

***Living Architecture in Dead Spaces: “Why Haven’t You Stopped Dying?”***<sup>1</sup>  
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The body is not a neutral place. Its politicization extends into both realms of the living of the dead. Dead bodies have been conceptualized in such a way that a form of politics has been created around them. And since these dead bodies themselves have been politicized, the space they occupy is then dictated by their biopolitics. The architecture that rises above burials, mass graves, and sites of massacres is then a contested site such that whatever physical structure formed is politically charged. Dead bodies then have the power to reconfigure space and to an extent affect urban planning (Verdery 1999, 109). This article will attempt to draw the biopolitical features of dead bodies as well as construct relationships between them, architecture, and the living. In order to do that, dead bodies must then be understood in Foucauldian terms: the dead body is a space in which the *bios* (the political citizen) is collapsed with the *zoe* (bare life). The article will then outline how dead bodies affect the architectural physicality of the living, especially in terms of urban development and planning.

**On *Zoe* and *Bios***

The dead body may be conceptualized as the bare biological remains of a human, as the *zoe*. However, if the dead body has already been deemed a person and recognized as a political being (having *bios*) while alive, then death does not reduce the human into a pure bare life. Politics governs over the body throughout life and death. The *zoe/bios* binary may not be a true one, but the division between biology and politics (*zoe* and *bios*) enables the construction of narratives and theories through the manipulation of dynamic concepts. Life, then, for Fassin “...has death for horizon but which is not separated from life as a social form, inscribed in a history, a culture, an experience” (Fassin 2010, 83). Therefore, survival is manifested as the continued postmortem influence of the past political self.

The dead body has the power of politically charging the physical space it encompasses because that corpse was once an active *bios*. The political self demands rights and recognition as a human being. That recognition entails human rights but a more powerful form is the recognition of a citizen since, as noted by Gregg (2010): “we have no evidence that human rights exist independently of human imagination and social constructions, which is to say: no evidence that humans are endowed with pre-political, universally valid rights a priori” (631). The political self’s influences extend throughout time to reach the realms of the dead; the dead body becomes politically charged and protected with the sacredness of human remains. This is where the collapse between the *zoe* and the *bios* happens: the biology, as in the bare life represented in the corpse is thus politicized and protected with sanctity of the memory of the *bios*.

The dead body is assumed to have lost its *bios* by the process of death that is, by losing its political activity. The dead body can no longer assume any political activity and is

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<sup>1</sup> Ziad Abillama, “Why Haven’t You Stopped Dying?” (2005) French and Arabic with English subtitles (artwork Ziad Abillama).

technically reduced to the biological bare. However, since the *bios* has already been enacted and recognized, it remains in demand for the rights of the bare life even after it is technically passive. The continued politicization of bare life can be presented in terms of *biological citizen* which "links the matter of the living (biological, whether as an irradiated or infected body) and the meaning of politics (citizenship, in terms of social as well as civil rights...)" (Fassin 2009, 51).

*Biological citizenship* then entails the recognition of the physical body as a politicized entity whose rights cannot be threatened. As citizenship is not taken away by death, the continuity of the *bios* is present in the dead body and the concept of desecrating the dead is rooted in such a continuity. Therefore, as citizens who have agency over their private spaces, the dead can claim such an agency as well. However, this agency is a residue of the past *bios* that continues to resonate via the memory of the person. Death does not completely transform the person into an object since the dead body can still enact its agency on the space it occupies; the dead have the power to "reconfigure space" (Verdery 1999).

The power, which comes from the recognition of the status of *biological citizenship*, is contextually tied to social relationships with kin and government. Therefore, as noted by Verdery "attachment to the burial sites of kin poses major problems for redrawing nation-state borders..." (109). But the problem can expand to include more than issues of nation-state borders, such that urban development and issues of property claims can be discussed in light of the dead. How then does the dead *reconfigure space* in context of living architecture? In the context of having limited land fertile for development and profit for the living? How does the *bios of the dead* react to the movement of the living city?

### **Absence of Bodies, Presence of Memory**

BO18 is not an ordinary nightclub, instead its physicality is manipulated by the memory of the Lebanese civil war. It is based on a contested site; a site of a massacre and its architect has embraced it. "In the recent war it [the site] became the abode of Palestinian, Kurdish and South Lebanese refugees (20,000 in 1975). In January 1976, local militia men launched a radical attack that completely wiped out the area" (Khoury). The contradiction of having an entertainment venue on a site where previous atrocities has happened is reconciled with the architecture itself. BO18 does not look like a bomb shelter, it *is* a bomb shelter.<sup>2</sup>

Khoury states that "B018 refuses to participate in the naïve amnesia that governs the post-war reconstruction efforts. The project is built below ground. Its façade is pressed into the ground to avoid the over exposure of a mass that could act as a rhetorical monument" (Khoury). This becomes a manifestation of living architecture whose life is given from the memories of dead bodies. The amnesia funded by the Lebanese government cannot sustain a full wave of forgetfulness on its inhabitants since tales of the

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<sup>2</sup> Images can be seen on the images tab on [www.bernardkhoury.com/projectDetailsImages.aspx?ID=127](http://www.bernardkhoury.com/projectDetailsImages.aspx?ID=127)

atrocities are unofficially present. Events are then spatial-ized into a physical site. This “calls attention to the importance of the representation of space as a sort of archaeological work of memory that allows victims both to work through their traumatic experiences and to denounce the atrocities committed by their captors” (Medina-Sancho 2013, 161).

However, since this site, along with many others, has not been officially recognized as a site of massacre and therefore not worthy of a memorial, is falsely presented to be a neutral space ready for investment. A plot of land in a city like Beirut is worth millions of dollars and that is a force in which dead bodies’ agency and memory cannot equate to, especially in a nation governed by profit-induced amnesia.

The economic benefit of developing contested sites render the dead and their memory, agency, and recognition without any force. However, the absent dead bodies’ force is not completely invisible. Through memory, architects such as Bernard Khoury allow the dead to reconfigure space through the medium of living architecture. In the context of the amnesia, the dead have been denied of their agency because of the lack of recognition of their *bios*. BO18 is therefore a compromise between recognizing the agency of the dead and imminent urban development projects. Dead bodies and their absence have the power to reconfigure space if they are granted the recognition needed to do so.

### **Presence of Bodies, Absence of Memory**

Standing in contradiction to BO18 on numerous levels, Cairo’s necropolis is a slum inhabited by both the living and the dead. It is a place where the poor of Cairo co-exist with the dead bodies of deceased people. This necropolis contains the dead bodies but is in absence of memory. These dead bodies nonetheless contain memories contextualized in each’s social relationships and networks; each is a person with family and friends. However, there is no unified memory of death: no atrocity that has claimed *all* of the lives that now reside there within tombs.

The dead have already been recognized as *biological citizens* such that they have been given a proper burial and a sanctified space, but one which, at surface level may seem to be violated. The necropolis is a space that holds tensions between the forces of the dead bodies and that of the economy. The people residing there were pushed by poverty into the necropolis. Therefore, there is an obvious manifestation of the ways in which the economy and urban development collide with the agency of the dead bodies. The space reserved for the dead bodies is violated with the presence of living ones due to dire economic factors.

However, there has been a reconceptualization of these dead bodies and their agency in order to permit the violation of sanctity. Verdery notes that “different people can invoke corpses as symbols, thinking those corpses mean the same thing to all present, whereas in fact they may mean different things to each. All that is shared is everyone’s recognition of this dead person as somehow important. In other words, what gives a dead body symbolic effectiveness in politics is precisely its ambiguity, its capacity to evoke a variety of understandings” (Verdery 1999, 29). Therefore the necropolis is thought of as a space that the dead *share* in order for the living to reside in. The dead bodies remain in

their private sphere allowing the living to carry on everyday life. They are not uprooted to make space for the living because there remains the continuum of the political self that demands recognition and sanctity. Life does not need the dead bodies' ejection in order to carry on, at least not in the case of the necropolis. As Brownlee states: "It's a suburb with its own power lines, post office, and multi-story buildings. No one knows for sure how many people live there, but depending on the estimates, the Necropolis could teem with anywhere from 50,000 to a million (quite living) Egyptians" (Brownlee 2014).

The relationship between the economy, urban development, and dead bodies is manifested differently between the two cases of BO18 and the necropolis of Cairo. The necropolis was inhabited due to poverty and conditions forcing the living to cohabit a space already claimed by the dead, while BO18 was a space never truly claimed by the dead but rather haunted by their memory. The necropolis allows its inhabitants to attempt to construct as much of a 'normal' life as possible while BO18 feeds off the abrupt discontinuity of war and havoc. The dead bodies in these cases, even when absent, exert forces depending on the social context they exist in. Both are in relation to the economy and urban growth and development. BO18 resides on a multi-million dollar site privately owned and readily up for investment. The necropolis on the other hand was created by pushing the living to coexist with the dead due to the harsh living conditions. The presupposed sanctity of the dead was readily disregarded for the sake of economic survival.

The manipulation of space has become an indicator of power relations, class inequalities, and political instability. The dead, even when absent, have had a direct effect on the physical architecture due to the recognition of the continuity of the political self by the architect, as the case for BO18. This recognition emphasizes the political tensions found in the site and the country on a broader level. This sort of living architecture can be seen as the physical replacement for the bodies of the absent dead. A bomb shelter, even though its purpose has been reimaged, is the remembrance of the event and an attack against the amnesia. However, the act of recognition still falls within an economical structure.

### **Death and Biopolitics**

Death does not bring the end of the political agent of a person, instead, it is the lack of recognition that does so. Dead bodies still hold the power to reconfigure space yet still have their force countered with other external agents such as the economy and urban development projects. The dead bodies become politicized due to the events that had led the living into death, whether it being wars, massacres, revolutions, crimes, or class inequalities. Verdery states: "Because human activity nearly always has affective and meaningful dimensions and takes place through complex symbolic processes, I also view politics as a realm of continual struggles over meanings, or signification" in which dead bodies are active agents in the push and pull battles of it (Verdery 1999, 24).

Dead bodies are the 'evidence' of an event, they are the material that holds within it the links to the past. And due to the social ties dead bodies are in the absence of a body is also an indicator of events that have happened in the past, and at times even more

politicized than the presence of bodies as in most cases of conflict. As Verdery states: “bodies have the advantage of concreteness that nonetheless transcends time, making past immediately present” (Verdery 1999, 27).

The relationship between dead bodies and architecture lies within the structure of *biopolitics* entailing a resistance stemming from the dead. The resistance comes from the recognition of the body as a human entailing the recognition of the *bios*. Therefore the agency in which the dead seem to ‘reconfigure space’ and affect urban development is due to the recognition of their ‘humanity’ (humanity being directly linked with the factor that renders a body as a human and person which is the political agency of a person). The agency of the dead bodies is another factor involved in influencing the change in urban development and architecture. The body continues creating politicizations even when dead. A human cannot exist beyond a sphere of politics since it is politics that have created the human as a person and continues to do so after death, in the presence and absence of the physical body.

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