THERE IS NO BIG TREES ON BEIRUT COAST

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The (cosmo)politics of Beirut coastal zoning

‘*When you see a big tree in Beirut, always look for the old house*‘
- Mona Hallak

During a foot excursion in Ain Mreisseh, Mona Hallak’s words caught my attention. We were walking through Ras Beirut, trying to uncover the secrets and treasures of its old heritage, among fancy buildings and other new developer’s projects. Big trees, and especially fig trees are emblems of Beirut’s heritage, marks of the past resisting through various private development initiatives. Hence, the houses on whose lot these fig trees stand, are as old as these trees. Ras Beirut is lucky to still hold these resilient figures of the past. Unfortunately, the coast did not have such chance. In other words, there is no big tree on Beirut coast; there is no heritage preservation on the coast.

My story hasn’t all to do with trees and houses. Nonetheless these material figures are the physical embodiment of a greater sorry tale. A look at the evolution of Beirut coast is very revealing of Lebanon’s game of power. Its landscape visually narrates the history of the prevailing forces in the country.

Originally, Ras Beirut was directly built on the sea. The coast was roughly constituted of some sparse housings, several kinds of trees to shade the Corniche and foremost, its traditional fishing community. Today, as landing at Beirut’s airport, this is the emblematic view that any passenger sitting on the left wing of the plane gets to see, my very first glance at the city:

The fishing community has turned into a gated-community. High-rise buildings have replaced the sparse housing, and yachts have substituted the fishing sector.

Everyone is free to appreciate or dislike these aesthetic changes to the city; but such changes unconditionally raise a major issue: Beirut's coastal adjustment entails everyone's right of access to the sea.
As part of the public maritime domain, the seaside should be a public space and provide everyone with a common access to the land. In fact, article 144 defines the Public maritime domain as the land along the seashore where the waves reach in the highest day in winter. Furthermore, the Decree No. 4810 on the Regulation of Maritime Public Property states that "*Maritime public property shall remain at the public's disposal, and no right in favor of anyone shall be acquired allowing its closure for a private interest*". Nevertheless, because of the multiple encroachments to the law, access to the sea is now only reserve the 'happy few'. The 'happy few' designates either the customers of the private facilities encroaching the public domain, the militaries, or the tenants of buildings breaching the initial zoning and blueprint assigned to the coast (by building expensive additional floors). These happy few are depriving the rest of not only access and view at the sea, but of access to fresh air in the city as well.

The question that Mona Hallak and Abir Saksouk have tackled through their work as architects at the Neighborhood Initiative and the Dictaphone Group is: *how did this happened?*

Illegal privatization is a quick to-go-to answer in a context of high informality and legal mess that characterizes Lebanon. However, it does not constitute the entire response.
Today's seaside-reality is the product of the state's shift of legal framework. The state overlooks basic rights (provided by article 144) by allowing the development of Real Estate Company -that must give back 25% of land back to the municipality- and changing the zoning to allow for some

coastal lots to be privately owned, change their buildable status or increase their footprint (thus enabling the construction of additional floors). Such policies reflect a vision of the city that is not inclusive of all its stakeholders and does not encompass for cultural practices nor heritage. It lets a space be defined by the biggest buyer.

But what is particularly striking in the case of Lebanon, is that the biggest buyer happens to be the state itself. The state approves of a change in the zoning and allow a Real Estate Company (i.e *Solidere*) to develop on some lots, though the prime shareholders of this company benefitting of the change of regulation turns out to be members of the government or their acquaintances. The Master Plan of Beirut is modified, impacting the zoning of the coast and enabling the erection of hotels. Nonetheless, such modifications appear after that the land affected was bought previously at small price when its status labelled it as unbuildable, hence increasing tremendously the value of the land and generating an important capital gain for its owners. Likewise, the buyers benefiting from those profits turns out to be complicit with the government.

All in all, I find Beirut coast's to be extremely relevant when it comes to illustrate the invisible schemes of power and influence. The private sector physically dominates the coast, but it is enabled to do so by the public sector. Beirut coast reflects the influence of developers taking over public space hence limiting the expression and the visibility of weaker groups (e.g residents, Kurds, domestic workers) by denying them space for their cultural practice. Nevertheless, a closer look at the coast and its actors reveals high interests tightening the private sector to the state.