

For Immediate Release



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City Debates 2019 at AUB: Urban Recovery at the Intersection of Reconstruction and Displacement

Faculty, students, and scholars, were engaged in critical discourse on urban issues of timely relevance at this year's City Debates conference that took place on April 1-3, 2019 at the American University of Beirut's (AUB) Maroun Semaan Faculty of Engineering and Architecture (MSFEA). The conference revolved around the theme of "Urban Recovery at the Intersection of Displacement and Reconstruction," given the wide geography of conflict, and the protracted nature of mass displacement.

Over the years, the conference has become a highly anticipated landmark event of the Department of Architecture and Design, as it creates a platform of exchange between local, regional, and international scholars and professionals, and attracts the community at large.

"City Debates is a signature AUB conference that emanates from our tiny-but-intellectually mighty urban core consisting of four faculty members in MSFEA's Department of Architecture and Design," said MSFEA Dean Alan Shihadeh. "Now in its 15th year, the list of past participants in City Debates reads like a who's-who of the world's most original thinkers." He added that City Debates reflects the urban core's interdisciplinary bent and purpose, and tackles some of the truly big problems facing humanity today.

A timely theme

In today's world, where violent conflicts are widespread, an unprecedented rate of one person every two seconds is forcibly displaced. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), conflict uprooted a record number of 3 million people in 2017 making it the biggest increase ever recorded in a single year. Discussing displacement and reconstruction is more critical than ever with the total number of displaced people worldwide reaching 68.5 million by the end of 2017.

Reconstruction and displacement have two independent scholarly trajectories that do not often intersect to enrich either discourse or challenge one another. While reconstruction is often confounded to the physical recovery of ruptured urban spaces, displacement emerges as a human-centered discourse. It encompasses the social and temporal dimensions of human migration towards safety and shelter and is not spatialized enough. While reconstruction has long been debated, its intersections with protracted and mass displacement call for more critical conversations. And while displacement has occupied a central focus in research across historical, urban, anthropological, geographical, and cultural studies, emerging threads call for more interdisciplinary reflections.

City Debates 2019

“This year’s City Debates conference is an invitation to re-conceptualize urban recovery by exploring how reconstruction and displacement intersect across volatile contexts,” said Professor Howayda Al-Harithy, organizer of the 2019 edition of City Debates. “It is an in-depth exploration of the spatial, social, artistic, virtual, and political modalities that promote the process of urban recovery. It is at the same time an interrogation of the strategies, methods, literature, and discourses surrounding recovery, reconstruction, and displacement.”

City Debates 2019 explored narratives of displacement and modalities of reconstruction and focused on their thematic intersections and overlaps. The theme was addressed through multiple lenses such as time, space, locality, gender, sectarianism, and memory. The conference challenged dominant discourse, framing displacement as agency, the displaced as social capital, post-conflict urban environments as archives, and reconstructions as socio-spatial practices.

The scholars who attended this year’s City Debates came from an array of disciplinary backgrounds and geographic study areas. The keynote speakers included Diane Davis, from Harvard University, who discussed “Resilience, Security, and Spaces of Migrant Refugees” and Sultan Barakat, from the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies at Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, who presented a regional vision towards post-war Reconstruction. Keynote speaker Jennifer Hyndman, from the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University, also presented her paper on “Global Compacts or Containment? Geopolitics by Design.”

“We are very proud of this yearly flagship event that is showing the world new ways of thinking about and making more livable the population centers of the Global South,” said Dean Shihadeh. He added that this year’s theme of population displacement and post-war reconstruction “could not be more timely or relevant to our context,” thanking Al-Harithy and the Master’s of Urban Planning and Policy students for organizing such a stellar program.

Previous City Debates themes included Property in Planning: Historical Transformations and Contemporary Practices organized by Professor Mona Fawaz, Urban Policy, Mobilities, and International Aid: Lessons from Regional Planning and Refugee Policies by Professor Mona Harb, and Architecture-as-Urbanism: Agenda for the New Millennium by Professor Robert Saliba.

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 900 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 9,100 students. AUB currently offers more than 120 programs leading to bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full-service 420-bed hospital.

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