

CALL FOR PAPERS

Date: 12-14 December 2013
Location: Beirut
Organisers: Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB) and Goethe-Institut Beirut
Deadline: 31 July 2013

This conference aims to look at urban governance, its agents, agendas and options, through contested space and conflicting urban concepts, identity claims and social environments. Rapid urbanisation and demographic change, antagonistic political and economic interests, and the diversity of cultural patterns have impacted and continue to impact the make-up of local neighbourhoods and use of public space in urban centres. Situated at the core of social and political fractions, contested spaces reveal insights into the dynamics of diverse societies and urban identities. Contested space here is understood as the physical space at the centre of conflicting interests as defined by different social actors.

The focus will be on the three cities of Beirut, Cairo and Tehran, each highlighting different types of fragmentations, political, cultural and social. Beirut leaves one with the question of “Whose space is it”? Different social layers coexisting in close proximity to each other, in combination with competing economic interests over the already densely populated urban space, make the city host to many areas of contestation. This applies as much to supposed public spaces like the barely accessible al-Horsh al-Snawbar as it does to places like Raouche where investors take little interest in cultural diversity. In Tehran cultural fragmentations impact on urban life, cultural here referring to norms, values and practices, what is considered right and wrong by different sections of society and the multi-layered ruling establishment. In a place where public space is there and accessible but controlled by the morality police who often hold different values to the society, citizens take refuge in the private – impacting on the delineation of public and private space. Cairo has probably been hardest hit by demographic change, and has to constantly deal with the challenges rapid urban expansion brings with it. The question of formal versus informal space plays an important role in urban governance in a socially fragmented city. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each in terms of fostering social cohesion while ensuring diversity? How are contested spaces governed on a local level?

The aim of the conference is to gain insights into experiences of urban governance as it is perceived and practiced by different lobby groups and social agents in view of the ambivalence of public space in diverse societies. We invite academics and practitioners (urbanists, architects, civil society activists, anthropologists, political scientists etc.) to submit papers dealing with contested space and urban identities in Beirut, Cairo and Tehran addressing one of the following three panels:

Panel 1: Claims and Agency

Sociology of space in the twenty-first century is still informed by the basic Marxian insight that human beings ‘make’ their own history, but that they do so under ‘given’ circumstances not of their own choosing to which they may relate by means of using, controlling, circumventing, subverting, transforming, or eliminating them. Material, social, and ideational ‘structures’ both confine and empower human agency (Giddens). This is particularly visible in the complex interplay between human actors and their *spatial* and *built* environments. The dialectics of material and socially constructed spaces (Lefebvre, Löw) are at the core of Urban Studies. This panel will focus (a) on the legal, moral, economic, and political claims that conflicting urban actors in the three cities may advance to control ownership, access, and uses of urban spaces, and (b) on their opportunities, resources and strategies to realize or renegotiate these claims.

- What are the factors fuelling antagonism between different claims over the use of urban space (needs and means, economic interests, cultural diversity)?
- What are the power dynamics over contested spaces?
- What are the legal frameworks, political constraints, options and loyalties of different actors (municipalities, civil society, political parties etc.) in governing contested spaces?
- What modes of symbolic appropriation of urban space do we observe?

Panel 2: Between Public and Private

Despite its historical contingency, the concept of a public space remains a powerful utopia that is strongly connected to the idea of a political space and to individual citizenship. As empty signifier a dichotomy of *public* and *private* continues to be the frame of reference for politicians, urban planners, and city dwellers on every level – normative, conceptual, and empirical. Every concrete meaning and manifestation of this dichotomy has an immediate impact on the *lived, built, and imagined* city, which is necessarily contentious and a dystopia for many of the individuals affected. The particularities of these negotiations between state agents, corporations/private-interest groups, and populations over the quality of urban spaces are at the core of this panel.

- What does it mean for a city's spatial texture when the private becomes public and the public becomes private?
- How do moral norms (whether imposed by society or the state) affect the delineation of public and private space, and how do diverse concepts coexist or clash?
- How do (changing) gender relations define public and private space and how are they formed by the structural design of urban space?
- How do alternative public spaces influence cultural production and how do manners of cultural production alter space?
- What influence does virtual public space have on real space?

Panel 3: Open Air Spaces of Gathering - Norms and Practices

Open air spaces, whether designed for leisure purposes or as busy city squares, prestigious urban focal points and the like, often serve as public meeting places that may acquire a more specific significance for the assertion of citizen rights and contesting political power. The recent conflict over Gezi Park in Istanbul may illustrate this, and the importance of People's Park in California in the debate over public space and the conceptualisation of the latter by diverse members of society (Don Mitchell) is an often-cited example. This panel will focus on case studies of urban governance by looking at public open air spaces of gathering such as Horsh Beirut, Sioufi Park, the Corniche or the Beirut Waterfront, al-Azhar Park or one of the *Mayadin* in Cairo, and public parks such as Laleh Park or equivalents in Tehran, and the intricate interplay between them and the public sphere. The aim is to discuss to what extent the spaces are used the way they were designed, who determines their use and whether and how this use is culturally and politically contested. The direct comparison between three structurally similar spaces of gathering in the three cities is of particular interest in this panel.

- What are the symbolic, normative and practical frameworks of collectively used open air spaces?
- How and under what circumstance do spontaneous popular practices create public open air space or alter its character?
- In how far is the use of open air space culturally and politically encoded and contested?
- What are the public order policies applied to such spaces and who is responsible for them?

The deadline for submission of abstracts (300 words) addressing one of the above panels is 31 July 2013. Please send your abstract together with a short biographical statement to Nadia von Maltzahn (maltzahn@orient-institut.org). Successful applicants will be notified by late August 2013.

The conference language is English.