

**The Space of Literature and Lebanese Wars  
Reconstructing Neighborhoods of War**

Hanna, John

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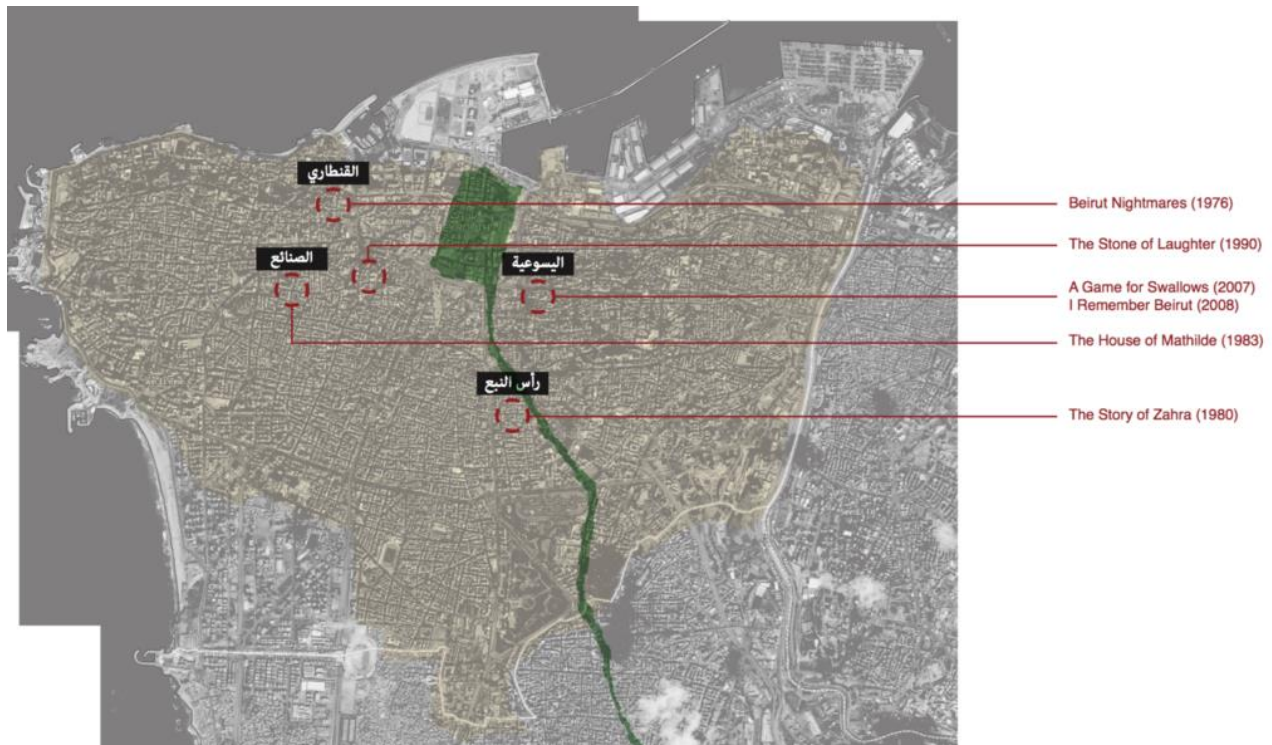
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# The Space of Literature and Lebanese Wars

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Part of the TRAF0 series “Reconstructing Neighborhoods of War”

By John Hanna



A map of the neighborhoods in Beirut where the discussed sample of Lebanese war novels takes place. Source: Author.

## Introduction

The engagement of Lebanese writers with the everyday realities of the ‘Lebanese wars’ is of crucial relevance to research involving the geography and spatiality of the wars. Often seen as a form of place-writing, the Lebanese war novel records a certain character of space in a particular moment of history. With the vague boundaries between reality and fiction and the common tendency of Lebanese writers to provide names of actual places in the city to mark the background and spatial settings of their works, these works can be looked at through the lens of Ed Soja’s third space – his proposal of a space that extends beyond the binary of real and imagined, bringing a blended form and introducing a possibility of an active relationship and productive exchange between architecture and literature.

Mostly of an autobiographical and/or a para-fictional nature, this literary production carries strong references to war spaces during the 15 long years of civil conflict. Under the conditions of violence, such spaces have often been reduced in the Lebanese war novel to the

neighborhood scale, where minimum conditions of everyday life existed within given boundaries.

The Lebanese war novel has been studied through different categorizations, according to the origin of the writer, their age during the conflict, date of publication, language of publication, ideology, genre and format of the works. For this analysis, a selection of six different works has been made which represent many of these categories. This selection features works that were published between 1976 and 2008. The novels in the selection are authored by both male and female writers and were originally published in Arabic or French. One novel, *Beirut Nightmares*, originally in Arabic, is authored by Ghada Samman, who is of Syrian origin. Two works in the selection, *I Remember Beirut* and *A Game for Swallows*, both written in French by Zeina Abirached, belong to the graphic novel format. These two works also represent what has been called “generation 1.5 works”, whose authors were of a young age during the war period.

While the major part of the Lebanese war novel addresses neighborhood scale and relations, this selection was made due to the centrality of neighborhood relations to the storyline. Three of these works narrate stories from al-Qantari (*Beirut Nightmares*), Ras al-Nabaa (*The Story of Zahra*, written in Arabic by Hanan al-Shaykh) and Sanayeh (*The House of Mathilde*, written in Arabic by Hassan Daoud), West Beirut neighborhoods. One work (*The Stone of Laughter*, written in Arabic by Hoda Barakat) recounts a story from West Beirut without specifying the neighborhood. The last two novels (*I Remember Beirut* and *A Game for Swallows*) take place in al-Yasoueia/Mar Maroun district on the east side of the city.

In most of these novels, the neighborhood (often reduced to the scale of a building) and its social relations are the main setting of the novel. These novels provide detailed information about living spaces, such as how the apartments are divided, where the safe corridors are, and who is allowed where? They similarly provide extensive descriptions of the neighbors and their backgrounds. Who are they? What do they do? And, equally important, when did they move to the building?

This analysis focuses on the common spatial elements that appear in the discussed novels. These spatial elements are seen to play an important role in shaping neighborhood relations during the violence of the war.

## **1. Spatial References**

These works provide clear spatial references to actual places, streets, and shops around the city. In *Beirut Nightmares*, Samman writes of Hourani Street in the center of Beirut. Similarly, al-Shaykh makes direct references to Makassed hospital and the Burj Abi Haidar School in *The Story of Zahra*. In *House of Mathilde*, Daoud constructs his narrative around a real incident that took place in the Sanayeh Gardens during the early years of the war. Likewise, Abirached evokes names like Youssef Semaan Street on the eastern side of Beirut and the Ward ice cream shop.

## **2. Proximity to Frontlines**

The selected novels choose their settings at a close proximity to the Green Line. *The Story of Zahra* takes place right on the western side of the Green Line. *I Remember Beirut* and *A Game for Swallows* both take place in a small enclave on the eastern side just opposite the

Green Line. The protagonist in *Beirut Nightmares* describes how her bedroom walls overlook Hourani Street, which is right around the corner from the hotels where a violent round of fighting occurred towards the end of 1976. Such proximity plays a role in setting new boundaries of the neighborhood and the safe zones by marking where danger begins.

### **3. Reduction of the Neighborhood Space**

As a result of the first element, in *Beirut Nightmares*, *House of Mathilde*, *I Remember Beirut* and *A Game for Swallows*, the reader is exposed to a detailed description of domestic spaces. The majority of the events takes place within the apartments of the protagonists as they receive their neighbors or pay them visits. The collective encounter of dangers and social change shapes the relations between the neighbors of the same building as they rebuild the limits of their interactions. The reduction of the neighborhood to the domestic space is very understandable under the conditions of war. As Kristin Monroe explains, with the presence in public rendered dangerous, there is a shift towards domestic spaces. During the war, and especially during the fierce rounds of violence, residents of Beirut spent much longer times in their private and domestic spaces compared to their pre-war lifestyle where bars, cafes and other public spots were the main field for social interaction.

### **4. Displacement and Migration**

These works bring the question of displacement to a central position in their storylines. In these novels we learn about neighbors who move to other countries or other sides of the city, and apartments that become abandoned and then re-occupied by newcomers who bring new social practices to the neighborhoods. This becomes particularly clear in *House of Mathilde* where Hassan Daoud illustrates in great detail how the social fabric of the building – Beirut's microcosm in this case – changed over the years.

### **5. Material Damage**

Finally, there is the element of materiality and destruction. A notable share of the novels' storylines recount the infiltration of violence into the most intimate of domestic spaces. One emblematic example appears in Samman's *Beirut Nightmares* as she extensively illustrates the movement of a stray bullet inside her bedroom. Similarly, *House of Mathilde* and *A Game for Swallows* both conclude with narratives of destruction to the apartment buildings where the stories take place.

### **Conclusion**

Literary productions provide an important form of spatial representation that blurs the boundaries between real and fictional space. Over the past decades, Lebanese writers have reflected on their personal experience of violence through the portrayal of war spaces in their novels. Following different approaches, their works carry very strong references to the everyday realities and neighborhood relations during wartime. Regardless of the genre or when they were written, a set of common elements prevail in their writings. These can be summarized as spatial references, proximity to frontlines, reduction of neighborhood space, displacement and material damage to the built environment. Further research is needed to explore a wider sample of Lebanese war novels, to focus on the spatial elements of this form of place writing and highlight their relation to the social production of space in Beirut and the rest of Lebanon.

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**John Hanna** graduated from the Faculty of Architecture at [Graz University of Technology](#) in 2014. During his years of study, he volunteered and worked with housing and shelter organizations in Zambia, Egypt, and Brazil. In the past few years, he has worked closely with contemporary art institutions in Graz and in Cairo. Hanna is a second year PhD candidate at the Chair of History of Architecture and Urban Planning at [Delft University of Technology](#), with a research project on the spatiality of urban conflicts, with a focus on conditions of armed violence.