QUICK STUDIES



AS YOU SEE IT

Under "Attack"

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After the cease-fire, I visited villages and towns in South Lebanon that suffered terrible destruction during the July 2006 war and that were facing the challenge of reconstruction. When I arrived to the border town of Bint Jbeil, I

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saw bulldozers demolishing beautiful, old stone structures. I stopped to inquire why; who authorized such actions and on what bases? With these questions, I approached the workers, the Council of the South (the government agency in charge of damage assessment and rubble removal), local residents, and the municipality. The answers varied: the structures were too damaged to save, we needed to widen the street, to build a better building, to erase the scars of war, to get full compensation, and so forth.

The answers stemmed from two political frames. One saw in the reconstruction project a need to rebuild rapidly and efficiently to convey "resistance." The other saw in the reconstruction an opportunity for development, a brand-new city with towers and wide streets. After twenty-three years of Israeli occupation, Bint Jbeil was liberated in 2000 but had received no developmental aid from the government since. Within this politically charged environment, there was no concern for saving the built heritage.

Given my research in the area of urban heritage, I realized the need to intervene to save the old city from further destruction and loss. Although heavily bombarded by Israeli air strikes, it still retained a good percentage of its traditional buildings. Between the rubble mounds emerged partially destroyed stone structures clustered around courtyards and cul-de-sacs that reflected the social fabric and spatial practices of extended families who had dwelled there.

I immediately set three objectives for fieldwork and research. The first and most urgent was to stop the bulldozers from further demolishing the historic and vernacular houses that constitute the urban heritage of Bint Jbeil. To that end, my colleagues and I have been pressuring the Council of the South to halt the demolition until the houses are surveyed, documented, and possibly saved. The second was to raise awareness and mobilize the community by discussing the value of heritage in identity construction, preservation of social memory, and sustainability of historic landownership. The third was to convince stakeholders in the planning process to adopt the initiative for the protection of urban heritage. This group includes donors (the Qatari government), the municipality, and owners. It is important to secure the Qataris' approval for additional funding for restoration, the municipality's consideration of an alternative vision not based on total erasure of the old city, and the people's interest in investment options and incentives. All of this is still unfolding.

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