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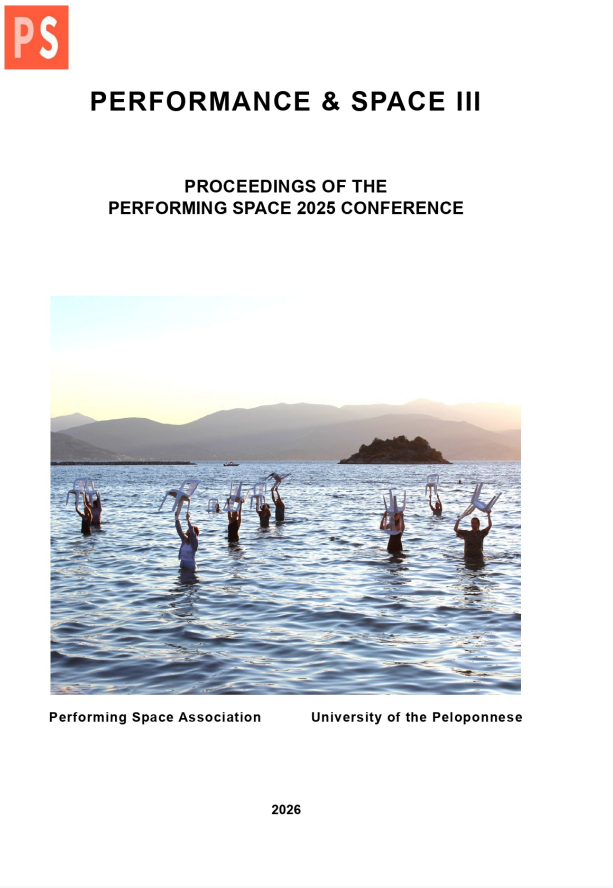

SPACING THAWRA: Performative Inversions during the Grand Theatre of Lebanon's 2019 October Revolution

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SPACING *THAWRA*: Performative Inversions during the Grand Theatre of Lebanon's 2019 October Revolution

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Abstract

What spatial desires emerge from impromptu urban performances during revolution? As a transformative event in Lebanon's political history, 2019's nationwide October Revolution (*Thawra)* involved spontaneous and leaderless protests — beyond sectarian, class, religious, gender and cultural divides — which not only led to the government's resignation, but to constructive expressions of civic 'spacing'. Although an inevitably failed mass uprising that challenged the political elite by demanding secular representation, Thawra was initially underpinned by optimism, joy and solidarity, which were demonstrated in how the populace took to the streets to claim public space that had been drastically depleted by half a century of internal war, external pressure and ensuing neoliberal commercial development. Thawra also radically challenged restrictive neoliberal urban development through complex spatiotemporal dynamics that emerged between protestors, the Lebanese security forces, citizen bystanders and the built environment, which was enabled by online platforms and citizen documentation. As a reclaiming of the public realm through temporary transformations of urban environments — in this case, the capital city of Beirut — fleeting spontaneous events enact potential innovations and longer-term transformations. Abandoned venues such as *The Egg* and *Le Grande Théâtre du Beirut* were briefly reclaimed as sites for public assembly and debate, while many more locations were occupied and physically embellished with protest art, spontaneous furnishing and 24/7 social engagement, thereby turning the city inside-out and outside-in through acts of domestication and publication. Such performative assemblages and inversions are here theorised as revolutionary 'spacing' — combining performance (as lived experience) and design (as speculative representations) — which is both situational and relational, transforming familiar settings into a *mise en scène* (staged arrangement) defined by performing, witnessing and participatory bodies, along with meaningfully selected or fabricated structures and objects. Ultimately, this exposes a desire for *diwaniyat*, which refers to *gathering* as spatial action and its designed artefact, positing an accessible civic environment for sociocultural and political spacing.

Keywords: performance design, civic spacing, radical spatial assemblages.

SPACING *THAWRA*

In the upcoming book, *Perform Design Act* (2026), my essay — 'Staging Critical Spatial Acts: What Is (a) Theatre Now we Call it Performance?' — formulates Performance Design as "radical spatial assemblages … responding to the raw 'Real' in the ever-present threat of catastrophe, collapse and epic failure… provoking the public to take spatiotemporal action" (Hannah, 2026, p.16). Examples discussed in the book range from the *Maldives Underwater Cabinet Meeting* (addressing sea-level rise in the face of climate change in 2009) to *The Teeter-Totter Wall* (Pink See Saws at the US-Mexico border in 2019) and Extinction Rebellion's *Tensegrity Towers* (disrupting traffic and media production in the name of a fragile planet in 2020). These exhibit Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of a "carnivalesque spirit" as they enact revelry and resistance, wherein the world is "turned inside out" (Bakhtin,1984) with citizens enacting spatial spectacles that confront, resist, and invert the systems of power that structure their everyday existence in an attempt to reconfigure the status quo.

Such transpositions can be found in Lebanon's nationally dispersed mass uprising of 2019. Known as Thawra, this revolution emerged from a general discontent with the political system, responding to entrenched sectarianism, state corruption and the lack of basic public services, transparency and accountability, among a plethora of other unresolved issues (Khatib, 2022). All came to a head on October 17th when — learning that the government was imposing a WhatsApp Tax as a means of addressing the country's crushing financial crisis — the citizenry took to the streets demanding an overthrow of the existing regime, removal of its leaders and radical social, political and economic reform.[1]

As a transformative event in Lebanon's political history, Thawra involved spontaneous and leaderless protests — beyond sectarian, class, religious and gender divides — that led to the government's resignation on the 12th day. Although ultimately acknowledged as a "failed revolution" because demands for radical change weren't met (Khatib, 2022, and International Crisis Group, 2020), this rebellion, primarily demanding secular representation, was initially underpinned by optimism, joy and solidarity, demonstrated in how the populace claimed public space that had been drastically depleted by half a century of internal war, external pressure and ensuing neoliberal commercial development. However, as a grass roots uprising that mobilised an estimated one million protesters throughout the country, it revived the citizenry's relationship with politics, particularly giving voice to women, youth, the LGBTQIA+ community, refugees and the local dispossessed. Those, as Serene Dardari points out, suffering the effects of "poverty, homelessness, lack of health care and

[1] As a digital space of unmonitored expression, WhatsApp is a communication platform uniquely utilised by the Lebanese to address exorbitant telecom costs, connect with those forced into economic exile abroad and – especially during Thawra – provide a tool for sharing locations, information, strategies and actions.

unemployment (…) chanting their unified demands — people who might have never crossed paths due to the strict sectarian partisanship and lack of shared public spaces" (Dardari, 2019). People requiring new spatial relationships and urban arrangements.

As a researcher in theatre architecture, pursuing the typology as an extended phenomenon and practice no longer limited to the prescribed interior stage, my general assertion is that theatre has left the building (Hannah, 2023/2026) with performance design providing a means to reimagine our daily landscapes through isolated events that reveal a specific 'spacing' — a term referring to situated spatiotemporal action shaping specific environments and how we experience them (Hannah, 2026). This task isn't limited to professional performers or designers and is often initiated and led by activists, artists and academics. One of the defining features of Thawra was a tactical utilisation of the public realm to inhabit an inherently uninhabitable urban environment. This legacy from the Arab Spring and globally dispersed Occupy movement of 2011 — both challenging authority, inequality, and democratic unaccountability — involved thriving communal encampments as a desirous rehearsing of more enduring public amenity: a performative urbanism in which repurposed sites are both symbolic and practical.[2]

Downtown Spacings as Revolutionary Spectacle

> During the weeks of the uprising, activists transformed Beirut's historic core from a no-man's land, an exclusive playground of the rich at best, through a new program that includes soup kitchens, free psychiatric clinics, piazzas for regular public debates, performance spaces, and meeting areas, among other functions. Its large-scale abandoned lots, vast parking areas, and wide roads dedicated to cars were brought to life by daily marches where chants recurrently denounced sectarianism, oppression, and capitalism. (Fawaz/Sherhan, 2020).

Lebanon's nationally distributed revolt was represented by the 6-metre-high cutout of a raised fist, visually pinpointing Thawra's centre in Beirut's Martyrs' Square — an urban void in which the populace spontaneously and formally gathers for celebrations and protests. However, it was in the various adjoining sites of Downtown Beirut where the October revolution was triggered and sustained through a three-month 'de facto' occupation that proffered alternative spacings — via communal actions creating makeshift barricades, encampments and arenas — from mid-October 2019 until 2020's Covid crisis.

[2] See Wolfrum, S. and Brandis, N (2015) where performative urbanism is defined as spaces produced through activities, performance and everyday social interactions. It advocates transformative approaching urban design through human action rather than focusing on static, planned forms.

Thawra is therefore considered an essentially ‘spatial revolution’ (Frederix, 2024, Harb, 2023, Sharp, 2023), which, according to Deen Shariff Sharp,

> centred around urban questions, that notably were both city-based and related to the entire urban fabric, including public services, real estate, corruption, the provision of urban goods and services (such as electricity, water and transport), spatial forms (including highways, public space and buildings), access to — as well as delineations and definitions of — private and public space, and urban identity (2023, p. 8).

Focusing on performance design as the critical orchestration of embodied spatiotemporal events – involving relational constellations of bodies, objects, atmospheres and sites in active dialogue — this paper considers Thawra’s achievement in its communally enacted aspiration for new spatialities currently denied the populace.

Downtown Beirut encapsulates Lebanon’s traumatised urban landscape: shaped through generations of colonisation, conflict and crisis, alongside excessive consumerism and the conspicuous ‘Real-Estatization of Civil Society’ (Nikolas Kosmatopoulos, 2021); resulting in an oppressive “privatopia” (Fawaz/Serhan, 2020) that limits and controls public access and inhabitation. This is exemplified in the post-civil-war development of Solidere, the civic heart of Beirut’s Downtown designed for banking, leisure shopping and Gulf tourism, and subsequent starchitect-driven developments such as Zaitunay Bay, where monitored access to the marina privileges conspicuous consumers.

It was against this combined and enduring spectacle of liberal capitalist economics, war, corruption and sectarianism’s patriarchal politics — reinforced in the signage of an unwalkable city – that the citizenry rebelled on October 17th, 2019, with their own lived spectacle, both united and fragmented. It began on the Ring Bridge — a highway overpass forming a junction between sectarian and secular neighbourhoods, which provided an amphitheatrical vantage point to Downtown — where they brought the city’s dense and unceasing traffic to a standstill, thereby triggering a sustained general strike. Under the watch of nearby security forces, they domesticated this brutal vehicular thoroughfare with carpets, couches, tables, chairs, fridges, hookahs and makeshift shelters, briefly transforming it into The Plaza, which was advertised on Airbnb and also referred to as the ‘House of the People’.

The dissenting citizenry closed banks (already in crisis), established micro-economies and public amenities on reclaimed streets, breached derelict public buildings — such as *The Egg* (an incomplete modernist cinema) and the *Grand Théâtre des Mille et Une Nuits* (a long-abandoned early 20th-century venue) — opening up spaces for gathering, debating and creating rebellious art and actions in Downtown Beirut. The brutalist concrete interior of *The Egg* — an incomplete structure encrusted with bird droppings — became a site for public

meetings and university lectures while metal cladding that shored up access to *The Grand Theatre* was breached after the public beat upon it in a performance of communal invasion. Both venues, long closed to the public, were invaded and reclaimed as sites of discussion and mobilization. A proliferation of graffiti rendered the city a gallery while spontaneous performance transformed it into an urban theatre. Revolutionary spectacle became a means of turning the city *inside-out* by domesticating roads and *outside-in* by making inaccessible interiors available.

Thawra as Grand Theatre … as Spatial Spectacle … as Urban Diwan

Amy E. Hughes sees spectacle providing a methodology for reform "as it rehearses and sustains conceptions of race, gender and class in extremely powerful ways", giving material form to what is "deliberately hidden or secretly imagined" (2012, p. 4). Its instrumental role in the public sphere lies in a "potential to destabilise, complicate, or sustain sedimented beliefs" (Ibid) – something evident in the sectarian billboards of middle-aged and elderly male politicians whose gargantuan visages have long dominated Lebanon's urban landscape, especially its arterial routes where traffic often comes to a standstill securing the gaze. However, during Thawra, it's expressed by bands of women cleaning the city every morning who gathered to chant, dance and raise their often-unheard voices. The populace beat pots and pans with sticks and spoons, which resonated throughout the city, at times rhythmically encouraging song and movement and at others a dissonant cacophony. Here, alongside visual imagery proliferating on mainstream and social media, the sonic provides powerful effects, especially when the city's drone has been quieted.

The gathering public threatened to breach security fencing of Solidere – the civic heart of Beirut's Downtown designed for banking, leisure shopping and Gulf tourism – which also houses Parliament. The precinct had been closed since the 2005 assassination of its developer, majority shareholder, and former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Here, and in subsequent surrounding developments walking access is made possible only for deluxe shopping, while sitting tends to be reserved for those patronising chic cafes, bars and restaurants. Transgressive gatherings overtook harbourside Zaitunay Bay, defying the signage and security guards prohibiting access to animals, skateboarders, roller skaters, picnickers and hookah smokers.

Perhaps the most powerful, but least spectacular, transformation was in an empty parking space between The Egg and Martyrs' Square, where an encampment of tents was set up by local organisations and political groups holding teach-ins and talk-backs; inviting citizens to learn about their constitutional rights, debate national issues and communally propose public policies. Here, we see the public spontaneously, strategically and

consciously claiming a city previously impervious to them as individual and communal bodies. Fawaz and Serhan (2020) maintain such spatial organisations during Thawra provide "a new repertoire of action that is worth dwelling upon and documenting, one that should motivate city planners in this age of rampant privatization."

Grand Theatre is another way of describing 'spectacle' as manifestation, demonstration and exhibition, which in French (spectacle) and Italian (spettacolo) also means public performance, striking display and impactful situation. Lebanese historian Sana Tannoury-Karam refers to her experience of entering the Grand Theatre during Thawra as a "memorable moment" of transformative empowerment: enacting a revolutionary spatial breach that "re"-claims public space while "claiming the abolition of the private for the sake of the public" (2022, p. 17). The revolutionary spectacle represents a claim for spatial justice through an event demonstrating how the public could set aside the differences that shape their social, cultural and economic landscape by gathering and protesting with each other within an atmosphere of secular comradery. They performed a powerful collectivity, transcending the religious, gender and fiscal divides they resisted.

Just over six months before Thawra, Lebanese actress Nidal Al-Ashkar, who founded and directs the Al-Madina Theatre in Beirut, lamented that theatre in Lebanon relies on freedom of speech, which is lacking in the Arab World; calling for "real, transformative revolutions [to] bring about democratic rule" (Al-Ashkar, 2019). Two decades earlier, while Solidere was underway, she articulated a vision for restoring the Grand Theatre: "It would be marvellous if this theatre can be open 24 hours, people could go on the roof, watch the stars… feel that this theatre is theirs. It must be alive. It mustn't be a place only open to do plays. It must be as if it is an anchor for the city of Beirut" (Naim, 1999).

Those rising up during Thawra were not seeking conventional spaces where someone stands on a raised podium demanding focus and respect as an experienced specialist. They stormed Beirut's streets, waterfront and squares, as well as The Egg and Grand Theatre to re-claim them as porous 24/7 places of assembly. This suggests the notion of an *Urban Gathering Space — Diwaniyat-al-Madinah* — as a potential regional model emerging from Thawra's various spontaneously staged performances demanding an end to Lebanon's sectarian society and consumer-capital urban development. Through spatial revolution it temporarily inverted Beirut's built environment — inside-out and outside-in — to facilitate urban domestication and accessibility, while enabling microbusinesses, commensality, porosity and 24/7 accessibility. Drawing on *DĪWĀN* / ديوان as a reception space for social gathering, eating, drinking, discussion and debate, this arena of hospitality and serious talk typically refers to a place for discussing politics, news, and community matters. *Diwaniyat* — as the act of gathering and its performed scenography — is therefore proffered as a conceptual model of resistant spacing desired and performed for Beirut as a revolutionary

city space. As architecture, action and metaphor of the Arab world, it has great potential to both decolonise and secularise the public realm: effective spacing for further exploration.

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