

Montreal Architectural Review

Introduction: *Contested Urbanscapes*

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Contesting the Urban

Hannah Arendt defined the urban milieu as the par-excellence public, common, and non-homogenizing realm. The city, in and because of its diversity, has rarely, if ever, existed or functioned as an uncontested space. The urban is always there in order to be claimed by diverse groups, as Henri Lefebvre would argue. Urban hi/stories can be narrated as periods of contestations of a certain form succeeded by periods of contestations of a different form. The urban, perhaps unlike the suburban or the rural, is contestation itself.

This volume of the *Montreal Architectural Review* explores the theme of urban contestation via a collection of interdisciplinary contributions that engage and interpret urban landscapes of conflict. Definitions and elaborations of urban contestation range widely in the contributions, proposing a diversity of possibilities that draws from the diversity of the urban itself. Ioannidis and Petridou, combining urban geography and public policy, study urban contestation through a data-driven reading of graffiti and street art on buildings and surfaces in a real-time unfolding of crisis in the streets of Beirut. Sun, from an architectural theory perspective, offers a hermeneutic reading of New York's High Line as an urban design

that can only exist in continuous and often painful conflict between reality and imagination. Glumčević and Odošević Novo, in an urban studies analysis review, highlight breaks and changes in architectural and urban culture via a descriptive, almost journalistic retelling of open warfare through the wounded fabric of Sarajevo. Lowery, via a fine arts hybrid of photography, painted banners and installations, visually documents and interprets contestation as a series of lines, of “boundaries, blocks, and borders,” that violently divide urban fabrics in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Agency in the Contested City

Margaret Crawford interpreted spatial contestations of the public realm as definitions of the city. Considered in the expanded field of twenty-first century’s globalized narrative of mobility, these definitions acquire renewed meaning. Underprivileged populations become authors of novel everyday urbanisms, collocating and claiming their own formulations of the city, often in conflict with the established order. David Harvey would pose that the urban experience can transfigure from alienating to humanizing only by undergoing crisis and contestation.

As the contributions in this volume evidence, it is often in the space, the place, and the time of contestation that the urban acquires new and heightened meaning, providing the possibility for spatial-cultural shifts, and becoming itself a physical manifestation of agency by which those shifts can occur. The city is claimed and changed repeatedly in action - whether by spraying calls to revolution on its walls, by walking through imagined superimposed landscapes on its fabric, by refashioning its war-torn streets and apartment buildings into protective shelters, or by capturing, painting, and repropounding the mnemonic of urban conditions of divisions. Calame’s book review of *Urban Heritage in Divided Cities* in this volume wisely suggests that while specific episodes and imaginings of urban contestation can often be highlighted as notable moments of spatial-cultural shifts, the intrinsic nature and chronic behaviors of the politics and culture of urban partition and injustice are not studied as more persistent patterns in a way that can lead to their overcoming. At the same time, the immediacy of action at the local scale and context, while of presumably less importance to regional or global networks of power, can eventually lead to changes in those more persistent patterns of injustice. The transfiguration from an alienating to a humanizing urban experience can occur instantaneously, repeatedly, or persistently, through a multiplicity of actions and agents of contestation. Though engagement with these actions and agents may indeed be but a fragment of a wider process, it is at the least a significant and necessary fragment.

The Desire for Urban Belonging

Jeff Ferrell proposed that, perhaps today more than ever before, groups questioning and contesting the contemporary urban structure become inventors of alternative systems of aesthetics, representation, identity and meaning, and that their actions build collective memory, shudder social order, and expose new possibilities in spaces of socio-political conflict. Is there hope, then, as Myrto Tsilimpounidi would imagine, that urban contestation can eventually lead to new forms of urban belonging?

The question can perhaps begin to be partially answered by immersing in this volume's contributions with an understanding that transcends architectural and urban aesthetics, representation, identity, and meaning as manifestations of purely formal, functional, or social perspectives. The studies herein can instead, or additionally, be approached from within our humanity, from within our subjectivities. As humans, our actions and our creations, including those of and within urban contestations, are driven primarily by a desire to belong. We long to belong. We long to be part of one another. We desire to belong to and with our surroundings, to and with our buildings, to and with our cities. That desire drives our actions, our creations, our questionings, our revolutions. Alberto Pérez-Gómez poses that architecture engages the inhabitant as an active participant and not as a disengaged spectator precisely because it derives from this desire, because it is 'built upon love.' Similarly, should we understand the city as a construction of desires and of belonging, the contested urban landscapes engaged in the volume become episodes toward a belonging that is already being shaped by the actions of contestations themselves. Urban belonging is not a destination or an end. It is a contested and a continuous journey.

About the Author

Panos Leventis is Professor and Associate Dean of the Hammons School of Architecture at Drury University in Springfield, Missouri. Born in Famagusta, Cyprus, he holds a B.Arch. from USC, an M.Arch. in Urban Design from UCLA, and a Ph.D. in the History and Theory of Architecture from McGill University. He served as Director of Drury's Study Abroad Campus in Greece, and taught for USC in Milan, for McGill in Montréal, and for the University of Cyprus in Nicosia. He is a Registered Architect in Cyprus. His Urban Studies scholarship engages Mediterranean cities from the late medieval to the contemporary periods.