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The Symbolic Dimension of the Urban and Cultural Landscape in Baalbek (Lebanon): The Challenge of Resistance and/or Instruments of Power

La dimensión simbólica del paisaje urbano y cultural en Baalbek (Líbano): el desafío de la resistencia y/o los instrumentos de poder

A dimensão simbólica da paisagem urbana e cultural em Baalbek (Líbano): o desafio da resistência e/ou os instrumentos de poder

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Abstract: This article proposes an interpretation of the symbolic dimension of urban landscapes that are mediated by symbols. The study aims to prove that the spatial symbols can be both an instrument of political power, a challenge of resistance against neoliberal global images, and an image of identity when referring to the spirit of the place. It does this in several ways: through studying the saturated places of symbolic loads and their collective memories in the case study in Baalbek, a spatio-temporal analysis of rituals related to the daily surroundings, and the analysis of the urban/ landscape master planning and urban development strategies.

Keywords: landscape, spatial symbol, power, identity, neoliberalism, Baalbek.

Resumen: Este artículo plantea una interpretación de la dimensión simbólica de los paisajes urbanos. Su estudio busca probar que los símbolos espaciales pueden ser un instrumento de poder político; un desafío de resistencia contra las imágenes globales neoliberales y una imagen de identidad al referirnos al espíritu del lugar. El artículo se desarrolla mediante el caso de Baalbek, el cual permitirá estudiar lugares saturados de simbolismos y de recuerdos colectivos; mediante un análisis espacio-temporal de los rituales relacionados con el entorno cotidiano, y mediante el análisis de la planificación urbana/paisajística y las estrategias de desarrollo urbanístico.

Palabras clave: paisaje, símbolo espacial, poder, identidad, neoliberalismo, Baalbek.

Resumo: Este artigo propõe uma interpretação da dimensão simbólica das paisagens urbanas. Pretende-se provar que os símbolos espaciais podem ser um instrumento de poder político, um desafio de resistência contra as imagens globais neoliberais e uma imagem de identidade ao se referir ao espírito do lugar. Este artigo é desenvolvido mediante o caso de Baalbek, o que permitirá o estudo de lugares saturados de simbolismos e de memória coletiva; mediante uma análise espaço-temporal dos rituais relacionados com o ambiente cotidiano, e mediante a análise do planejamento urbano-paisagístico especializado e das estratégias de desenvolvimento urbanístico.

Palavras-chave: paisagem, símbolo espacial, poder, identidade, neoliberalismo, Baalbek.

Introduction

The purpose of the symbol is to link material realities to intangible ideas or abstract values. The spatiality of symbols registers the experience of human communication in places characterized by their socio-cultural loads. The landscape can be marked by creating symbols for cultural purposes or by economic and political issues. It can also be reshaped, thus changing the image of the spaces that it represents. Whoever manipulates the spatial symbol can manipulate the process of invention, urban planning and development, or even space preservation; moreover, they can treat it as something sacred and appropriate it, neglect it, standardize it, or either assign it a local label or a global brand.

This text presents the results of a research-in-progress. It is an interpretation of the symbolic dimension of urban and cultural landscape, and it addresses the spatiality of symbols and the differentiation of some places that are mediated by symbols, while also addressing the relations between “Space/Time /Planning/Power”.

Using examples from Baalbek city in Lebanon, we will present how urban landscape elements are structured as well as their relations with collective memory and their impact on planning strategies. We gathered the results by employing a tripod methodology. Additionally, a social survey was given to four-hundred people who were asked about spatio-temporal hierarchy, symbolic places, social practices, and rituals related to daily surroundings and social living systems. We also explored urban development strategies and the role of political power, while analyzing the performed master urban/landscape planning studies and those still in progress.

The conclusion proposes that space should be understood as a representation of identity and popular connotations. The spatialization of symbols is a mediator that legitimizes the exercise of political power and promotes spaces, and it is an instrument to resist standardized images of neoliberalism.

The spatiality of symbols and the symbolism of places: the articulation of concepts

A symbol is the link between a physical reality (a flag party, a memorial, a building, etc.) and an intangible idea, belief, or value: it is the “visible” which shows the “invisible”. This aspect allows us “to articulate the concept of a “spatial symbol” with those of landscape emblem, monument”^[1] and other geographical and urban archetypes. The symbol, in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is “Something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance”, it refers to something else, and “bears extrinsic values”.^[2] It is more of a paradigm than a concept.

The symbolic place is first and foremost a real geographical place; it may designate other geographic elements that are convoked by the mind

and spirit. We agree with this viewpoint that explains the concept of the place and spatiality and assumes that the symbolic place combines “references to Time, Spaces and Societies”.^[3] When the construction of spaces extends beyond the individual perception towards the common, the cultural landscape can be seen through the places that compose it. Conversely, these places symbolize an image, and sometimes a “sacred stamp”, and give an identity to daily social and political actors.

The essence of geography lies in the meaning that Human gives to places. “Space and Place together define the nature of geography”.^[4] Place is both history and meaning, it incarnates the experiences and aims of people. Place is the reality exposed by the people who have granted its meaning. However, places differ and are transformed by their interpretations and symbolic significations; the cultural landscape is perceived in the places that make a mark on the territory. The issue of time is integrated into this awareness for conservation or transformation.

A place is a reality that can be explained based on the perception of people who have given it significance during a specified period. This significance or “meaning” builds, together with “structure and identity”, the image of environments and places in the city.^[5] Thus, the “Space/Time/Social/Symbol” relation leads to the categorization of spaces, the humanization of the physical landscape and the interpretation of the cultural landscape.

Symbolic places: labelling territory and/or appropriation of spaces?

There is no appropriation without marking and labeling space, and the spatial label accompanies all forms of appropriation, “from the most symbolic, to the more material and violent”.^[6] Appropriation itself may be undertaken by individuals or by political actors. A process of colonization can take advantage of the economy, architecture, and even the urban/landscape planning to symbolically mark the territory: “in Seoul, during the Japanese occupation, the palace of the governor was built in front of the Palace of the east, so to crush symbolically the former power”.^[7] Appropriation does not only relate to power, it also becomes emotional, affective, patriotic, “existential, symbolic and identity appropriation”,^[8] and as such it is transformed into a sense of “belonging” and follows a reciprocal relationship with a given place: a place that belongs to us. This marking is sometimes so impressive that it represents a symbolic violence, or it is simply one of the symbol bearers; “many cities have many symbol bearers of which one is usually the most dominant”.^[9] Symbol bearers are present in urban symbolism through different phenomena such as architecture, statues, street names, festival and urban elements, as well as other cultural expressions like rituals, poems, music, and literature.

In Baalbek, a strong symbolic image can be seen in the publicly displayed photos of the martyrs who have lost their lives resisting the

Israeli occupation of Lebanon (1982-2000) and then fighting Daesh militants since 2012. On the one hand, these displays in public spaces, in the main symbolic space in the city (on the columns of street lights), are symbols of patriotism/community for some people and also represent an ideological belonging to places or “existential appropriation” due to a feeling of belonging. On the other hand, these symbol bearers mark the landscape in a “coercive” and imposing way as some people view these public displays as elements that negatively affect the urban landscape and overload public places and urban furniture with symbols of political community.

This does not only happen in Baalbek; most of the Lebanese political parties mark socio-political territories with flags, monuments, and photos of their political leaders: “This placarding, in addition to the political message, defined a particular ideological space...and the geography of the ideological forces of the site”^[10] is present in the landscape. This labelling and symbolic appropriation participate in defining the socio-spatial identity that some groups associate with. “The concept of marker, underlines the importance of the relationship between this marker, and the cultural social meanings. This is a fundamental distinction that gives the place its real value”.^[11]

According to Bourdieu,^[12] populations are some- times affected by a “coercive” symbol, which arouse their confidence and re-translates it into a “belief”: this process may affect the space and transform it in a “sacred place”. Thus, symbols have the power that the social and political actors can invest in a concrete place.

Structuring of the urban landscape and socio-cultural production of symbolic spaces in Baalbek

Baalbek is a Lebanese city (area: 38 km², population: 120,000) located at the foot of Mount Lebanon. It lies 85 km to the east of Beirut at an altitude of 1170 m and is on the edge of the Bekaa Valley. The temples of Baalbek (Baal/Jupiter, Bacchus, and Venus), built in the Second Century AD during Roman rule, are internationally known and are a major tourist destination in Lebanon and the region. In the eighteenth and nineteenth-century, Orientalists came to explore Baalbek under Ottoman rule, and in 1898 an archaeological delegation was sent from Germany to Baalbek to excavate and document the site.

This study was conducted to explore elements of the urban landscape and their relation to the collective memory and *genius loci* by using a tripod methodology. In the first stage, four-hundred individuals from fifteen main neighborhoods from different socio-professional categories and age groups were surveyed. Through closed and semi-directed questions, the interviewed participants responded to questions concerning symbolic spaces and the role of the political power in landscape development/ planning. The questionnaire aimed to facilitate a spatio-temporal analysis for the practices and rituals that take place

within symbolic places. In the second stage, we analyzed the urban development strategies, the role of political power, and finally the master urban/landscape planning studies performed (1939, 1955, 1964, 2003, landscape 2008) and one in progress (2017) by the General Directorate of Urban Planning (Lebanese government) and Cultural Heritage and Urban Development project (CHUD).

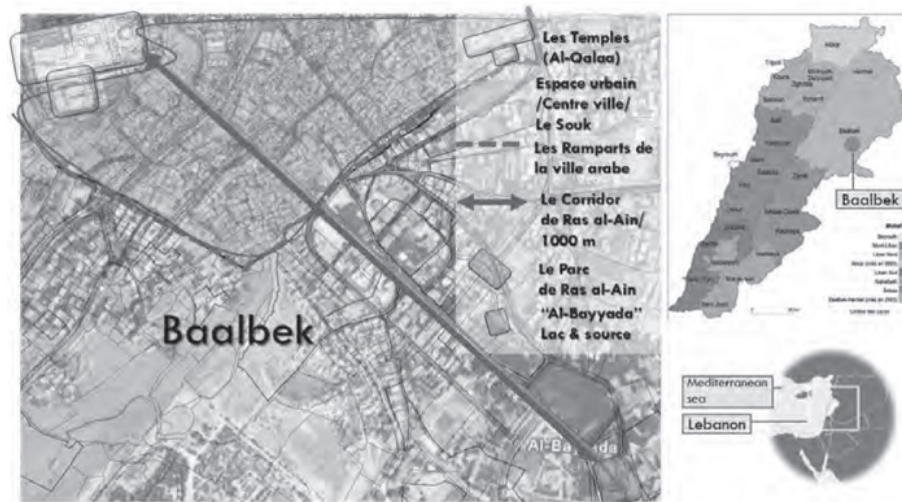


Figure 1

Right: Map of Lebanon/ Left: Plan of Baalbek city R. Mourtada 2018, through CHUD project, land use plan.

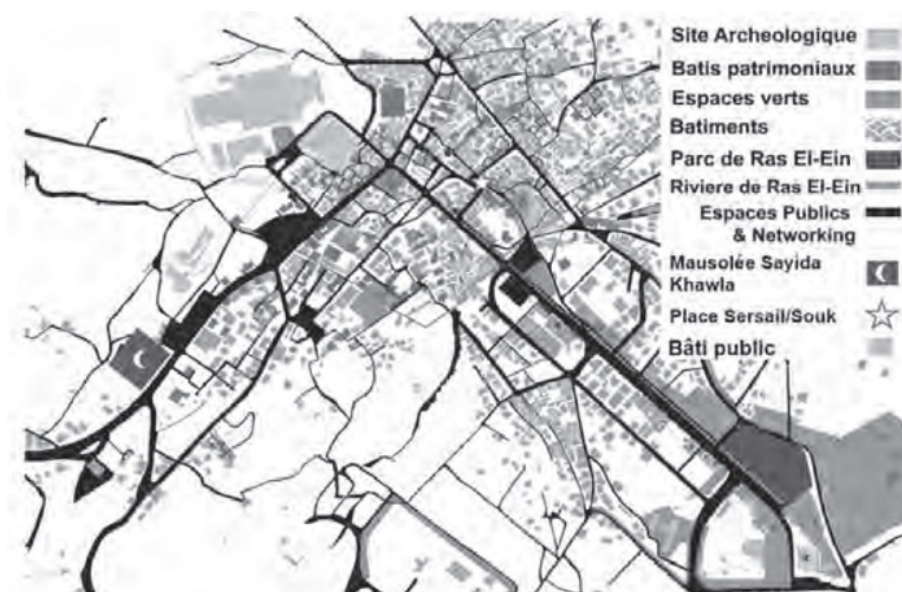


Figure 2

The Master Plan of Baalbek city, R. Mourtada 2008, through CHUD project, land use plan.

Spatio-temporal reading and changes of spatio-political and socio-cultural symbols

For conservation purposes, people bring to life certain symbols, which then makes certain places sacred. An example could be a village called

Bechouat (about 18 km north-west of Baalbek) which is famous for the sanctuary of Our Lady. The number of visitors increased considerably when it was stated that the statue of Our Lady was crying oil. Even if the place is sacred, new spiritual symbols make it more attractive, and the local economy and religious tourism is renewed.

In Baalbek, The Mausoleum of *Sayida* Khawla (the daughter of the *Imam* Al-Hussein, the grand- son of the Prophet Mohammad), has been a sacred destination for the city's inhabitants as well as those from the surrounding areas for approximately 350 years. Promoting this space, while exploring its genius, adjusting the site, and expanding its scale, has transformed the Mausoleum into a site of "religious tourism". The site's sphere of influence extends to other Lebanese cities and even attracts the Muslim-Shiites from other countries (Syria, Iraq, and Iran). This transformation of the spatial symbol into a religious tourism "brand" requires an evolution of accompanied practices such as the celebration of "*Aachoura*" (61 Hijri/ 680 AD) when Al-Hussein was killed in Karbala (Iraq). During these practices, rituals become part of the "re-invented" symbol.

The spatio-temporal analysis of spaces in crisis shows us a hierarchy in Time/Space, and reveals a comparison in urban landscape and its physical elements between the present and the past.



Figure 3

The Mausoleum of Sayida Khawla, 2017, photo by Baalbek al-holom page.

Before the civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990), Ba-albek had been influenced by different political parties, and their social practices were reflected in public spaces. At the city's entrance, there was a square with a statue of Jamal Abdel-Nasser (the President of Egypt: 1956-1970) who was an iconic figure in the Arab World. These public spaces have gradually evolved along with the geopolitical changes and the foundation of a new local party that is in conflict with the Israelis, who are occupying some

contested Lebanese lands. Consequently, the statue was replaced by a new monument, a big mock-up of the Mosque of the Rock symbolizing Jerusalem (*Al-Qouds*); this marked the square located in the main entrance of the city (Beirut/Damascus road) with a spatio-ideological symbol that insists on idea of a free Palestine. Sometimes, as part of urban/landscape strategies, political power creates spaces for a memorial that exists in a common setting and marks territory limits. Details for flags and occasional hanging monuments are even included in the urban furniture design at specific times of year.

The makeover and changes that take place in the space and its resulting identity are due to the modifications of spatial symbols, which lead not only to changes in their landmarks but also to the transformation of the urban landscape plan.

As part of the same case study, the Ras al-Ain area is also rich with symbols. It is where the source of spring water emanating from the eastern slopes and flowing towards the temple site is located, which is precisely how and why Baalbek exists.

The political actors continually attempt to “reload” the park of Ras al-Ain in the social spirit, by inventing new spatial symbols. For the majority of the individuals and generations who live or have lived in Baalbek, this park represents a symbol of greenery, recreation, leisure, and childhood nostalgia (Survey 2017). It also symbolizes local and national feasts such as Green Day, Independence Day, and *Moukawama* or Resistance Day after 2000, as well as some religious festivals.



Figure 4
The parc of Ras al-Ain- 2017- by R.Mourtada



Figure 5

The parc of Ras al-Ain- The green feast- 1965- from “Baalbeck Photoprint” collection

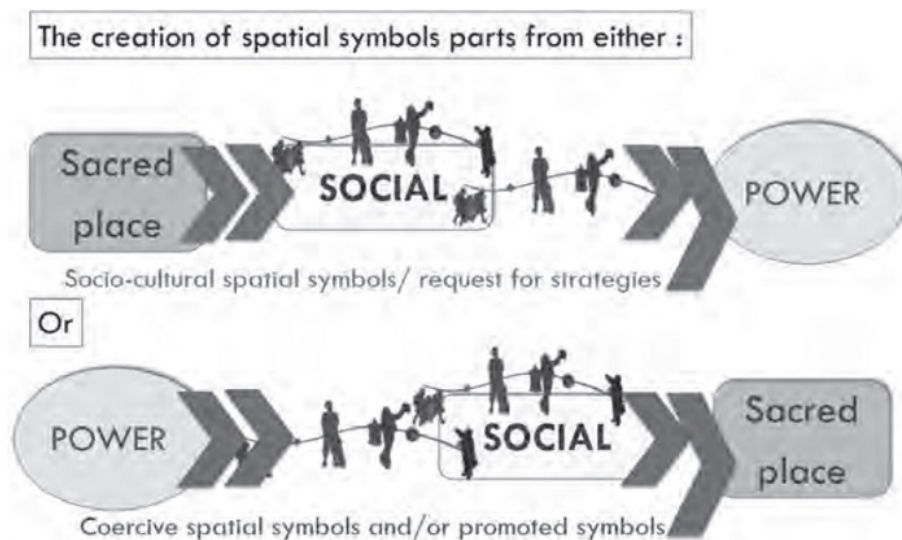


Figure 6

Diagram showing the spatial symbol creation- by R.Mourtada, 2017

Power has taken advantage of this green place and invested its symbolism and socio-cultural deep-rooted meanings in the collective memory by establishing new symbols and memorials such as the new monument (2018), which celebrates the speech of *Sayed* Moussa Al-Sadr (the founder of a local party).

In this case, the invention of the symbol was inspired first by “power”, then the “social”, and finally the “sacred”, which was the place where this power reacted with landscape intervention, and a landmark was born. In other cases, the invention of the symbol is first inspired by the “sacred” (the place and its socio-cultural loads), then the “social” (which frequents and appreciates these sacred spaces), and finally

the “power” (which is finally obliged to react due to a new urban/landscape intervention).

Spaces and places: resisting images of neoliberalism and promoting integrated tourism while facing the “city/site disconnection”

It is pertinent to question the spatial symbols and their implied strategies that harmonize memories of places and socio-cultural lived systems and that create new images without harming spatial identity. Power can first participate in the evolution of the urban and cultural landscape by creating a hierarchy of places and improving the quality of daily surroundings. It can also preserve these spaces during crisis.

Some places in Baalbek are today resisting the standardized and stereotyped images of neo-liberalism, while presenting challenges relating to landscape, society, politics, economics, and the tourist industry. Thus, the city’s *Souk* (market), as in many Arab cities, has spice stalls and local merchandise that contrast with shopping centers; a small local restaurant selling traditional dishes and *sfiha baalbakiyeh* (meat pies: a popular dish in Baalbek) resists the globalized image conveyed by Pizza Hut; street vendors selling candy cane, toys, and roasted corn around Ras al-Ain Park, reflect an identity that is different from the burger and hot dog or ice-cream mini-vans that can be found all over the world. The mission is quite easy: symbols of distinction are *spatialized* in places that have a symbolic dimension.

Despite this, resistance against the image of neo-liberalism in cities that are trying to preserve the identity and memory of symbolic places does not seem to always be the result of power and a strategic vision of urban/landscape planning. Instead, it could be caused by the lack of capital and financial investments, sometimes due a geopolitical situation.

Promoting a touristic image of these spaces as well as certain anthropic elements in the physical and cultural landscape that are found in existing or recently invented symbols, allows us to grasp the ongoing dynamics that are constantly reshaping the spatial identity of tourist spaces.



Figure 7
Souk stalls (local market), by R.Mourtada, 2016



Figure 8
Souk , Abdul Halim Al-Hajjar street at night, by Z.Jamal, 2017



Figure 9
Bacchus temple, by I.Samad, 2018.



Figure 10
Bacchus temple (to the left) and Jupiter temple, by Baalbek International Festival, 2013.

The Roman temples of Baalbek (Jupiter, Bacchus, and Venus) have always been a major attraction for Lebanese and foreign tourists. They are also the site for the annual Baalbek International Festival, which began in 1955. It was then suspended during the civil war (1975-1990), resumed in 1998, and then canceled in 2006 due to Israeli bombardment. It has been operating ever since. The temples or fortress (local called *Al-Qalaa*) are greatly symbolic in common memory. For reasons of preservation, to interpret the image of grandeur that the site symbolizes and to attract tourists, the ancestors of Baalbek used symbols when referring to historical myths and popular tales; the archeological site then became not just a “historical/national symbol”, but also a “spatio-mythical symbol” for the city’s inhabitants. However, the majority of the tourists rarely visit any place other than the temples; hence, tourism has little impact on the rest of the intra-muros spaces/the medieval city, and the green leisure area of Ras al-Ain (30 restaurants and cafés) located 1000 m from the temples.

Baalbek has been facing economic stagnancy as a result of a growing disconnection between its city spaces and its archaeological site, which “is caused by the successive state-initiated urban regulations and master plans”^[13]. During the twentieth century, several government-initiated master plans were suggested that had different visions and processes.

In 1902, plans drawn up by a German delegation shows the temples to the north-west, the urban agglomeration inside the medieval city, and the fields and Ras al-Ain spring water area.^[14]

However, after the colonial Ottoman period, and during the French mandate, the state of Lebanon was created, and Baalbek had to be connected symbolically to Beirut and other Lebanese cities. The first street in the city was Abdul Halim al-Hajjar and it connected the south-west entrance to the Beirut-Damascus road.



Figure 11

Plans of Baalbek. 1) 1902 plan in Theodore Weigand, *Baalbek: Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen und Untersuchungen in den Jahren 1898 bis 1905* (Berlin and Leipzig: Vereinigung Wissenschaftlicher Verleger, 1905). Image scanned at the American University of Beirut Jafet Library Archives, by M. Ghandour, 2006. 2) The Edde winning competition plan for Baalbeck, by M. Ghandour. 3) Overlay of building blocks as mapped in 2000, by M. Ghandour

In 1939, new legislation ordered three major sites to be preserved in the city: the archeological site including the populated neighborhood around it (*Al-Qalaa*), the Mercury temple at the eastern cliff, and the trees on Ras al-Ain road.

The 1955 master plan that sacrificed the trees by proposing to enlarge the two major vehicular roads (Beirut-Damascus road/temples and temples/ Ras al-Ain) was carried out in 1994 when the memories of places and spatial symbols that were incarnated in the aged maple and poplar trees were cut down. The main idea was to facilitate tourists' accessibility within the city, to the archeological site, and towards the leisure area in Ras al-Ain where many restaurants can be found; they intended to facilitate the mobility of tourists but neglected social daily surroundings and cultural landscape.

The idea of a master plan for Baalbek was most visible in 1964 when it was suggested that it should be a museum-city; the designer (winner of the first-prize for the Baalbek master plan competition in 1963) proposed a road starting at the temples and ending at a newly designed roundabout. Most of the people living in the nearby areas would have to be moved. This “trendy” planning strategy prioritized tourists over residents and ignored the spatial significances and cultural landscape; however, it has never been implemented.

The 2003 Cultural Heritage and Urban Development project worked on preserving the social system in the temples and neighborhoods by restoring and investing in the residential spaces for integrated tourism. Although incomplete due to lack of funding, it intended to emphasize the corridor of temples/Ras al-Ain.

A landscape academic project ^[15] was suggested, which provided a master plan for the corridor linking the “city/site” (1 km link). The plan was to channel visitors from the Sayida Khawla Mau-soleum and tourists from the temples to urban spaces (*Souk* and downtown commercial and residential neighborhoods) until they end up in the green leisure area in Ras al-Ain via an urban node at the medieval city wall (south-east entrance).

The purpose of this was to re-appropriate green-space within the urban environment by enhancing green texture in *Souk* as well as directing the urban dwellers and shoppers towards the green spaces by providing more artisanal kiosks along the route and investing in restaurants/café that offer additional new functions (bed and breakfast/guest houses) during summer times for tourists.

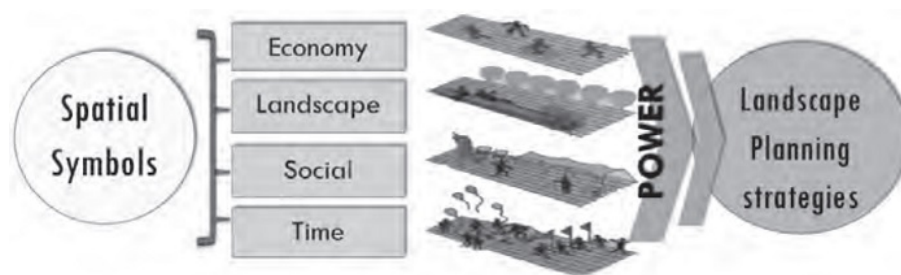


Figure 12

Diagram showing how spatial symbols lead to landscape planning strategies, R. Mourtada, 2018

Local power, therefore, must find spatial symbols that represent spaces by trying to reshape their images in a unified master plan. This will improve social daily surroundings and promote integrated tourism. These spatio-symbolic reflections must leave traces on the biophysical landscape as well as in the cultural landscape of the urban spaces. The relationship between “Economy/ Landscape/Time/Society” also needs to be considered. Tourism companies and political and local authorities can invest in these spaces and mark them with international or local labels using mythical or cultural forms without trivializing the spaces and their identities with standardized global images.

The symbolic reading of social and spatial marks

The relation between Space/Time/Society is an important component in the process of inventing or re-inventing spatial symbols. The daily surroundings and social rituals belonging to the ordinary landscapes are mutated and affected by the changes of spatial symbols. These changes can cause transformation in cultural, as well as in physical landscape, and can be made by political intention and vision, or accidentally by

absence of preservation policies in planning and strategies. In this study we have tested and analyzed the disappearance or emergence of different landscape entities related to cultural landscape elements.

The generation of over-60s remembers some landscape elements that have disappeared from common spaces but are still present in their memories such as public drinking water fountains, known as *Sabil* in Arabic. These fountains represented a particular place and were functional as well as having meaning. They possessed the “Triplcity” of space, and signified the distinction between perceived space, conceived space, and Henri Lefebvre’s lived space. “In the perceived space, the spatial practice closely associates the daily reality (the timetable) and the urban reality, the paths and networks linking the places of work, “private” life, and leisure activities”.^[16] In this respect, the *Sabil* is projecting Edward Soja’s “Thirdspace”.^[17] While its location in *Serail* square primarily reveals its geographical location, next comes its function - to provide drinking water to the community and visitors. Finally, the “Thirdspace” indicates that it is a spatial symbol, and its role in the cultural landscape is the place where men get together and discuss the country’s political problems, women chat and exchange cooking recipes and tips while filling their water bottles, and children have fun and hide.

This place that evokes all these meanings has been replaced by a banal square with no identity; therefore, the young people surveyed had no attachment to it. They did, however, try to categorize and symbolize its geographical location, which is close to the *Serail* and a place either directly or indirectly related to “governmental administration”. A place’s whole identity and a cultural landmark disappeared when the landscape intervention became completely functional: the *genius-loci* was crushed.

Conclusion: The challenge of resistance and/or the instrument of power

The city is strongly loaded with spatio-cultural and spatio-political symbols; symbolic places are in crisis and mutation due to geopolitical changes. Consequently a problematic question arises concerning the actors who invent or re-invent these spatial symbols as well as around the role that they play in the urban landscape, the cultural landscape, and the tourist landscape. Therefore, the spatial symbols derive from the power that political actors, social activists, and tourist companies invest in the spaces representing identity and popular connotations. They are an instrument of power!

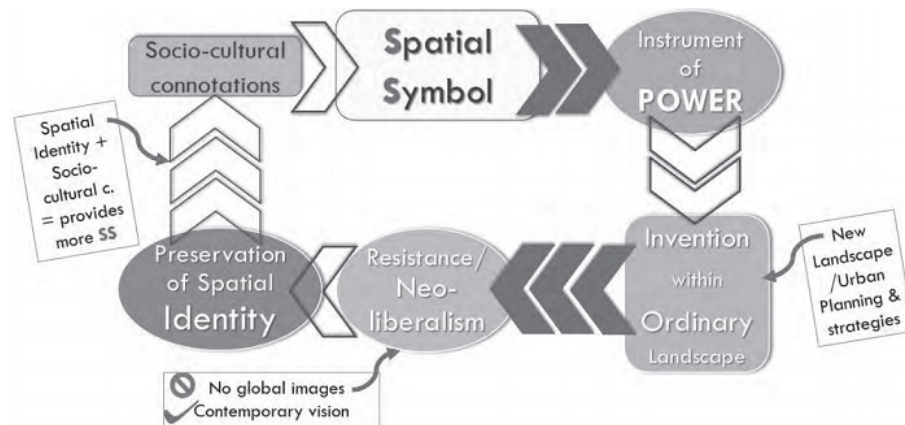


Figure 13

Diagram showing how spatial symbol is an instrument of power and a challenge of resistance against neo-liberalism, R. Mourtada, 2018

Far from being the “museum city” with standardized images and global references, the spatialization of symbols in urban landscapes allows political actors to draw new strategies or to preserve “the landscapes of the ordinary”. Nevertheless, preserving this familiar landscape and conserving the space identity does not prevent planners from working on contemporary visions and technological/smart solutions and approaches. Sub-sequently, in Baalbek the spatiality of symbols is considered as a challenging factor that resists -either due to planned visions or an absence of financial investment- the standardized global images of neo-liberalism, while still referring to the spirit and identity of the place.

The spatial symbol begins from a “sacred” landscape and then moves towards the “social” (which appreciates it) and consequently claims the “power” to intervene and proceed in planning the urban landscape accordingly. However, it can also move in the opposite direction: the “power” imposes this symbol in a coercive or unconscious smooth marketing way on the “social” to give spaces a “sacred” meaning for political/appropriation and for economic or even touristic objectives.

Despite the direction, we conclude that the spatial symbol is a mediator that legitimizes the exercise of power through planning and creating new urban/landscape models (contemporary or traditional). We also highlight the value of spaces and promote their identities; their “distinguished ordinariness”, through labels and “brands”, promotes integrated tourism while exploring the cultural daily surroundings. It also refers to the spirit of “ordinary landscapes”.

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Notes

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