City & Society

Forum

Ghostly Specters, Haunted Ruins and Resistance to the Amnesiac and Exclusivist Divided City

By John Nagle
University of Aberdeen

"Ghosts", notes Edensor, "haunt the regulated city and the impossible dreams of totalization"; they disturb political imperatives designed to "bury the past too swiftly in search of the new." Among many things, ghosts and haunted ruins irradiate the logic and consequences of urban economic development in city centers. This form of urban cloning is an identikit regeneration scheme drawing on adaptive commercial reuse and gentrification, including a sanitized version of localism, which designates areas of the city as themed historical quarters. Ghostly apparitions and hauntings can come in many forms. Hauntings may be old abandoned buildings that stand as anomalous figures in a milieu dominated by the cult of regeneration. These hulking monuments represent complex forms of memory that challenge blank slate ideologies and modes of political amnesia imposed by planners and political elites. Ghosts are also figures – individuals and groups – that are not supposed to be visible in particular spaces. They have supposedly been socially cleansed, removed from and proscribed access to their right to the city. Since they expose hidden narratives and injustices, ghosts can also point the way to new alternatives in imagining political community.

While not explicitly deploying the conceptual language of "hauntology," Thomas F. Carter's 2003 article "Violent Pastime(s)" prefigures and positions these forms within the context of divided cities – cities that have experienced ethnic violence. In such cities, the gentrification process has an added dimension. These reconstruction projects focus on the city center and its rebuilding symbolizes the successful appearance of the peace process. In divided cities, neoliberal urban regeneration often intersects with the ideals of the "capitalist peace," an attempt to discipline these places through incentivizing foreign direct investment, tourism and privatization. Urban destruction, in such environments, is transformed into the new chic. Carter focuses on Belfast, a quintessentially divided city. During the conflict, which began in 1969 and officially ended with the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, 1400 deaths and over 20,000 people were injured in the city. While a peace process has taken root, the city is better described as "post-violent" rather than "post-conflict" with a toxic mix of territoriality, poverty, paramilitarism and intensifying segregation in the most disadvantaged housing estates.

From the 1990s a number of new major infrastructure projects were established in Belfast city center, including a major shopping mall and the commercial redevelopment of the riverfront. As part of recent attempts to "normalize" Belfast, the city center contains the "Cathedral," "Laganside," and the "Titanic Quarters" – areas the authorities call "character zones" – that they hope will facilitate "cultural reanimation" and the local economy. The Titanic Quarter, a £7billion, 185-acre site located on deindustrialized shipyards, comprises 180,000 square meters of leisure space, including a heritage center. Opened in 2012, the Titanic Quarter is a slice of nostalgia intended to celebrate an era supposedly before the violent conflict when Belfast was an industrial powerhouse. Such forms of regeneration strive to make memory and identity as objects of public attention by constructing emotional attachment to places and periods from the past as a means of building civic solidarity.

The city's leaders promote the city center as representative of a late modern cosmopolitan city rather than one compelled by sectarian violence and intolerance. This remaking and rebranding of the city center reflected the peace process in complex ways. Towards this, the British state were preoccupied, as a strategy to end violence, with building solidarity across middle-class lines, thereby firmly locating the conflict in lower-income groups. In rebuilding the city center as a new public space, the state hoped to "build a shared sense of civic pride, security and enjoyment among people whose attitudes, shaped by separated experience, may well be mutually antagonistic."

Rather than support peace and reconciliation, the reconstruction of the city center as a globalized and cosmopolitan space represents instead a "Potemkin Village," a mask hiding the escalation of poverty, sectarianism and exclusion within working-class urban districts, which has been a dominant theme of the peace process. Carter notes how the regenerated city center acts to "obscure social violence in the streets and provide images of attractive settings for conspicuous consumption in a global marketplace."

While the rebranded city center is portrayed as a "neutral, modernizing place that has left its parochial sectarianism behind," at the same time political life is increasingly subject to ethnic Balkanization. In constructing a branded localism, the dominant theme of urban post-war reconstruction is nostalgia for a peaceful past prior to the outbreak of sectarian conflict. In Belfast, those responsible for the gentrification of the city center are accused of "calculated amnesia," "a deliberate effort to bury the recent conflict."

Ghosts are haunting reminders of persistent forms of political conflict and social exclusion purposely hidden and forgotten. Rather than mute presences, ghosts occur "when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving," Carter illuminates the traces of such unwelcome spirits by detailing "how working-class youth in Belfast use communal violence to express notions of Belfast that are contrary to city leaders' desires, including the elite's attempts to use violence to promote Belfast as a late-modern, cosmopolitan city." While some working class forms of violence – particularly boxing – are classified legitimate in the city, other forms, especially youth sectarian rioting, are labeled criminal and a threat to the elites' attempts to rebrand the "global image of Belfast as a place of intolerance and ethnic violence."

Peace(re)building in Beirut
Intercommunal rioting provides one expression of revolt from "below;" yet there are other manifestations of resistance to these reconstruction schemes. To highlight these complex forms of subversion undergirds a key concern covered in my own research. I have recently focused on Beirut, the capital of Lebanon. During the civil war (1975-1990) 30% of buildings in the historic downtown area were destroyed in violence. Similar to Belfast, the peace process has witnessed the creation of more ethnically homogeneous and insular spaces across the city, which has the effect of consolidating the exercise of local power by former warlords now reinvented as political luminaries.
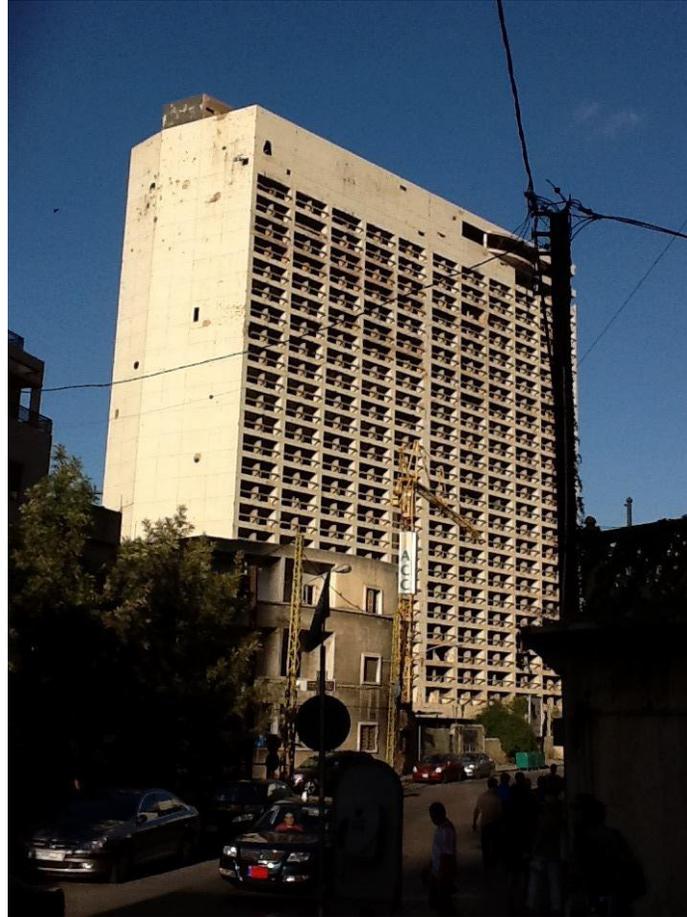
Figure 1. Ruined hulk of the Holiday Inn destroyed in the civil war. Photo by author.

The regeneration of Beirut city center was led by a company called Solidere specifically set up to expedite the reconstruction process in the public interest. Solidere represents the "colonization" of the public sector by the private." Assets held by more than 120,000 original claimants to property rights in the area were transferred to Solidere. Solidere framed the regeneration process as constructing a conflict-free zone to symbolize Lebanon's ability to overcome its divisions. Yet, the postwar reconstruction of the city center rendered the space amnesiac, with no reference to the history of sectarian violence, and exclusivist by de facto limiting public access. Rather than the gathering place of all Beirutis from all backgrounds, the city center is now an exclusive space for "appropriate people only". The rebuilding of Beirut's city center, which rather than fostering a new collective memory necessary for reconciliation, created "the forgetful landscape," a "concerted effort to bury and to deny the country's more recent past." Solidere's project sought to "wipe clean the surface of central Beirut; to purify it of all historical associations in the form of its buildings; to render it pure space, pure commodity, pure real estate."

For critics, the exclusivist and amnesiac reconstructed city center is a dangerous process that obscures the concurrent sectarianization of space across Lebanon as groups increasingly seek shelter in cloistered ethnic communities. Beirut has become an increasingly segregated city as urban space is physically and symbolically divided into exclusive sectarian districts. For example, the proportion of Muslims living in the eastern suburbs of Beirut declined from 40 per cent to 5 per cent by the late

1980s. Thus, a simpatico relationship binds the amnesic and exclusivist city center and the exacerbation of ethnic cleavages in the post-war era.

Yet, given how reconstruction strategies entrench social forgetting to legitimate urban dispossession, resistance may also be articulated by social movements that cross-cut ethnic cleavages to create strategies of resistance to amnesia through right-to-the-city claims. Thus, right-to-the-city movements harness the power of memory, haunting, ghosts and history as a way of fostering peacebuilding and as a means to demand access to municipal services in the present. In particular, I link Lefebvre's right-to-the-city with the idea of ghosts and haunting, the strategy of making what is concealed – and thus used to legitimate sectarian division and economic injustice – visible and open to transformation. If postwar reconstruction expedites disappearance through amnesia, radical movements reveal what Arendt termed a "space of appearance", a sphere of political action where citizens coalesce to produce agency, power and collective action.

Figure 2. Tent in Beirut city center for Families of the Kidnapped. Photo by author.

These groups range from trade unionists, LGBT rights activists and feminists, movements resisting the privatization of public space and activists mobilizing to protect public services. While these movements do not belong to ethnic groups, neither do they correspond to specific socioeconomic classes or even represent a broad alliance of interests. Yet, I argue that these non-sectarian movements use memory to sustain peacebuilding in extremely complex ways that are, in themselves, not always classified as traditional forms of conflict resolution. They engage in activities, for instance, to promote rights for sexual minorities and women, to demand better terms for workers, and for better public services for the whole society. Some movements strive to resist private interests from gentrifying urban spaces. In calling for these changes, these social movements strive to unsettle the basic grammar that reinforces sectarianism in the divided society.

One brief snippet from Beirut illuminates some of these dynamics.

The Return of Abu Rakhussa

More than 20,000 tons of uncollected rubbish amassed in Beirut during the summer of 2015. The problem of uncollected rubbish occurred as a result of the multi-ethnic power sharing failing to agree to extend the contract of the private company responsible for disposing the city's trash. In response, a newly formed protest movement – called "You Stink" – began a series of protests in Beirut city center where they demanded the government's resignation. Many protestors – reported as people from across the sectarian and political spectrum – carried placards, symbolic refuse bags and wore paper masks to cover the stench of the trash and what they viewed as the decaying political class. Tens of thousands of demonstrators were recorded at the city center protests, which were held on almost a daily basis. For You Stink's protestors, the issue of uncollected trash was symptomatic of the wider problems of dysfunctional, sectarian and corrupt governance. Indeed, in Lebanon the spoils of state are divvied up as lucrative contracts for public works are awarded to private companies with close ties to sectarian elites.

Figure 3. Poster on bombed building outlining campaign to stop the privatization of the city center. Photo by author.

After one protest in the city center, the general manager of Solidere complained about the demonstrators "impeding the business of the commercial district in Downtown for both small and large merchants." The manager demanded the protestors leave the city center as they were "cheapening" it by transforming it into a new "Abu Rakhussa." The label "Abu Rakhussa" was significant; it translates as "father of the cheap" and it was the descriptor used for the working-class souks and flea markets that characterized the city center before the civil war. A social movement

activist responded: "We want to hold accountable everyone who robbed this country ... and we want to reclaim Downtown Beirut for the people ... Al Burj Square and the markets are coming back." In an attempt to take back the city center from high-class businessmen who turned the district into an exclusive quarter after the civil war, thousands of activists recreated Abu Rakhussa for one night. They set up stalls in the city center to sell cheap homemade goods, thus highlighting the exclusivity of the upscale stores that predominate in the downtown district.

Ghostly presences unmask projects aiming to cleanse socially public space; they trace the powerful dynamics of expropriation underlying continuing public disinvestment and economic inequality in postwar cities. Ghosts and haunted ruins ensure that public space can never be programmed in comprehensive ways that simply affirm the power of the state and its neoliberal partners. Ghosts and hauntings, states Gordon, are notifications of "what's been suppressed or concealed is very much alive and present, messing or interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed towards us". Thus, in Belfast city center, these ghostly disruptions, as Carter notes, are youth or sectarian forms of rioting, which contradict the state's desire to build a cosmopolitan, consumerist space. In Beirut, these disturbing apparitions are non-sectarian movements that re-imagine the city by impressing memories into city center public space that shine a light on complex, awkward and disordered histories of the city that defy sectarian and amnesiac visions. If judiciously mobilized, these memories can become "routes for forging new cosmopolitan identities and transcending loyalties and commitments."

References Cited
Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Carter, Thomas. F. 2003. "Violent Pastime(s): On the Commendation and Condemnation of Violence in Belfast." *City & Society* 15(2): 255-281.
Daily Star. 2015. "Abu Rakhussa brings Pre-war Nostalgia to Downtown Beirut." Daily Star, September 19. Accessed September 21, 2015. https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Sep-19/315892-you-stink-calls-on-supporters-to-join-abu-rakhussa-rally-in-downtown-beirut.ashx.
Edensor, Tim. 2005. "The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins: Ordering and Disordering Memory in Excessive Space." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23(6): 829-849.
Gordon, Avery F. 1997. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
Hadaway, Pauline. 2001. "Cohesion in Contested Spaces." *Architects Journal* November: 38-40.
Kelly, Brian. 2012. "Neoliberal Belfast: Disaster Ahead?" *Irish Marxist Review* 1(2): 1-20.
Khalaf, Samir. 2012. *Lebanon Adrift: From Battleground to Playground*. London: Saqi.
Makarem, H. 2012. "Downtown Beirut: Between amnesia and nostalgia." LSE, October 17. Accessed October 16, 2017. http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2012/10/17/downtown-beirut-between-amnesia-and-nostalgia/
Makdisi, Saree. 1997. "Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidere." *Critical Inquiry* 23(3): 660-705.
Murtagh, Brendan (2008) "New Spaces and Old in 'Post-conflict' Belfast." *Divided Cities/Contested States, Working Chapter No. 5*. Belfast: Queen's University of Belfast.
Murtagh, Brendan (2017) "Contested Space, Peacebuilding and the Post-conflict City." *Parliamentary Affairs* (Online First)
Nagel, Caroline. 2002. "Reconstructing Space, Re-creating Memory: Sectarian Politics and Urban Development in Post-War Beirut." *Political Geography* 21(5): 717-725.
Nagle, John and Mary-Alice Clancy. 2010 *Shared Society or Benign Apartheid? Peacebuilding in Divided Societies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Nagle, J. 2009a. "Potemkin Village: Neoliberalism and Peace–Building in Northern Ireland." *Ethnopolitics* 8(2): 173–190.
Nagle, John. 2009b. "Sites of Social Centrality and Segregation: Lefebvre in Belfast, a 'Divided City." *Antipode* 41(2): 326-347.
Nagle, John. 2010. "Nostrum or Palliative? Contesting the Capitalist Peace in Violently Divided Societies." *Civil Wars* 12(4): 218-36.
Nagle, John. 2013. "'Unity in Diversity': Non-sectarian Social Movement Challenges to the Politics of Ethnic

Antagonism in Violently Divided Cities." *International Journal for Urban and Regional Research* 37(1): 78-92.

Nagle, John. 2016. *Social Movements in Violently Divided Societies: Constructing Conflict and Peacebuilding*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Nagle, John. 2017. "Ghosts, Memory and the Right to the Divided City: Resisting Amnesia in Beirut City Centre." *Antipode* 49 (1), 149-168.