

# Future-Invested Urbanism: Beirut's Shifting Society

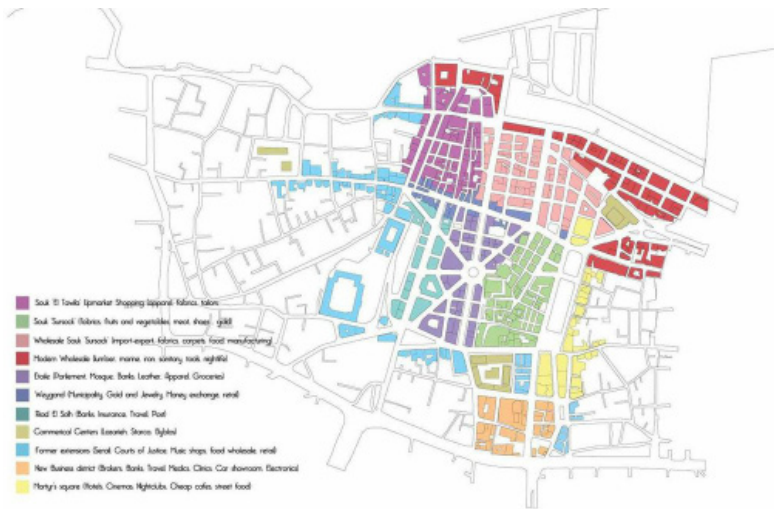
Beirut is a city of complexities and contradictions. The tensions resulting from such a condition have exploded into violence throughout its recent history, most devastatingly in Lebanon's fifteen-year long civil war (1975-1990), which was centered in Beirut, and marked the city in the international consciousness as a place of urban turmoil. However today, Beirut has recovered remarkably; it was voted the number one destination to visit by the *New York Times* in 2009, and, more recently, received a similar title by Frommers.<sup>1</sup> city is in the second phase of one of the biggest urban reconstruction projects in the world, city run by a single entity Société libanaise pour le développement et la reconstruction de Beyrouth known as Solidère.

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The city is in the second phase of one of the biggest urban reconstruction projects in the world, city run by a single entity *Société libanaise pour le développement et la reconstruction de Beyrouth*, simply referred to as Solidère.

Conceived of in 1994, Lebanon's first postwar government run by Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was determined to turn disaster into opportunity through a unique form of public-private partnership. Creating a special zone, the Beirut Central District (BCD), the government commissioned its urban planning and formed Solidère, a private development corporation<sup>2</sup>, in which the BCD's former owners and tenants pooled their property assets in exchange for controlling shares, with new shareholders contributing to the company's working capital. Solidère was required to fund the relocation of displaced families, undertake the necessary clearances, construct the city center's entire infrastructure and public domain, and carry out environmental reclamation and sea defense works on the new waterfront. In exchange for financing on behalf of the government all infrastructure and land reclamation, the company was granted ownership of 29 hectares of new development land on the reclaimed area.<sup>3</sup>

For all intents and purposes, Solidère created a post-war reconstruction master plan for the BCD that included linkages between spaces and individual buildings, not simply the exterior facades, by attempting to positively contribute not only to their personal pockets, but also the on-going debate regarding Beirut's role and definition of urban design and redevelopment practices:



2

After an initial period in which urban design was narrowly defined as merely dealing with appearances, there is now a growing appreciation that it also, and more importantly, deals with organization of urban space and processes of shaping cities. Design has therefore, been redefined, from merely aesthetic issues that should be left to developers and designers alone, to a much broader definition, which requires proper public attention. (Madanipour 2006: 178)

Ali Madanipour as quoted above identifies three forms of control over space: *spatial, mental, and legal*. Attempting to build upon these 3-forms, in 1994, Solidère’s master plan (as stated on their website) was conceived not as a single, homogenous central district, but as a cluster of city quarters, or sectors, each with its own detailed plan and regulations, as well as its own unique character (Figures 1 and 2):

Sector A: Park and Waterside, comprising leisure facilities, two marinas, a city waterside park and a landscaped seaside promenade.

Sector B: Hotel District, high-density mixed-use area with a number of prominent hotels.

Sector C: Serail Corridor, mixed-use area of medium density with controls on building height and tiled roofscape preserving a visual corridor to the sea.

Sector D: New Waterfront District, high-density mixed-use area on reclaimed land, with carefully located high-rise buildings.

Sector E: Souks, named after the former late Ottoman markets, with the new Beirut Souks as the focus of commercial and shopping activities.

Sector F: Wadi Abou Jamil, medium-density residential area with new clusters added to a number of retained Levantine houses and buildings.

Sector G: Conservation Area, forming the political, financial, religious and cultural focus of the city center, with late Ottoman and French Mandate heritage and a zone of high archeological opportunities.

Sector H: Martyrs’ Square Axis, mixed-use district extending along the highly symbolic civic space, aims to reconnect the city and enhance its relation with the New Waterfront.

Sector I: Saifi Village, with medium-density residential development among a concentration of retained residential buildings recreating a traditional urban neighborhood.



1

Figure 1: (Above) Beirut Central District (BCD). Image. Yasmina Chami: *From Multipli-City to corporate City*.

Figure 2: (Left) Soledere Master Plan, indicating multiple sectors.



3

Sector J: Ghalghoul and Beirut Trade Center, with gateway buildings planned along its edges to mark key entries to the city center.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, reconstruction is the BCD combines low-scale rehabilitation of buildings true to their historic memory to high-density high-rises creating an impressive skyline at the waterfront with beautiful views to the Mediterranean sea (Figure 3).

#### **GLOBALIZATION: CREATING AN ARCHITECTURE OF ALTERITY**

Solidère has brought internationally known architects like Steven Holl, Herzog & DeMeuron, Zaha Hadid, Vincent James, Jean Nouvel, Sir Norman Foster, and Rafael Moneo to define post-war Beirut. In less internationalized parts of the city sit the landmarks of the 1960s and 1970s, Beirut's pre-war glory days, including buildings by names such as Alvar Aalto, Victor Gruen, and Swiss Addor & Julliard, and more recently, projects by locally designed architects such as Bernard Khoury.<sup>5</sup> From one point-of-view, this building boom, which is turning Beirut into a forward-thinking, modern metropolis is a sign of better times and peace. From another, it is a removal of the city's cultural history by only looking at the city as a physical manifestation of future-invested urbanism.

Today, Lebanon is witnessing both an astonishing increase in the activities of repressive state apparatuses as well as an increase in the state's role in those forms of public planning that are calculated either to yield immediate private profits, or to improve the infrastructural conditions for the current generation of private profits, as opposed to healthcare, education, and low-income housing. This does not entail merely the confusion of public and private interest, as has often

Figure 3: Solidère post-war, re-construction balancing historic renovation and new modern skylight to fulfill their vision as the "Ancient City of the Future" per their marketing material.



5

been suggested. It is rather, the colonization of the former by the latter. That said, where state projects end and private projects begin can no longer be determined, not because this is a strong state that is organizing a command economy, but because capital has become the state. State and capital have become incorporated as one and the same force, or a process defined by the same discourse.<sup>6</sup>

History writing is a powerful tool in the construction of collective urban memory. Typically in postcolonial states, history is linked to a national project. Methods and tropes of national history writing aim to create or reinforce a sense of shared identity rooted in past experience and urban developments. Particular historical actors are valorized and emphasized, as they become protagonists of the national narrative. Often the outlines of the present-day state are anachronistically projected backward as part of attempts to construct a modern national identity.

Lebanon's contested history offers a window—or indeed a laboratory—for considering the uses of urban public space and development in addressing issues of subnational identity. Alongside attempts to construct a national Lebanese narrative rooted in the politics and history of the country's Christian and Druze mountain communities, there exists a counter-narrative of the major coastal cities and their predominantly Sunni Muslim populations. Shifting the geographic focus this way means that some of the same tropes and methods used to construct putative national histories can be applied to develop subnational sectarian narratives, which the Solidère attempted to re-create using a colonial, or global framework by promising to return Beirut to its pre-war position as a multicultural center of international trade and finance.<sup>7</sup>

As part of the future-invested package, the state's eventual payback comes from profit on the sale of its many properties, as well as income generated by the site. The government also underwrote a public offering of shares in this company, a subscription that would capitalize the company to the tune of more than one thousand million dollars, making it the largest corporation by far in Lebanon (and one of the largest in the Middle Eastern region). In order to attract other investors, Hariri leveraged his financial reputation by himself investing in the project, as would virtually all of Hariri's family and his key business associates. The Lebanese government together with its Prime Minister would be invested in the publicly traded company, thus ensuring government oversight.

While at on the surface, it's easy to misunderstand Beirut's future-invented urbanism, or *Harirism*,<sup>8</sup> as representing the withering away of the state, or its reduction to simply the maintenance of order. At another level, what we are witnessing is not so much the dissolution of the state, but rather its reinforcement, it's strengthening. Although it is undoubtedly true that the state apparatuses have been circumvented and to a certain extent either dismantled or privatized, we need to extend our analysis a bit more to understand its complexity.<sup>9</sup>

In their book *Labor of Dionysus*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue "the neo-liberal project involved a substantial increase of the State in terms both of size and powers of intervention. The development of the neo-liberal State did not lead toward a 'thin' form of rule in the sense of the progressive dissipation



4

Figure 4: (Above) Solidère waterfront development.

Figure 5: (Left) 12-new high rises creating a new skyline for the city of Beirut. Photo-montage by Debraj at [www.skyscrapercity.com/May-23-2012](http://www.skyscrapercity.com/May-23-2012).

or disappearance of the State as a social actor.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, they argue, in spite of the neoliberal rhetoric of privatization and the thin state, “neoliberal practice moves in the opposite direction to reinforce and expand the State as a strong and autonomous subject that dominates the social field, in the realm of public spending as in that of judicial and police activity.”<sup>10</sup>

Today, most economists regard Lebanon’s once-vaunted privatization program contemptuously because the post-war reconstruction development financial



6

structure has downgraded the Lebanese treasury and corporate bonds to junk levels. The truth of the matter is that Solidère, still Lebanon’s largest company, has not truly privatized, and does not truly grow out of the free market. Instead, it epitomizes a complicated public/private arrangement, less partnership than Faustian pact. The private sector holds the public sector hostage as its private fortunes are equated with the government’s. Meanwhile the public sector does what it can to protect its investment and to damage control the activities of its business model and the world’s perceptions of the Lebanese marketplace.

Beirut is the only remaining City-State in the Mediterranean, as the Distinguished Professor of Risk Engineering at New York University, Nassim Nicholas Taleb points out so graphically:

the multilingual multi-religious, tolerant, obsessively mercantile, Mediterranean City-States have been swallowed by the modernistic nation-states. Alexandria was swallowed by the nation of Egypt, Smyrna by the nation of Turkey, Tesseloniki by Greece, Aleppo by Syria. But luckily Beirut swallowed Lebanon. Lebanon was small enough a state to let itself be colonized by the City-State of Beirut. The Mediterranean was the anti-statist’s dream; it was itself the infrastructure. The maritime city did not need large structural projects, like trains, roads, dams, airports, and bridges. Consider how free a ship is in the sea compared to a train on a track or a car on a road? (Antifragile: Things that Gain from Disorder commentary on Facebook)

Figure 6: Photos of before-and-after pairings of reconstruction, where *before* illustrates a Muslim and Christian family sharing water during the war and *after* shows the re-emergence of the cafe culture and pedestrian street.

It's a no wonder Solidère's future-invested urbanism would take form within a city-state post-war reconstruction effort, where the real Beirut exists only in the memory of a nation that suffered for years of war for power, identity, and existence. Theorist Saree Makdisi succinctly puts it: "In view of the (Solidère)reconstruction project...Beirut can be seen as a laboratory for the current and future elaborations of global capitalism."<sup>12</sup>

Neither public nor private, Solidère epitomizes a hybrid economic world whose viability is fundamentally dependent on huge infusions of state capital, public revenues that might otherwise serve other unsung sectors of the economy. Tacit city-state guarantees also encourage profligate fiscal irresponsibility, fraud, cronysms, monopolism, and excess expenditure that further draw down the state's meager resources, explode its national budget deficit, and atrophy the civil state.<sup>13</sup> For in a sense, according to Saree Makdisi:

The fluid and multidimensional "frontier" between Beirut and Solidère and the rest of the city represents nothing less than the frontier between space-time of a global postmodernity (fully appropriate to Beirut's privileged jet-set and their domestic servants brought here by the global labor market) and an antithetical modern space-time appropriate to the bulk of the population and still living with all the contradictions and unevenness of modernity. (Makdisi, 2002: 39)

Modern urban planning clearly demonstrates the central property economists refer to as the so-called *top-down effect*. Due the fast-paced future-invested development that Solidère clearly illustrates, top-down is usually irreversible, so mistakes tend to stick, whereas bottom-up is gradual and incremental, with creation and destruction along the way, though presumably with a positive slope.<sup>14</sup>

For the state to call Solidère a day would be to admit the failure of its economic centerpiece as well as the defeat of the very modernist social program that propelled the project in the first place. What's more, to leave Solidère incomplete—a ruin—would be to acknowledge the futility of Lebanon's dreams for social and economic reform, a reality which sadly this part of Solidère's story serves but to illustrate: therefore, Solidère's future is perhaps in the past. Interestingly to find there is an Arabic proverb to that effect: *He who does not have a past has no future*.

## ENDNOTES

1. In 2009, Beirut was being touted as one of the world's top tourist destinations with Solidère being referred to as a safe 24-hour zone with an ancient heart. See link: [www.naharnet.com/stories/en/102483](http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/102483) and also [www.theplan.it/2077-beirut-urbanistica](http://www.theplan.it/2077-beirut-urbanistica).
2. An acronym used by the development company's marketing materials for the French phrase that roughly translates to: *The Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut*.
3. Richard Becherer. *A Matter of Life and Debt: the Untold Costs of Rafiq Hariri's New Beirut*. The Journal of Architecture, Volume 10, No. 1, 2005.
4. The master plan main drivers for Beirut's City Center is described in Solidère's *Frontpiece* and also on their website: [www.Solidere.com/city-center/urban-overview](http://www.Solidere.com/city-center/urban-overview).
5. Ramzi Naja. *Architecture City Guide: Beirut*, 09 May 2013. ArchDaily. Accessed 28 Oct 2013. <http://www.archdaily.com/?p=368883Endnotes>.
6. A prominent left-wing activist, Samir Kassir was assassinated in June 2005 by a car bomb due to his voicing his opinions and questioning the state spending strategies. Kassir was an advocate of secular democracy in the Middle East. Many of his ideas as cited here can be found in his book: *Being Arab*, Verso, 2006.
7. Ibid, Samir Kassir, *Being Arab*, Verso, 2006.
8. *Harirism* is said to first used by Saree Makdisi, in his article: "Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidère." *Critical Inquiry* 23, No. 3 (Spring, 1997): 670-4.
9. Gary W. McDonogh and Marina Peterson. *Global Downtowns*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania, 2012, pp. 153-54.
10. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form*, Minneapolis, 1994, pp. 242, 245.
11. Ibid.
12. Saree Makdisi, "Beirut/Beirut," in Tamáss, ed. David, p. 36.
13. Richard Becherer is his timely and inciteful article: *A Matter of Life and Debt: the Untold Costs of Rafiq Hariri's New Beirut*, along with Saree Makdisi, discuss the unsung sectors of the economy being affected greatly.
14. Throughout his childhood, Nassim Nicholas Taleb experienced the Lebanese civil Wars, where his father was shot by militias for holding his ground and lived with the bullet in his shoulder. Taleb during a discussion about his book: *Antifragile: Things that Gain from Disorder* on his facebook refers to Lebanon's top-down development.