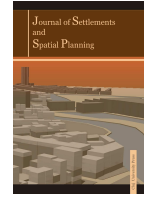




Centre for Research on Settlements and Urbanism

**Journal of Settlements and Spatial Planning**

Journal homepage: <http://jssp.reviste.ubbcluj.ro>



# “Zaïmisation”, “Customisation” and “Sacralisation”: Three Major Phenomena of Privatisation Tendency of the Lebanese Regional Urbanism

**Nagi SFEIR<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> University of Grenoble, Urbanism Institute, Grenoble, FRANCE

E-mail: [nagi.sfeir@architectes.org](mailto:nagi.sfeir@architectes.org)

**Keywords:** regional urban planning, local economic development, urban privatisation, zaïmisation, customisation, sacralisation, Lebanese urbanism, reurbanism

## ABSTRACT

Over the last three decades, the Lebanese urbanism has been largely discussed and analysed by the national and international specialists of social, political and urban issues. However, spatial planning and urban development case-study projects are still mostly selected within the limited urban and economic poles of the country, especially Beirut's urban region and its coastal corridor, plus some other regional principal centralities. In this paper we aim to analyse regional and local urban development projects implemented in localities that are disconnected from these major poles. We therefore introduce three primary phenomena occurring in those micro-territories and thus participating in the broader privatisation tendency of the Lebanese urbanism. Thus, “Zaïmisation”, “Customisation” and “Sacralisation” as phenomena of regional (local) urban development – in relation with “Micro-political (Zaïm)”, “Micro-economic (Local Investor)” and “Religious” stakeholders – allow for a better understanding of the dynamics and mechanisms involved in the Lebanese urbanism within paradoxically alternative and complementary urban governance process, where limits between public and private interests are permanently negotiated.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Lebanon we generally perceive a historical scientific interest towards the “grand” urban regions, particularly the Grand-Beirut region, as it is the main demographical, social and economic region in the country or otherwise towards the coastal strip as it incessantly extends the Beirut tissue north and south; rare are those studies concerning urban dynamics implemented in the regional and local “small” territories.

Paradoxically however, it is in these decentralised and disconnected contexts that a major part of the alternative urbanisation process is clearly revealed, permitting therefore to directly measure the weight of networking and of locally rooted forces, which, due to their matching interests, a large part of the Lebanese urbanisation process is architected and created.

With regard to a macro-approach to Lebanese urbanisation dynamics, characterised by the public authorities' failure to manage and accompany the economic and socio-urban development, we propose a complementary or even alternative micro-territorial approach that fundamentally participates at the economic development through the urbanisation of the Lebanese local territories.

The micro-territorial scale clearly suggests here the direct involvement of the very local societal forces in urbanisation and construction through a fragmented and sequenced approach of the territorial tissue. It is about the juxtaposition of regional territories participating together, cumulatively, to the urban and economic development of the country.

The territories under study are thus essentially sub-urban or rur-urban [*Rurbain*] territories affected by the phenomenon of urban sprawl and random expansion of constructions largely supported by the

little constraining Lebanese urban and construction settlements.

The case of these territories “forgotten” by the public authorities [Pouvoir-public] particularly brings out the question of social (societal) and economic opportunities of the urbanisation process as an immediate response to local issues, often private. Thus, we observe that the micro-territorial scale is layered by three main urbanisation phenomena: “Zaïmisation”, “Customisation” and “Sacralisation” that are closely characterising the local economic and social issues and which are implemented according to three local actors’ profiles: Micro-political (Zaïm), Micro-economic (Local Investor) and Religious.

## 2. THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Discussing spatial planning in Lebanon both by its urban and rural dimensions primarily refers to the territorial scale issue and to the multiple political, social and economic stakeholders’ approach of Lebanese territories. Indeed, the urban designing process in Lebanon is oriented towards both macro and micro-territories and systematically concerns the private and public actors’ prerogatives, spatial planning settlements and their operational framework. The main issue is that the Lebanese urban governance seems fundamentally linked to the stakeholders’ power of relationships and their balance within a complementary and alternative approach. Hence, the Lebanese case undeniably fits into the current scientific debate and dynamics dealing with issues related to the privatisation tendency of the contemporary urbanism in the context of economic crisis and more largely in the context of “*the crisis of modern democracies*” [1], public-power versus private initiatives, “State’s come-back” [2] as a major actor of the socio-urban scene where lately public policies have been largely decentralised and are challenged (even dominated) by private spheres.

Since the 1980s and simultaneously with the progressive emergence of new topics in public politics (local development, sustainable development, etc.), states are being continuously disengaged from some of their historical prerogatives, especially those related to spatial planning and more broadly to social and economic policy issues. Such reconfiguration of the public power scheme between the centre and the periphery has led to the introduction of multiple interpretation and analysis models of those induced emerging power relationships, particularly between public power and private actors’ aggregates. This tendency towards “*polycentrism*” [2, p. 45] emphasises the “*interactionist*” (Chicago School) power approaches through renewing traditional public power schemes and exceeding the public-centred frame of peripheral usual analysis (State/Local authorities); central power is no longer in a hegemonic situation vis-à-vis other actors as it is increasingly being compelled to negotiate politics

(urban politics and policies) with those peripheral actors, since the governing capacity involves cooperation and partnership among diverse stakeholders with the objective of expressing preferences and their aggregation. As “*(...) the act of governance requires the cooperation of private actors and the mobilisation of private resources*” [3], it consequently imposes new urban governance, analysis models, some of which have been already developed: multi-level governance, urban regimes, social organisation, policy communities, issue networks, etc. Nonetheless, all these models share the idea of a growing role of the individual [*Sujet*] as the main stakeholder in a situation of interaction facing an increasingly decentralised and diffuse public power.

The Lebanese case is indeed closer to the Anglo-Saxon pluralist analysis model of public power, which, in terms of social networks, is based on the networking school that allows for a better integration of “*the numerous and diverse stakeholders’ statuses and roles*” in politics [4], than to the French model and more broadly to the continental Europe neo-corporatist models where the State is still designed as a leading actor.

Furthermore, the Lebanese socio-political specificity is induced by the issue of the “common” social construction and the “idea” of public-power representation, through the following double report:

- the Lebanese public power is central-oriented and local authorities have almost no prerogatives in terms of spatial planning and urbanism;

- the State is either inexistent (conflict periods) and therefore counter-balanced by societal groups or is weak and powerless (conflict free periods), in which case enacted laws are voluntarily not fulfilled as they are believed to hamper the private initiatives.

The analysis of the Lebanese context demonstrates the existence of “juxtaposed” powers that are neither horizontal nor vertical (top down or bottom up); it perfectly joins here the Stanford University empirical studies of the late 1970s upon which was developed the concept of “*organised anarchy*” [5] through the questioning of the rational decision-making process and the necessity to introduce an “anarchical” analysis model of governance, negotiation and decision systems. Empirical ground observation of an ensemble of “ideologies” and urban “practices” into the particular Lebanese social political context of absence of what we can call a “common higher” (that is represented by a strong public-power and a law-governed state) for diverse societies - formed around a “coagulum” of private interests carried by community policies essentially micro-territorially based ones - is actually constituting a fundamental report of a local structural “state of anarchy” of public [*Respublica*] and political affairs that undeniably recalls the Realism international anarchy [6] as it is theorised through the *Realurbanism model* [7].

Studying the implication of this social-political conception of power at the scale of urban policies and urban project making mainly refers to urban governance as a government mode at the scale of macro and micro-territories; in other words, it is clearly about analysing the decision-making processes of urban projects production methods: specifically, the roles of public versus private power into defining (paradoxically) complementary and alternative urban project policies to be implemented within the framework of potential interactions among concerned actors.

To this end, we analysed the Lebanese double-oriented territorial governance on both macro and micro-territorial levels:

1). The first level is what we call the macro-territorial level. It is a state-oriented and largely centralised level where urban policies are implemented by state's services, which are the traditional actors of the planning issues. The study of the macro-territorial level (organisation structure of national and territorial authorities, national urban and construction regulations and policies, general or regional development schemes (when they exist), diverse ongoing urbanism documents and plans, etc.), allows for a better understanding of the regulation framework and its implementation in the field, its characteristics and particularities but also its limitations especially the socio-cultural ones. This macro-territorial level indirectly implies the top-down oriented involvement of the public power in urbanisation and planning processes in a required global balance and coherent politics towards the Lebanese territory (territories). The role of the public power directly involves definition, enactment, supporting and implementation of spatial planning politics and their urban policies and settlements towards regional territories through their social, economic and environmentally connected dimensions.

2). The other level is what we call micro-territorial level. It is a decentralised and essentially privatised level, where spatial planning and urban development are led, promoted and implemented by actors that are emerging from the local political, economic or social scene.

To better understand, we tried to deconstruct both the administrative and the practical mechanisms of the Lebanese urbanism through the analysis of the urbanism stakeholders' level of involvement and the power relationships and their balance issues that underlie the urban object.

Who are the effective and critical stakeholders of the spatial planning issue in Lebanon, and how do they interact locally, in terms of social, economic and political dynamics?

Otherwise, what role does the State or more broadly the public-power play in the definition of regulation process and practical tools of the spatial

planning towards local territories outside the major urban and economic poles of the country?

Furthermore, we studied multiple local developments projects chosen across Lebanon that concern different communities, social or religious groups, and geographical locations.

We therefore led empirical case-studies (analysis of development plans and technical supports, info-graphical data, interviews and surveys, etc.) of the following localities:

-the tourist development project of the Bnachi'i Lake, in northern Lebanon;

-the village of Bejdarfel, in northern Lebanon;

-the coastal city of Batroun, in northern Lebanon;

-the Holy-Valley protected area, in northern Lebanon;

-the Saints-Route in Mount-Lebanon;

-the tourist development and leisure-oriented project of the historical city-centre of Byblos, in Mount-Lebanon;

-the water-front development projects of the northern suburbs of Beirut and Mount-Lebanon periphery coastal cities;

However in this paper, we do not intend to submit a particular case-study of a local development urban project out of the examples listed previously, but drawing upon these diverse projects, we try to deconstruct the Lebanese regional or local spatial planning urbanisation process through the identification of major phenomena of the Lebanese regional urbanism.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **3.1. The “Zaïmisation” of the Lebanese micro-territories urban development**

Historically, regionally rooted political leaders are the local elders who constitute a traditional aspect of the Lebanese political socialisation, a manner to rally around values and interests that are handled by a personality, who is popularly called “Zaïm” (Arabic).

Zaïms, who are often designated personalities by long heritage and continually recycled through democratic election process, constitute the local political referee and the anchor for the identification of an entire territory. Thus, a zaïm generally leads an interested policy based on “clientelist” (customer-oriented) dynamics of social and political life. In fact, zaïmisation of the Lebanese political representation [8] and the central weight of primary links of belongings [9] still produce a coagulum (antithesis of continuum) of micro-politicians who seek the complacency and favour of a maximum of electors; that can easily be extrapolated towards urbanism policies.

Actually, the Lebanese state politics is constitutionally (literally: a confessional consensual democracy) a politics of the consensus (or even of the compromise), between all the Lebanese communities/societies (the addition of the communities' interests equals the collective interest), that if re-scaled to zaïms-run regions or micro-territories and approached from the urbanism perspective, is translated into sequenced (juxtaposed), fragmented and disparate local development points. Throughout engaging local projects that are in the court/medium-term providing critical social and economic services - and despite the potential resulting incoherencies between projects at regional or national scale - they guarantee their continuous social and political leadership.

Ranging from simple improvement works to innovative leisure tourist hubs, such projects and ideas have always been in the heart of their electoral promises and commitments, or even in their socialisation motivations. This marked manifest towards micro-territorial development thus provides a win-win situation. This is how a significant part of the development, extension and paving of transport infrastructure is completely or partly funded (by partnership or joint-venture) and implemented by zaïms. In addition, we can also find investments in: upgrading drinking water network or sewerage systems; active seeking for national extraordinary subsidies; revival of abandoned projects; acquiring registered exemptions or particular rights (e.g. for the widening of a road servicing a little subdivision); creation of a public square. Some of these projects bear the name of their promoter, thus conciliating their public consistency with their intimate origins. We can observe a wide range of similar local development projects led by zaïms in different regions of Lebanon, from south to north [10].

Thus, the example taken of Bnachi'i Lake in northern Lebanon led by the regional zaïm implements the major schemes and principals previously presented; it demonstrates how a banal locality lost in the northern highlands but likely located on the holiday destination road of a zaïm was transformed into a north-Lebanon major tourist hub.



Fig. 1. Bnachi'i artificial lake, at Christmas.

The project itself constitutes in a leisure village that greatly benefits from the natural and environmental assets of the site; it was developed around an artificial lake surrounded by a resort and services facilities (restaurants, crafts, etc.) and was therefore accompanied by a large campaign of infrastructure improvements.



Fig. 2. Bnachi'i leisure village.

The project symbolises the micro-political private initiative and involvement that has led to the implementation of such an urban project, which even though largely consists of private electoral issues it is nevertheless beneficial to the social and economic development of the territory.

The fact is that in the absence of public planning schemes and socio-economic development political vision, such local "surgery" interventions have inevitably become structuring pillars of the local economy and land planning strategies.

Nevertheless, they remain fundamentally fragmented, incoherent and discriminating, resulting in a "fits and starts" development.

These micro-planning "essays" induce direct and indirect effects on the urbanisation, the occupation modes, the movement and inhabitation schemes, the economy and the environment of local territories.

Through the wealth (employments and benefits) that they generate, any further national or regional development scheme will have to intelligently integrate (and compose with) these existing micro-territorial centralities so as to rebalance and equitably share induced quantifiable and non quantifiable profits.

The concentrated development at the scale of such micro-territories can result in its imbalance by monopolising a certain "power" dynamics that are quite attractive for a regional workforce otherwise directly involved in land and real estate pressure and that undeniably and paradoxically ends in disastrous urbanisation outside of any preventive and transversal public spatial planning settlements.

A largely decentralised spatial planning approach that issues from local political and private initiatives emphasises the original micro-political stakeholder's role in the social and economic development of the Lebanese territories, from the micro-territorial emerging centralities towards the macro-territorial connecting centralities.

### 3.2. The “Customisation” of the Lebanese micro-territories urban development

We refer to micro-economic stakeholders as local private investors from the civil-society who by their self-investment and motivation manage to completely modify specificities and orientations of the social and economic local tissue. Induced direct effects are therefore observed on the urban development process.

The profile of these private investors varies according to two parameters: on the one hand the level of their private wealth and on the other hand the level of their implication in local politics. We generally observe that most of these actors end up applying for local political office; as for micro-political stakeholders or zaïms, micro-economic stakeholders provide personnel capital to civil society, which finds itself indebted to them by supporting their likely political conquest. This is another direct win-win situation that is underpinning urbanism in micro-territories and that added to the zaïmisation phenomenon perfectly underlines a privatisation approach or tendency of Lebanese urbanism.

Many local examples highlight the deep and intimate imbrications of political and economic actors, especially at the micro-territorial scale through the public-oriented projects development; private investments occur in different projects such as hospitals, hospitality and leisure, educational and social amenities.

Most of these local investors develop a standard approach of the territory and its appropriation process primarily constituted by the edification of their own residential “reserve” on the most culminating geographical point, raised as a landmark or even a “social identification”.



Fig. 3. Example of a personnel residential “reserve” under construction, dropped on a culminating hill, with stunning views over the sea and the mountains.

Some others pursue this approach by promoting less private projects, as for example the construction of commercial centres and schools; these developments are usually accompanied by infrastructure works similar to those engaged by zaïms.

Here, the Bejdarfel village case (1,500 inhabitants) is widely evocative as it shows the leading role played by a local billionaire who managed to buy a large part of the land property in the village, constructed one of the largest commercial centres of the northern region, renovated the scholar and institutional amenities, and constructed medical and social-medical care centres, while as usual improving the transport infrastructure, especially by the construction of a major road that short-cuts other local centres by connecting the main coastal locality to the village.



Fig. 4. Commercial and leisure centres at Bejdarfel.

Micro-economic actors are to be considered the local planners who develop urban projects and real estate operations, in which cases private and public issues and interests intimately cohabitate.

Private interests could consist of simple property investments that guaranty profit and that by the same time run induced public interests, since local development projects led by micro-economic actors are promoted as get-out operations for the territories affected by the lack of public initiatives and schemes towards issues of local economic development.

Nevertheless these operations are almost rushing the spontaneous and radical transformations switch of the inhabitants’ behaviours and habits and the land urbanisation. We therefore see how (e.g. Bejdarfel village) the creation of a strategic road coupled with the establishment of a commercial centre would attract a large amount of customers and visitors and thus encouraging the impoverishment of neighbouring localities and the enhancement of sprawl.

This illustrates the growing role of local economic actors in the privatisation of urban development, a role that besides its political, social and economic spinoffs is involved in two major issues:

- the first issue globally focuses on the public-power complementariness of these random and sequenced interventions, as they are not supported by public-power, upstream and downstream of the emerging polarisation process;

- the second issue focuses on the lack of transversal dynamics towards networking regional territories, particularly by connecting the most remote areas to the central urban poles and furthermore by their integration into a broader regional development circuit; although these emerging points are raised as

socio-economic development models, they are still weak and ephemeral.

Abandoned localities are thus frequently reported despite the huge private investments that have been made since the local economic actor priorities were changed and court-termed.

This underlines the issue of micro-territories that are forsaken to private economic stakeholders that manage to undertake a wide range of serious investments through customising the territory according to their ongoing private interests and issues.

Another example is the one related to urban marketing architected around the increasing notoriety of the Batroun medium coastal city (30 000 inhabitants) after the successive introduction of a high-level clubbing industry by a few local businessmen [11].

It shows the radical modification of the historical functional and social mixing [*Mixité*] of the local urban tissue into a leisure and a clubbing service-based economy that has become the unique and only lever of the local development and that was not so far supported by the public power (national and local) through for example the counter-strengthening of alternative sustainable economic resources such as eco-tourism or cultural-tourism [12]. This metamorphosis has been effective due to the relocation of housing towards the city suburbs hills essentially due to the overvaluation of property market and the changing ambiance of the central sector (congestions, late extended noises, etc).

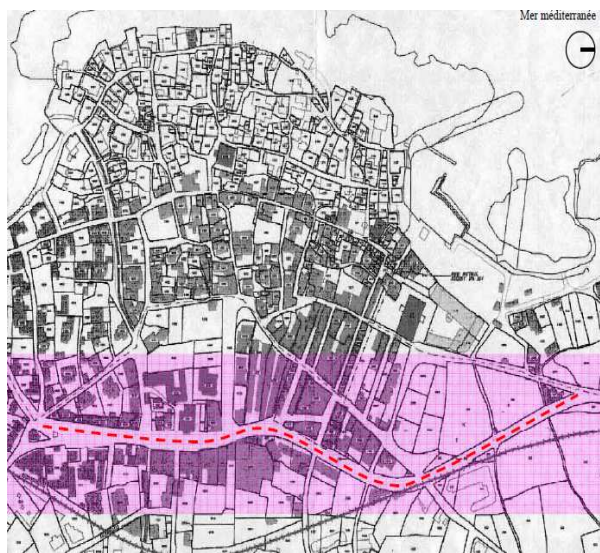


Fig. 5. Batroun city-centre. Installation of the clubbing industry around the main road of the city (purple).

The resulting situation was the emergence of a real city-centre (in its North American definition; i.e. dedicated/oriented to business and leisure) offset by the constitution of a residential suburb, where accelerated growth of urbanisation has led to urban sprawl, the destruction of natural scenes and the fatal increasing of the land price.



Fig. 6. Example of residential suburb sprawls in coastal city of Batroun.

Public-space phenomena of “Stage-orienting” [*Théâtralisation*], “Event-orienting” [*Festivalisation*] and “Business-orienting” [*Commercialisation*] that are usually accompanying such urban transformations attest of the crucial local private power initiatives for the options of local development and spatial planning [13].

### 3.3. The “Sacralisation” of the Lebanese micro-territories urban development

The notion of religious urbanism that underlies this third phenomenon has nothing “religious” in its profane, social and economic life-organisation definition around a sacred or mystical conception of the urban object as it could be for example in the ancient cities of Hindu societies (*Vastu Vidya*) and Pre-Columbian ones, or even in the classical Greek Cité. The qualifier refers here to the religious belongings of concerned urbanism stakeholders, since spatial planning and urbanisation process is directly linked to essentially religious issues and prerogatives.

The major historical and cultural weight of the Lebanese religious communities has always been fundamental in the consecration of the social-political Lebanese unity and thus politics and religion cohabit in a vital complementarity for the Lebanese identity. If we consider for example the Maronite Church, a central actor of the Lebanese political scene and which plays a major role into the local economy (owns about 27% of the land property of the country) through its numerous institutions and civil-law associations, we can observe that the willingness of preserving the Christian minority’s existence in the Middle East [*Proche-Orient*] region constitutes the guideline of its politics. This passes through the strengthening of the identity and community links by the promotion of socio-economic “packs” that contribute to the vital maintaining of Lebanese Christian communities in regional territories.

The ongoing construction of churches completed by other diverse educational, social and medical amenities that are under religious management is an important phenomenon for which one can easily account in almost all Lebanese Christian localities.

Therefore, it is in this dynamics that “religious urbanism” participates in the definition of local development options and orientations: economic, societal (confessional) and spatial planning ones, particularly as we can see it in priority rur-urban and rural contexts, e.g. in the mid-mountain of Mount Lebanon.

The case of the Saints-Route is highly symbolic regarding this sacralisation phenomenon. Through the idea of connecting four major Maronite Saints’ religious sites (monasteries), the structuring of a pilgrimage circuit would permit the development of religious tourism activities in a profoundly faith-based country.



Fig. 7. Religious tourism and Sunday pilgrimage at the Saint-Charbel Convent.

Despite the central public-power funding of this project, it is obvious that its implementation and promotion were led by the Church, attesting to the religious actor’s power and prerogative. Indeed, large and costly improvements, widening and extension transport infrastructure works have simply transformed the picturesque routes crossing through the authentic villages into almost a two-lane highway that is focusing on religious tourism and attracting several hundred thousands of pilgrims a year. Nevertheless, this infrastructural project was naturally accompanied by a frenzied urbanisation of natural and ecological surrounding areas in order to allow for the installation of a large offer of lodging, trading and catering services.



Fig. 8. Frenzied urbanisation of natural and ecological sites, on the Saints-Route: private housing and hotel resort.

The lot servicing allows for the placement of important land offer on the real estate market, an opportunity that promoters rapidly took over, resulting in the development sprawl on natural and agricultural lands, irreversible damage of local ecosystems and, as seen through both phenomena above, huge social and economic transformation of the local tissues.



Fig. 9. The Saint-Valley of Kadisha.

Otherwise, religious actors are playing a counter-role in the urbanisation process as one can observe for example in the case of the Saint-Valley in the north of the country where according to the principles of *Faith and Forests* [14] promoted by ARC association (Alliance of Religions and Conservation) to preserve natural heritage and biodiversity, the Church has strived to the classification of the valley (owned by 95% by the Maronite Church) as a *UNESCO World Heritage Site*, thus preserving it from a real estate project promoted by local investors for the creation of a leisure complex within the valley.

Without willing to deal here with both projects details, the report of the implementation by religious micro-territorial actors of multiple and sometimes contradictory (urbanisation/conservation) spatial planning processes as a response to their wider interests and strategic issues - through the analysis of the sacralisation phenomenon occurring onto local territories - permits one to underline their role (among the two others micro-territorial actors: zaïms and local investors) into the planning orientations and choices for land use, but also into the enhancement of built and natural heritage, facing demographical and urbanisation challenges.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The Lebanese urbanism, on both regulation and practice levels, is designed on two different scales or standards that are paradoxically, complementary and alternative ones:

- 1). On the one hand, a traditional public-led spatial planning where public power struggles to renew or enact urban tools and which is furthermore still lacking legitimacy within the different social components (communities/societies).

2). On the other hand, micro-territorial actors (zaïms, local investors, religious) are continually and successfully substituting the urban planning public authorities' prerogatives, particularly in crisis periods, and almost beyond these periods, when public power is still globally weakened, dismantled and territorialised.

This double scaled urban governance [15] has historically led to the empowerment and rooting of the micro-territorial stakeholders who play the major role in the development of local (disconnected) territories outside the Capital influence area and other few regional centralities, through three urban design phenomena: Zaïmisation, Customisation and Sacralisation.

However, these phenomena are easily observed throughout a wide range of urban development projects and investments processes.

Therefore, Zaïmisation, Customisation and Sacralisation of Lebanese micro-territories urban development constitute the triptych of a profoundly privatised territorial urbanism where strategic planning and socio-economic development orientations are undertaken and designed by private local actors (zaïms, local investors and religious).

More broadly, this privatised urbanism fits into the realist (within the meaning of the "realist paradigm" in international relations theories) lecture and analysis grid of urban policies and practices that is developed through the *Realurbanism model* [7] and that is constructed on three fundamental and corollary theses: "the anarchical urban governance", "the privatisation of urbanism" and "the power relationships and their balance". It thus permits a better understanding of urban governance and urban development design in anarchy contexts (state-of-anarchy) where limits between public and private interests are permanently negotiated.

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