

Virtual Roundtable “Beirut Urban Declaration: Which Future for Beirut Port?”

Hanna, J.M.K.

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Virtual Roundtable “Beirut Urban Declaration: Which Future for Beirut Port?”

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John Hanna

Natural and man-made disasters usually come with a very high cost of lost lives, physical assets and heritage. At the same time, historically, disasters have often brought opportunities of change and new beginnings in many urban centres (Vale & Campanella, 2005). In this spirit, various state and non-state stakeholders in Lebanon have organized the Beirut Urban Declaration seminar from 12-14 March 2021, to create a “positive dynamic” for the reconstruction of the city after the [devastating blast in August of 2020](#). Participants from Beirut and the world discussed various issues in this virtual seminar including mobility, housing, heritage and port-city relationships.

Planning debates in Beirut traditionally have paid little attention to questions of port-city identity. Following the blast in August, the port of Beirut and its relation to the city started to re-occupy a prominent position in many public events and debates. The Beirut Urban Declaration was not the first event to highlight the port-city relationships following of the deadly blast. However, it was unique in its dedication of one roundtable with two full sessions to discuss the port and its future in the urban and national context. The participants came from a wide range of institutions, varying from international ports and ports’ networks, to educational and financial institutions. The first session addressed the future of the port and its geostrategic context, the second focused mainly on the relationship between the port area and rest of the city. Overall, the presenters largely agreed on the necessity of a redefinition of the port’s role and its relation to the city.

Port cities bring a unique urban setup. They are located at the meeting point of water and land. This comes with a set of distinct challenges and opportunities (Hein 2016). While the development of Beirut was directly connected to its role as a port-city (Abou-Hodeib 2007), the relation between the port and the city became troubled in the past few decades. In the second half of the 20th century, different infrastructure projects separated the port from the rest of Beirut, despite the spatial proximity (Khalaf 2013). In the first session, Anne-Cecile Souhaid (World Bank) underscored the importance of integrating the port back in the city. Souhaid clarified to resolve the troubled relation between the port and the rest of Beirut,

the way forward can only be based on a collaboration between local communities, and public and private actors.

In line with Souhaid, professor Carola Hein from Delft University of Technology explained how, historically, ports and cities worked together to produce a particular port-city culture. Often, this relation was rather a troubled one, where the interests of the port and the city were not always aligned. Regardless of the contested nature of this relation, the intersections between the port and the city spaces extend beyond the physical borders of the port space. The flows between the two spaces become visible and tangible at various scales and different proximities. Jose Manuel Pages Sanchez (AIVP) stressed that the tensions between ports and cities can be handled through a coherent vision of how both settings can co-exist in one shared space. The driving vision of his organization for the past 20 years has been to bring port and city experts together to develop this coherence.

In Lebanon, the main obstacle lies within the governance structure. Rami Semaan (TMS Consult, Beirut) maintained that the challenges within the governance structure need to be addressed before the tension between port and city can be handled. Souhaid underscored that this can only become possible through strong political will.

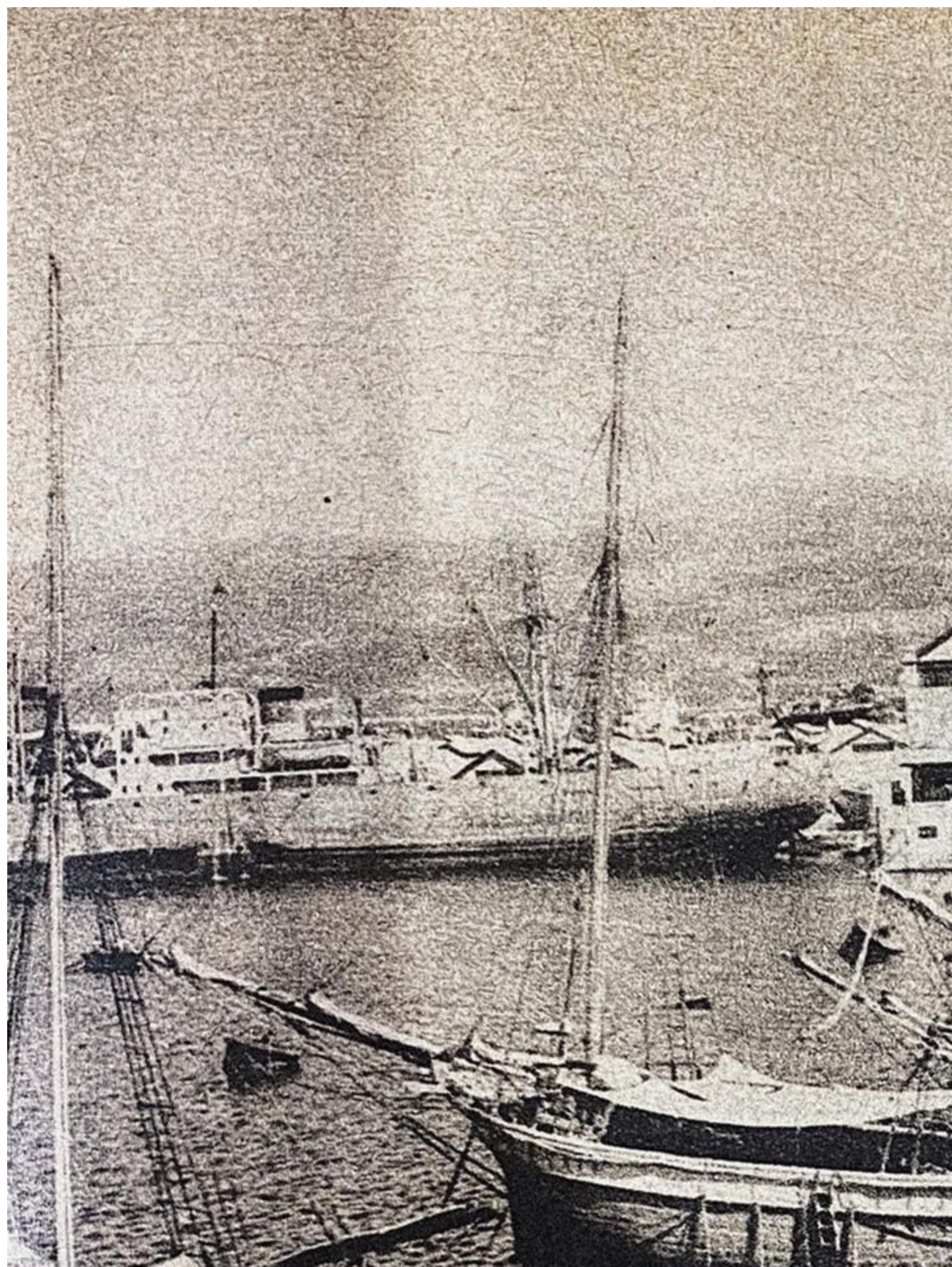
While any intervention needs to take the particularities of the Beirut port case and its socio-spatial context into consideration, its future can still benefit from other contexts. Port officials from four European cities shared their perspectives, based on their own local experiences. Pascal Bedros (Marseille), explained how the institutional reform of the port sector in Marseille contributed to developing the operability of the port. Alberto Cappato (Genoa) demonstrated a different example from Italy, where a port company was established. As a result, Genoa port is governed through a partnership between the municipality and the port company. This allows the company to make its own revenues which it uses for re-investing in activities that contribute to the sustainability of the port. Jordy Torrent (Barcelona) brought another example where the port is fully public, but managed through a private company. From the Netherlands, Frans van Zoelen (Rotterdam) illustrated the clear separation of responsibilities in the Port of Rotterdam, where private companies are involved in terminal operations and land use, while the port authority has the general responsibility of management and the development of the port infrastructure.

Jad Tabet (Lebanese Order of Engineers) concluded the roundtable by stressing the importance of exploring the future role of the port of Beirut, before discussing the nature of its relation with the city. Tabet brought the attention of the participants to the new perceived identity of the port following the explosion, and the role it plays in the collective memory of the citizens of Beirut. For many, the structures of the port are now associated with the memory of the tragic event. This brings additional layers of complexity for any future role the port may play.

The roundtable underscored the significance of a port city relationship in both the present and the future. For the re-building of the port after the blast, all aspects of this relationship must be taken into consideration. Only by involving all the different stakeholders and understanding the extent of this relationship can Beirut re-invent itself once more as a port city, and not merely a city with a port.

Acknowledgement

This blog has been written in the context of discussions in the LDE PortCityFutures research community. It reflects the evolving thoughts of the author and expresses the discussions between researchers on the socio-economic, spatial and cultural questions surrounding port city relationships.



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