

SOAN239B

Marie-Louise Ettel

Photo Essay: On the (in)visibility of Beirut's sea side

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As Beirut's sea view is mostly blocked, the sea appears to be at risk to sink into obscurity at times. It seems like there are only a few spots left unveiling the sea's existence between high-rise buildings and construction works. A clear view is only provided if you find yourself standing on top of a building, if you approach Beirut by plane or if you are in the sea itself. At my very first day at AUB, I wandered around for a while until I discovered the gleaming sea surface between the tree covered campus. As I went downstairs, I left AUB's vegetated areas behind me, the tennis court, the gym, the swimming pool and finally I exited through the sea gate. After crossing a highly frequented street, the Avenue de Paris, I faced another blockade before being physically able to reach out to the sea water. The metal barriers of the Corniche, a five-kilometer-long promenade planted with palm trees, forced me to stop abruptly. The esplanade extended to my left and to my right. As I looked around, there was no access to the water at first sight – apart from iron stairways, attached to the concrete foundation of the Corniche, leading to the rocks surrounded by the sea.

Later I got told that indigenous trees were replaced by these palm trees, such as many other elements of the city's history that disappeared completely. What was invisible to me at first sight, emerged later at second glance. Engaging with the sea covers a multidisciplinary approach, for instance, through research projects or forms of civic activism. In the following, I want to present ways of re-engaging the image of Beirut's sea side and making the unseen seen.

#### How to uncover the invisible?

The [AUB Neighborhood Initiative](#) is an exchange of AUB members and residents of Ras Beirut. As advocates of the neighborhood, the initiative performs critical citizenship and civic responsibility through the environmental protection of the area and the preservation of its local heritage. One possible approach is to have a look at the [online map](#), which offers a discovery journey of localities, restaurants and activities in the neighborhood and provides additional information on the sites. Another possibility is to take part in a walking tour, for example with Mona El Hallak, the director of AUB Neighborhood Initiative, covering Ain Mreisseh port and the museum of the former diver and fisherman Ibrahim Najem. This tour enables the participants to understand the relationship between Beirut's sea side and its residents more clearly.

Moreover, information can be taken by using art and photography projects like [Dwarfed](#) by Maha Nasrallah or [Panoramic Beirut](#) by Antoine Atallah. The artist Maha Nasrallah draws abandoned traditional buildings in Clemenceau, Hamra, Ain el-Mreisseh and Manara. Her illustrations isolate the houses from their actual surroundings and put a different complexion on it. Antoine Atallah, Alex Baladi, Alphonse Garabedian and Watchi provide panoramic images of Beirut during the years 1870, 1910, 1952, 1995 and 2017, and help to re-engage the sea side underlining change of time and space. Another visual approach is the [clip](#) of the youth-led-NGO [NAHNOO](#) "Beirut is at the sea, but the sea does not belong to Beirut" (بيروت على البحر.. بس البحر مش لبيروت) through visiting sites in the city in order to compare them with old pictures or postcards, visualizing the transformation of Beirut covering Zaytouna Bay, Solidere, the restaurants and beach resorts, Manara, the military area, Raouché and its surroundings cafés, Dalieh and Ramlet al-Baida beach as the last remaining public (?) space.

Making the invisibility of Beirut's sea side visible is grounded in a interdisciplinary research based on a critical engagement with time and space and the perception of sea and land. This research brings people with different academic backgrounds together like in Stefan Helmreich's work on marine microbial diversity and the cultural, social and scientific imaginations of the sea as it unites

oceanography and anthropology. Grouping works of researchers like the economist and historian Charles Issawi's writing on the history of Beirut's port in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and human geographer Carolyn Cartier's conceptualization of maritime world cities, help to uncover the invisible – like Beirut's maritime activity – and enable us to understand economic and social structures on land produced and shaped by the sea.

Engaging these and other works help us to perceive and discover Beirut's sea side in its entirety, and consequently, not to lose sight of it. These are tools of raising awareness and responsibility, as they make us understand that sea and land could not exist without one another. Sea and land share history, culture, political, economic and social structures. To unfold it, the engagement of a scientific, civic, and environmental community is needed and can be approached through the work of photographers, painters, urbanists, architects, historians, economists, or biologists.



This image was taken during a boat trip from Ain Mreisseh port to Raouché – as part of our course Sea & Society – with [Dictaphone group](#) on 22 March 2018 (14:30 pm). Throughout the boat trip we were listening to an audio file, a piece containing oral history of Beirut's fishermen. This picture stands for Beirut's sea-related history and the uncovering of the unseen. We see two fishermen located on a rock exposed from land. The setting of the picture encompasses the imagery of making the invisible visible. Behind the fishermen Beirut's skyline spreads out. Because of the sun's reflection on the sea, the picture almost appears as a black and white photography and it could have equally been taken in 1952,1995, 2017. How about 2052?

References:

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