315882/2038-to-represent-germany-at-the-17th-venice-architecture-biennale/>
- [16] <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/klaus-biesenbach-recalls-the-founding-of-kw-in-berlin-25-years-ago-at-a-moment-of-radical-change-and-freedom-7370/>
- [17] <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/on-politics-art-and-space-beirut>
- [18] <https://news.artnet.com/market/exile-gallery-1318580>
- [19] <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/mar/17/rem-koolhaas-dalieh-beirut-shore-coast>