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Slice of MIT Podcast

For the War Yet to Come (Alumni Books Podcast)

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ANNOUNCER: You're listening to the *Slice of MIT* podcast, a production of the MIT Alumni Association.

HIBA BOU AKAR: Hello?

JOE MCGONEGAL: Hi, it's Joe at MIT.

BOU AKAR: Yes.

MCGONEGAL: I'm joined by Hiba Bou Akar, an assistant professor in the urban planning program at Columbia Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation. She has a master's in city planning, alum of MIT from 2005. And her book, *For the War Yet to Come, Planning Beirut's Frontiers*, published by Stanford University Press in September 2018.

The book examines Beirut's many complexities in Beirut's peripheries: War and peace, arrested development and growth, destruction and construction, home and displacement are intimately entangled, writes Bou Akar. Well, Hiba Bou Akar, thanks for joining me. Tell us, why this book now? What inspired it? And how has it been received so far?

BOU AKAR: This book was actually 15 years in the making. But it's entitled *For the War Yet to Come*, and so the book comes out at a critical moment in which the future as we imagined it before in many cities in the global south and global north is actually being contested, especially as we reach unprecedented numbers of conflict and climate refugees, and at the moment in which we are told that we kind of have less than 15 years to do something about climate change before we're all doomed. I've been working on this book since 2004, since I started my master's at MIT.

So the book examines the production of everyday spaces—like master plans, zoning ordinances, housing and real estate markets, infrastructure production—in contested geographies. And the field research is basically based in Beirut, Lebanon. But then the book theorizes from Beirut to think about contested spaces elsewhere. The book interrogates, specifically in Lebanon, interrogates the underlying logic that make phrases like “planning” and “order.”

A common sentiment in Beirut—people always talk about, like, how the city is not planned, it's unplanned, impossible to plan—so taking that seriously, and try to interrogate what is actually happening on the ground. And I show in this book that such a feeling develops when the specters of war are always present, like, war is always on the horizon, and state structures are not clear, and public projects are often outsourced and privatized. However, what this book tries to emphasize specifically is that such conditions are neither exceptional nor restricted to the paradigm of citizen conflict, like, for example, Beirut and Belfast or Medellín. Assuming that these cities are exceptional produces the same assumptions that this book seeks to destabilize.

And these assumptions are mostly rooted on how we think of the temporalities of planning and development intervention. For so long, the intertwined fields of planning and development have been configured basically with an imagined future of progress. If we plan and think of how to make plans for the future, that we will somehow go always towards progress and embetterment. However, today we are at a global moment in which the imagined future in most places in the world is one of conflict and contestation, characterized by ecological crises, anticipated terror attacks, and unprecedented influx of refugees and migrants, which is a horizon that what I call “the war yet to come” in the book.

As someone who was born and raised in Lebanon and lived through the Lebanese civil war, this book is also very personal. I mean, my family and I experienced firsthand the geographies of war, including multiple forced displacements. Like many people who grew up in such contexts, the fear of future wars continues to shape my family's everyday lives, but also the promises of a better future, of postwar, that is yet to come. Although the war has ended in 1990, we're always waiting for this future that has not quote, unquote arrived.

So through this book, I chose to write about violence in a place I call home, which is itself the landscape of many lost homes. Which makes this book actually a quest that has been shaped by my personal history, as much as it is a scholarly inquiry into the geographies of conflict and their aftermath.

MCGONEGAL: It was a great deal of your research. Your PhD was at Berkeley.

BOU AKAR: Yes. Actually, the first part of the research started when I was doing my master's degree at MIT. I was in the international development track at the Department of Urban Studies and Planning. And I was wondering, like, why there were so many vacant housings in the periphery of Beirut. So that was just a regular research question.

But then when I went to do my field research for my master's thesis, I started learning that the answer for why there were vacant apartments does not lie in housing markets or just basic ideas of what I find, as I reckoned. But that there are complex stories about war displacement, what the government decided, what kind of compensation policies they decided to do.

They had, for example, they opted for compensation money. They wanted people to quote unquote, go back to where they come from, basically disappear from the city after they've lived there for more than 20 years. So instead of giving them relief compensation packages, they wanted them to just go back to their villages.

And so I start there. I start learning about how to understand the housing and real estate markets at the time after the war. You have to understand the war, the displacement, what happened, what kind of policies. And more importantly, the role that religious political organizations that used to be militias during the war ended up playing after the war.

And this is key, because usually, these are not actors that we focus on in our research, whether on planning, on urbanism. Because usually, we divide our interests or the actors into public and private so it's clear what's the state. It's clear who's working outside the state, or who is private.

But this act is actually they are the state, and they are outside the state. Together, they form the parliament and the government in Lebanon. And at the same time, they operate outside it. And some of them have military structures.

Then this story becoming like a big interest, I went ahead and continued doing this kind of research at Berkeley, developing it much more and on these issues.

MCGONEGAL: So that the lines are more blurred in Beirut, you'd say, between state and those religious political organizations.

BOU AKAR: Yeah, usually when people work or talk about life, countries like Lebanon, and they want to understand the state. So usually they're all these descriptions, especially in developments that is like a failed state, a weak state, a hybrid state. You hear about all these categories of state.

But actually, if you study how things are functioning on the ground, which is where I come from—I do an ethnography of patient practices—you realize that, actually, you start thinking about how the same act—for example, I work on four political organizations. The most famous people who are in the S will be most famous with Hezbollah.

But then I also work on the progressive socialist party, which is a political party of [INAUDIBLE] group and the Sunni future movement, as well as other parties that are associated with the Maronite church. And you start seeing that this act is—many of their members are elected to the parliament. They together form the state. But then they also operate as charities and military organizations, and in other kind of many, many other forms, like social services outside the state.

And so it becomes very difficult to just categorize them as either public and private. And so we'll understand them in the traditional way, we understand who is public and who is private.

But also, they debunk not only that, they also make us rethink what is market, what is public interest, and also, what is the government, what's insurgency, right? Because many of the wars we see is that some factions of these, some factions of these entities end up participating in wars related to the Arab–Israeli conflict or to the regional Sunni–Shia conflict, or even issues related to the global war on terror that is started by the US and its allies.

It becomes very complicated. And then trying to understand how they shape space and their geographies, we have to figure out ways on how to study that.

MCGONEGAL: I like the way you put it. You say this research required a flexible methodology, particularly with those blurred lines. You said there was no tape recording allowed frequently and no note taking, and so forth. Talk about some of the strictures on gathering data.

BOU AKAR: In general, people who work on contested areas are sides of conflict and violence. It's very difficult to take pictures or put a voice recorder and tell people, OK, tell me the stories. Because yes, this is a project about housing and infrastructure and things that you think people should be able to talk about. But actually, these are very much political projects, right? So access to shelter, security, where you live are also in the context of, like, Lebanon, are political questions too.

So you cannot just put the voice recorder and ask people to just say. It will just stop them from being able to say anything. Also, because of security reasons, you cannot take pictures in different ways. First, very often, if you just try to point your camera or your phone, then you have many people surrounding you asking you, Why are you taking pictures? Who are you an agent for, et cetera? It's a very contested area. People are very scared about who, why you taking pictures, et cetera.

And this is common in sites that have experienced violence. People are worried that this organization, religious organization, also want to control about who does what. So very often, they won't allow you. Or it becomes like a whole permit thing where they have to send people with you to take pictures—becomes really difficult.

And people also, in terms of voice recording, as I said, are not comfortable of being voice-recorded. They're afraid this will come back and haunt them.

So you're basically working in an environment where you can't take pictures, where you can't take voice recordings. The only thing you can take is notes. And you have to be very flexible, because sometimes a door opens for you, someone agrees to give you documents, or let you see the documents in their office, like building permits and stuff, only to realize that within one hour someone has intervened. And they're like, you can't see this anymore. It's happened to me. Like, just close all the files—that's not going to happen anymore.

And you don't know exactly why, or who felt threatened by what. You cannot go into these kind of sites knowing exactly, oh, this is what I'm going to do. This is my plan. Because that's not how it's going to work. You have to be very flexible.

And so I have in my book, pictures and images, but it was a very interesting process. I mean, all my images do not have people because I cannot take the risk of having people's faces show, as the book is titled *For the War Yet to Come*—you don't know what happens in the future. So you don't want anyone to be able to be tagged in these photos.

Most of the note taking is actually me going back to my car, or going back to—after leaving the interview or my observation are writing down notes. Because also, people are afraid of speaking.

Other things also are like gender, like how people take—like being a woman and such spaces. Many of these spaces, especially spaces of expert and expertise and former militiaman are all male-dominated spaces. And of course, you had to negotiate also that kind of a woman researcher coming in.

And the way they would construct these spaces are the way they would go about the interview. I was very aware of that too. And I had to also be flexible in terms of what kind of questions I ask and how to frame them, when to be provocative. So you really have to be very flexible in the way you approach everything. And very mindful of the context that each of these people you're talking with—they're operating in.

MCGONEGAL: You're writing about a country within a region that is in perpetual anxiety now for the war yet to come and for the turmoil to come. And just one way to take your readers into that, you talk about real estate a lot.

You know, Americans are used to seismic prevention in building construction in California, or thicker walls in Florida. You write about getting mortar-proof and bullet-proof apartment buildings in Beirut. What is shopping for real estate like for a typical family in Beirut?

BOU AKAR: The context in which people talk about bunkers, it was definitely after the end of the Civil War, where like the territorial wars between these religious political organizations. For example, one of the developers told me in this negotiation, they thought of building their buildings in an area where the other religious group did not want to build, like bunkers, i.e., very thick concrete walls, that it's very, very hard to destroy in the event that a war is to happen between these two groups.

But this is not very uncommon logic. I mean, as a person who grew up in the Civil War, and if anyone who has been through war, or lived through war, people always think about what is the safest place in that apartment they buy in case something happens. And so you just have usually the corridors inside, because there are several walls that separate it.

People think about space that way, maybe in a way many people, like you're saying, and they would think different. They would think about where is the safest place in the case of a hurricane, a fracture in

California. But in Lebanon, they think about it more in the case of snipers, or in the case of violence. Where is the safest place? So that's true. Also, many buildings have—they use the basement for that.

But in terms of shopping, right now this is not—this is related, but it's actually making me think of another thing, which is very contested where you buy apartment in Lebanon right now. Because there are all these—especially after—in the past decades, several towns have made it impossible for a Muslim person or family to be able to rent or buy from a Christian family and vice versa, or for Jewish family to buy here, or for Muslim family to buy there.

And so, first, many towns actually issued something that is illegal. But they still issued regulations that will stop that from happening. So they will say, like, even if you want to sell it, we will not sign your paperwork. One of the parliamenters in Lebanon proposed this law which bans land sales between Muslims and Christians for 15 years in the name of coexistence. So it's basically promoting segregation in the name of coexistence.

This is what is very common right now, is that people cannot just—oh, I want to live in this neighborhood. Then I'm just going to rent or buy there. This is not how it functions. Blood of political and sectarian issues that come to play, especially in the areas that are heated, these peripheries that have torn frontiers where it's still mixed. But people are fear of the other coming and taking over. This shapes, somehow, the logic of apartment hunting.

Many of my friends or family members who are thinking of buying apartments, as a young generation, they're like, oh, this is a nice area. It's close to my work. And their family—you will hear their families—no, no, no. You can't buy there. We cannot get to you if a war is to come. No. And you weren't there when we had to be displaced based on our religion from this area. So no, go to a different area where it will be a bit safer.

These are the things you will hear with people while apartment hunting. Right now, the market is stagnant in Lebanon. The economy is really in a dire situation. So there isn't much of buying and renting going on. I don't know how that is being affecting. But this is the logic that has dominated the past decade.

MCGONEGAL: What else could be written about this topic? And I'm curious what you think of bringing some of these questions to bear on Syria.

BOU AKAR: The field of urban planning and development is very much future-oriented field. And we have to think about it right now, not only in conflict, as I said earlier. Also, when we think about climate change, or what's going on, what's going to happen to Miami or New York, or what's going to happen to other places in the world. We have to think about what does it mean for [INAUDIBLE] to operate in different kind of future.

So for the longest time, the future that was imagined for modernization in the '50s and '60s, and even a bit before, was that this always—as I said, that always is going to be progress. And somehow, it's going to be for the better.

But I mean, as we consumed all the resources, and as we stared at the face of extreme climate change, we have to rethink about that. So this is another area of important research in the field I work in. And how to think about displaced populations and access to housing.

Because another kind of myth is that refugees go back home, that somehow, like in Lebanon, they wanted everyone, all the war displaced to go back home. Just give them like \$5,000 and let them go back home—which no one did, because they've been living in displacement for 30 years.

Same with refugees. I mean, if you look at most of the refugee crises that happened in the world, most of the refugees end up creating homes in the new places. Because wars really take a long time before they quote unquote end, if they ever end.

And so it's a rethink of what does it mean when we talk about refugees and housing and host communities. And I mean, this is also a big debate not only in research, but also in practice, especially for United Nations and aid organizations.

For example, the Syrian refugee crisis quote unquote in Lebanon is an urban crisis. One in every four people in Lebanon is a refugee right now, so more than 25 percent almost. And most of the people live in urban areas. So we're not talking about refugee camps anymore.

So what does that mean? How do we think about urban contexts where 25 percent of the population are refugees? How can we think of the housing question and when aid becomes development? All of these are important.

Now, how does this [INAUDIBLE] of course this is a project that synchs up from the peripheries of Beirut. And that's critical, because I mean, after the end of the war, all the focus on Lebanon was the reconstruction of its downtown. It became this fancy place. A lot of dispossession happened in the name of post-war reconstruction of downtown Beirut. The project called Solidere. And many people were not allowed to keep their spaces, their houses.

And anyways, this company took over and they rebuilt everything. But for the most part, it wasn't rebuilt for your average middle-income or low-income Lebanese. So it's mostly like, right now, it stands as a ghost town. Because most of the people who bought apartments at the time were people from the Gulf who were able to buy very high-end apartments. And so right now it stands mostly as a ghost town.

And I'm talking more about shifting the lands from this kind of massive high investment. Many could post-war reconstruction projects to think about the other spaces, like the peripheries and what happened there because of this kind of big, post-war reconstruction projects that took all the money. And what happened in the peripheries, where the people have been displaced to.

Another thing I want to talk about just for a second is that although the logic of future wars is not only in Beirut. For example, think about after September 11 in Europe, or the gang violence in Chicago. I mean, we are not very aware often of what's going on. But many of our cities and spaces in the United States are also being shaped within this expectation that—or fear that yet another September 11th is going to come, or another gang violence is going to come.

And then how our spaces, how we go through airports, how our public spaces are being monitored, et cetera, are also justified in the name of this kind of terror to come, violence yet to come, gang violence yet to come.

And so to also think about it not only in spaces like Beirut, but also in spaces in Paris and Mogadishu and Barcelona and New York, et cetera, how this fear ends up shaping our present. And in the name of that fear, we do not contest these geographies that get produced, geographies of fear in the present. And so this is also an area to keep pushing, in terms of research and practice and policy.

MCGONEGAL: Can you talk about anything from your research that was pleasantly surprising about your home, or gave you hope, or might be a model for urban design in war-torn regions?

BOU AKAR: One of the things about doing this research is that it's made many spaces that I thought were intimate, or people who are a bit—places that I grew up in that I really didn't—I realized I didn't really know. So there was a lot that I knew, a lot about I learned about how people work together.

So despite the fact that maybe the war yet to come as is this topic narrative, it also shows how people still, despite everything, despite the wars, and the violence, and the displacement, are still trying to work together. They in the end, these are mixed areas. People are still living in them. They're not building walls. They're always negotiating these contours of conflicts.

But at the same time, they're still trying to make homes in these places. And so, despite the overarching narrative of the war yet to come, you still feel a lot of resiliency in the people and how they actually try to make life in mixed religious areas, despite the episodes of violence.

In terms of hope, is that while we have to think about the futures of urban planning and development, and how to think about the interventions in the present through rethinking that future. Actually, one of the important things that emerged from my work in Lebanon is how different groups are trying to use the tools of planning and development. But rather than just to forecast the future of 2030 and 2050 that may not come, is actually to use these tools to open up conversations between people beyond the future their sectarianism or the future of othering.

And think about shared areas, or public spaces. How we think about greening the city. How we think about the garbage crises that plague Beirut. So try to use the tools basically as a way to start opening up conversations between people who may not have had these conversations with each other before.

And I thought this is—and I'm part of this conversation. And I thought this is a very interesting way in which we can take this information and tools that we've developed and designed, et cetera, but to use them in a different way, and to open up futures that people thought might not have been possible. And to think about the future in Beirut, for example, beyond being fearful of a next war and thinking of, like, now how can we manage the city and live together in a better environment, or better public spaces for children?

MCGONEGAL: Tell me what else you're reading right now.

BOU AKAR: As a true MIT Berkeley person, I'm reading actually right now on sedimentation from the natural sciences and its relation to global change. And of course, that's not my field. But that's because I think it's very much relevant to, like, new projects I'm working on, which also related to conflict. But try to think about how sedimentation can be thought of in the social sciences, and thinking about urbanization and urban space, urbanization and urban space and alternative futures.

And so this is what I've been reading about for now, in terms of for research. And I'm trying to put together a list on climate change, utopias and dystopias in cities. And that would be my next reading list.

MCGONEGAL: Well, the book is *For The War Yet to Come: Planning Beirut's Frontiers* by Hiba Bou Akar, MCP, class of 2005, and it's published by Stanford University Press last year. Professor Bou Akar, thanks for joining me.

BOU AKAR: Thank you.