

Power Dynamics in the Post-War Reconstruction of Aita el Cha'ab

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A reflective essay based on our involvement in the reconstruction process after the 2006 war on Lebanon

(Slide 01) Notions of consensus and conflict in the social theory of Foucault act as a challenge for any understanding of urban intervention and governance. Indeed, Foucault's prominent quote that "power is everywhere" presents an important entry point to explore the nature and meanings of participatory planning practices.

According to Foucault, social relations are characterised by conflict, not consensus and power relations should be understood and conceptualized to fight against domination. (Foucault 1980: 98)

In order to understand any context and its transformation, especially in the case of war-induced shifting geographies in Lebanon, one should realise that they are the result of changing power relations and processes of struggle. For some power is the attribute of political institutions such as the state (ibid). But this conception of power is limited and does not allow understanding how the agency and the influence of all stakeholders can change. Power analytics are therefore a crucial starting point to understand the relationship between conflict and participatory planned urban interventions.

Based on this approach, this paper investigates the power analytics as they are revealed in the post-war reconstruction process of Aita el Cha'ab, a border town in southern Lebanon that was severely bombed during the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon. More specifically, we explore how the participatory approaches of an advocacy group of designers, planners, researchers and activists (which we were part of) was faced with the social, urban, and political realities of the place. We particularly focus on a context-based analysis of power, by examining the attempts of the group to use participation in the process of reconstruction, as entry point to understand the *reproduction of power relations*.

Our analysis is based on a personal experience that is the outcome of our active involvement in the reconstruction process of Aita el Cha'ab as a group of volunteers who lived in the town for a year after the war. Given the scale of destruction and the history of reconstruction in Lebanon's modern

history, it was a difficult concept to accept the negative and eminent predictable outcomes of yet another reconstruction process. While in Aita el Cha'ab, we volunteered to aid in the reconstruction efforts within the municipality, while pushing for bottom-up approaches, negotiating with different actors, and bringing closer the municipality and the residents in their demands for reconstruction.

Due to this experience, we are able to better articulate why pre-set notions of participation in planning need to be re-questioned.

Introducing the Context (Slide 02)

After the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006, various civil society initiatives linked up to form Samidoun – a spontaneous initiative and network that worked on diverse yet coordinated relief and solidarity tasks during and after the war. *(Slide 03)*

Upon the end of the war, about thirty of Samidoun's volunteers decided to head to the southern border village of 'Aita al-Cha'b to help in the return of the villagers to their homes and assist in the eventual rebuilding of the village. The group was critical of contemporary attitudes and practices of relief agencies and wanted to provide a different model of solidarity through their physical presence and everyday living in the village. *(Slide 04)* We, the authors of this chapter were part of the group of six volunteers to remain in 'Aita al-Cha'b and to focus on the issue of reconstruction.

Upon our arrival in 'Aita, on the night of 15 August 2006, the village was a ghost town. *(Slide 05)* Aita had managed to resist the occupation and control of the Israeli Army despite thirty three days of direct bombardment and ground fighting. The Israeli Army had demolished an entire neighbourhood of its old core by its military D-9 Caterpillar bulldozers. Israel, however, could not occupy 'Aita. *(Slide 06)* But the result was that 'Aita lost all of its public buildings, infrastructure, road networks, and 600 out of its 1100 houses. In addition, its historic core was bulldozed, and its agricultural harvest for the year was totally lost. *(Slide 07)*

While in 'Aita al-Cha'b, we volunteered within the municipality by founding a 'Reconstruction and Planning Unit' that was managed by the group. The permits necessary to allow for construction to begin were to be issued by this unit, especially those concerned with houses located in the historic core and the extension. *(Slide 08)* We devised a system of urban guidelines, which were negotiated with the members of each household. The 'Reconstruction and Planning Unit' also arranged public meetings between municipal representatives and the families.

We lived in ‘Aita al-Cha’b for a whole year after the war. We made friends, were involved in the pains of war, and we understood our new context. Through our involvement, we sensed how the village was burdened with reconstruction procedures and decisions instead of being supplied with the means to retrieve losses.

(Slide 09) As important and significant this experience was, it was not without challenges. Any person working in a time of post-war reconstruction, especially within a region that was formerly occupied, faces many battles and struggles. There have been many difficulties as well as contradictions facing the process of participation which the Aita group undertook in the post war period. There had been a conscious decision to struggle with complications rather than to revert to easy answers. We shall hence discuss these challenges and point out to the impossibility of quantifying successes; we instead refer to the experience as a whole, as the start of a process which we and others have learnt from.

Governance and Marginalisation in Decision Making (Slide 10)

In this section, we discuss the complex history of local governance in Aita which, as it stands today, is the result of years of state marginalization to the area, of 28 years of Israeli oppressive occupation, and of armed resistance.

Some important historical events shed light on the current geo-political conditions of ‘Aita el Cha’b. Two geographic signifiers in the region explain the troubles to come. *(Slide 11)* First, is the division of the historic Galilee region, which ‘Aita was part of. The partition drawn north of Haifa was arbitrary, and so in 1920, relatives found themselves suddenly under a state boundary that meant different citizenships, allegiances, and fates (Hof, 1985). Second signifier is the 1948 French and British division of the area according to the 1916 Sykes-Picot plan and the creation of the state of Israel.

‘Aita al-Cha’b was among one of those villages that were abruptly attributed to a Lebanese State. Little did these villages know that existing social and economic relations with Palestine will be disrupted. Prior to 1948, some of ‘Aita’s major social and economic relations were with Palestinian villages and cities.

This division was aggravated with the economical marginalization of the whole region (Mallat 2007). From an area destined to be very flourishing, the South of Lebanon had overnight turned into a periphery.

(Slide 12) As a result of these historical geographical conditions and aggravated by an international situation that placed it at the heart of the regional conflict, 'Aita turned into a border village.

(Slide 13) In 1978, the 'Litani Operation' marked the actual occupation of the South. Local governance during the Israeli occupation, from 1978 till 2000, was a form of '*Idara Madaniyya*' or civil administration imposed by the state of Israel. The members of this administration were residents of the village who were given privilege to exercise power by the occupying state on the rest of the residents; this exercise of power included curfews, permits to circulate, taxes, confiscation of land to build institutions for the civil administration and so on.

'Aita al-Cha'b was liberated with the liberation of southern Lebanon in the year 2000 and the Municipality of 'Aita al-Cha'b was established in 2004 after a considerable political battle between the different families and political parties. The newly elected post-liberation municipality never addressed the many confiscated rights, including land, of many families during the Israeli Occupation. The social and economic setup that had been formed during the occupation was not addressed. These issues continued to haunt many of the social and political relations within the village. The eventual exclusion of the local population's voice from the reconstruction process after the 2006 war came therefore as no surprise.

No doubt the war and the responsibility of reconstruction came as a shock to an unprepared, disputed upon, and fragmented municipality. The particularities of the municipality of 'Aita al-Cha'b include its weak and overwhelmed mayor, abandoned by a municipal council whose members live and work outside of 'Aita. These conditions made it easier for actors in the post war reconstruction period to bypass the municipality in many decision-making instances. The local community also bypassed the municipality and opened channels with more influential actors, such as political party members, or members of influential families within the village who are well connected.

The undermining role of the municipality by all actors can be seen as an undermining of the participation of the local community. The continuously mounting criticism and pressure by the local community on the mayor would initiate a practice of his withholding of information as he feared and avoided opportunities of confrontation and discussion with the public.

Hence the local community with its complex history, geography, and an unstable present to appreciate the public realm was not even able to participate through the conventional and hierarchical methods of an elected body.

The Power of Knowledge, the Power of Money (Slide 14)

We choose to discuss the politics of aid in post war Aita in order to particularly explain how the work of aid and development agencies contributed to the reproduction of power relations and indirectly oppressed communal mobilizations and public demands of the residents of Aita by either hiding knowledge of reconstruction decisions or diverting the focus towards money and aid. In this sense, knowledge and power are inextricably linked, the former challenging or reinforcing established patterns of visible/invisible/hidden forms of power.

In post-war 'Aita al-Cha'b, the main actors were the municipality, which is controlled by Hezbollah, the donor country, and the local residents. Between the three actors, opinions circulated and fluctuated, as negotiations were divided between recognized Hezbollah representatives and isolated members from the 'grassroots' who arrived to allow other voices to be heard and exercise the right of examining the privileged relations between Hezbollah and the donor country.

(Slide 15) Immediately after the ceasefire, Gulf States proudly announced pledges worth tens of millions of dollars to aid Lebanon's reconstruction. The State of Qatar launched fascinating campaigns of reconstruction and outreach through advertising banners conveying Qatari efforts and generosity.

It sought to take advantage of its donation to promote itself as an emerging hands-on geopolitical actor in the Middle East. The donor country compensated each damaged unit (house) with a sum of money. A housing unit was loosely defined as 140 sq m of area which was to be registered in the name of an individual who in turn was entitled to receive the compensation. The way in which the survey to determine the compensation of each family was conducted and its mechanism formulated had tremendous negative effects on both the urban and social fabric. The surveys conducted by the different state agencies were corrupt and led by clientalism and private interests. The Qatari representatives were confronted by an enormous amount of unexpected complaints by angry homeowners claiming unjust assessments, corrupt house listings and unclear compensation criteria. The result was that homeowners were never notified of dates of delivery of compensations, were aware of the corruption involved in the process of damage assessment, and were unable to take their demands beyond complaints because they feared losing their compensations. In fact, the negotiation around the damage assessments were never institutionalized, but rather revealed in public instances, afterwards, largely when the intervention had been launched. The mechanism through which compensations were offered, from initial categories, to surveys and to markings on

the walls of affected houses, all tended to abstract space, living conditions and social structure into numbers and predisposed definitions, thus, was the most negative factor in the reconstruction project in 'Aita al-Cha'b.

The residents of Aita strongly recall the moments when they stood in line for hours in one of the public schools in Aita, on a given Sunday, to receive their compensation quarterly checks from the Qataris.

This misunderstanding of 'Aita's social space, in parallel with the conflicting and confusing damage assessment procedures, transformed the post war discussion in 'Aita from one about the future collective recovery of the village into one about lists, names, and delayed payments.

Participatory Practices - Learning from the Old Neighbourhood Project (Slide 16)

The compensations provided by the state of Qatar were based on the construction and rebuilding of concrete homes – and did not take into consideration the historic stone construction that is present in the village. This type of construction is mostly found in the old neighborhood of the village – and the lack of funds and projects to restore and repair these old structures was prompting the removal and erasure of the neighborhood.

(Slide 17) The old neighbourhood has a strategic military location and role in the village's history – as it historically resisted the Israeli occupation. It was from its dense urban fabrics that the resistance fighters sought shelter and best conducted guerrilla urban warfare. The old village on the hilltop constituted the origin and the soul of the village. *(Slide 18)* *Hara tabta* was mostly levelled to ground by Israeli bulldozers; it had 18 piles of rubble in place of former houses.

(Slide 19) The old town of 'Aita had witnessed irregular informal spatial developments over the past 250 years. The spatial production of that neighbourhood was based on informal laws and socially accepted practices that guided building activity without rigidly dictating its form. *(Slide 20)* Houses originated from a two-room quarry stone construction unit dating from the early 1930s. Buildings typically were built to the edge of their small plots and adjacent to their neighbours thus allowing for the traditional *bakoura*, an open space within the private plot. All houses were one or two stories with the courtyard spatially and programmatically central to the residence. *(Slide 21)*

Given this fabric of the old town, the question of how to rebuild was difficult. The main contradiction was whether or not to preserve the old fabric and rebuild according to the informal laws that existed prior to the war. Before damage assessment surveys were finalized and even before the final decisions on demolition categories were taken, the only thing that had started was the bulldozing of the houses. *(Slide 22)* The sub-contractor responsible for the bulldozing had a personal interest in destroying as many houses as possible and the residents were still unsure about the categorization of their houses, the payments or their position towards demolition. That was where and when the battle had started.

Two weeks after the war ended, Hajj M removed the rubble, broken glass and furniture from his house. His house was sprayed with bullets and hit by a mortar on the second floor, but it was intact, stable and standing. His house was built by his grandfather in the earlier part of the twentieth century with large stone roman masonry blocks that they had found under their land. Hajj M and his entire family were sheltered during the 33 days of aerial raids by 1m thick stone walls of this house they stayed to from invasion. Yet, two weeks after the war ended, Hajj M was told by a sub contractor hired by a state agency for “rubble removal”- to empty his house by the morning as it was designated to be bulldozed. Hajj M. did not know that he could say no to bulldozing his house – would he be denied compensation if he refused? He cherished his house, it had in fact saved his family's life during the war... Hajj M and his family rushed to pack the remainder of their belongings before the arrival of the bulldozer in the morning.

(Slide 23) The group was convinced with the position of renovation after the voiced-out fear of Hajj M, and consequently many other residents who did not have the tools to demand and pursue otherwise. Being keen on using participation to resolve these issues, the group carried out village meetings in the Husseiniyye between the residents of the old core and the municipality, did extensive individual house meetings with home owners, proposed schemes to the Qatari funders of the feasibility of renovation, used state agencies to impose on the municipality halting the bulldozing process until all decisions have been finalized, stood in front of bulldozers to stop the sudden demolition, and had direct confrontation with the contractors.

To focus on what is actually happened on the ground with our group in the name of ‘public participation’, and to look at the particularities of the case, means that a lot of questions will arise. If planning operates inescapably in the face of power (Forester 1989), it becomes essential to address

these practices themselves and the way in which the process of participation was unfolded in this particular case. In this sense, conceptualising *participation practices* as sites of struggle becomes important.

Throughout the participation/activism initiatives carried out by the group, the issues that were raised resulted in severe conflicts between several homeowners, between us and other homeowners, between homeowners and the municipality, and between us and contractors. Indeed, the topic of bulldozing the entire old neighbourhood and building according to new “modern” laws was on one hand desirable by the local contractors (who had an interest in bulldozing) and by many residents who regarded the old as a reference to a phase of “backward” traditional ways of life. On the other hand, for us and for many other residents who stressed on the relevance of continuity with the past, the introduction of modern building blocks reaching up to four floors and free standing entailed disruptions on the social practices of residents. Conflict was caused between the spatial practices of these families and the new modern blocks. These contradictions and conflicts surfaced strongly, and reaching direct consensus in such practices for us meant either the exclusion of issues which caused the conflict or the exclusion of certain people or stakeholders. Yet we did not ourselves change our premise in order to “peacefully” or “consensually” achieve results. In this sense, to exclude results from actors’ choices, a great deal of power is yielded by the designers and initiators of a consensus-building process, and these issues of power and politics cannot be ignored, or ‘wished away’ to be able to formulate a consensus.

To Conclude (Slide 24)

We therefore believed in the impossibility of removing power, we saw the alternative is to rethink participation in ways that allows us to take a step away from regarding power as negative and oppressive but to embrace it as inescapable, essential and productive in struggles. This means that attention should be paid to the nature of public participation. The challenge for us was therefore on how to sustain these participatory initiatives which we linked to activism after participatory processes seemed for people to arise more conflict than solutions.

Indeed, as Cambell explains, the potential for participation in making a difference in the pursuit of spatial and social justice relies on individuals exercising situated judgment rather than the un-nuanced deployment of generic models or toolkits. (Cambell 2002)

(Slide 25) In the end, the historic neighborhood was almost entirely bulldozed. Somehow ironically, but not unexpectedly, all efforts on our behalf to reconstruct the physical fabric of 'Aita reached a dead end. What actually materialized from our experience in 'Aita were things that had nothing to do with physical reconstruction. *(Slide 26)* Our mere living in 'Aita opened much debate by the people of the village on who we were and what were we doing there. Our presence challenged preconceived visions on reconstruction and planning. Our presence in 'Aita set the conditions for further interactions and allowed for more stories to emerge; by highlighting the critical thinking in the process, it is the start of new actions, on our part, in another context.

(Slide 27) In the minds of the thirty volunteers who went to 'Aita, between many unspoken words amongst ourselves - we went to 'Aita for many, different and varying reasons. Yet we all knew that a big part of 'Aita's ability to captivate our imagination was its situation: far on the frontier where representations for resistance and the search for different possibilities lay closer to our hearts.