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Reconstructing and Deconstructing Beirut: Space, Memory and Lebanese Youth

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Editorial note

This Working Paper focuses exclusively on one of the linked cities – Beirut; exploring themes related to public space (B5) and agonistic urbanism (J3) through the lens of social memory.

Biographical note

Craig Larkin is a project research associate and fellow of the politics Department of the University of Exeter. He completed his PhD in Middle Eastern Studies at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter in 2009. His research interests include the politics of memory and identity; urban and social division and conflict; and processes of reconciliation and forgiveness.

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Reconstructing and Deconstructing Beirut: Space, Memory and Lebanese Youth

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Abstract

Throughout the centuries Beirut has had an endless capacity for re-invention and transformation, a consequence of migration, conquest, trade and internal conflict (khalaf, 2006). The last three decades have witnessed the city centre's violent self-destruction, its commercial resurrection and now most recently its national contestation, as oppositional political forces have sought to mobilise mass demonstrations and occupy strategic space. Amidst this stalled post-war recovery criticism has increasingly been levelled at reconstruction projects that have failed to acknowledge or integrate Lebanon's chequered past, or provide space for critical engagement, social inclusion and historic debate (Makdisi, 2006). Rather than merely adding to such memory discourses, this paper seeks to examine how Lebanese youth are negotiating Beirut's rehabilitation. How are the post-war generation imagining and spatially encountering their city? How does Beirut's rebuilt urban landscape, with its remnants of war, sites of displacement and transformed environs affect and inform identity, social interaction and perceptions of the past?

Keywords: Beirut, Ethnic conflict, social memory, urbanism, conflict management and reconstruction.

Introduction

The music evoked Beirut's Golden Age...Marwan's voice burned with anger. 'I hate the way they are demolishing the old centre and plonking down a new rootless, soulless ghost town with only a handful of old buildings preserved. Ignorant arrogant assholes! What do they think they're doing? We need to continue the country, not reinvent it. Every single fallen stone should come back to its place. We should rebuild the souks, restore the crumbling buildings – preserve the essence of a city that's been there at least five thousand years.'

The Last Migration, Jad el Hage, 2002.

Beirut's endless capacity for reinvention and transformation is best observed in its city centre. This pivotal district, has known as many labels and urban forms as it has done historic lives. The medieval *bourj*, Ottoman provincial port, French colonial 'Places des Canons', independent 'Martyrs' Square' (*Sahat al-Shuhada*) has finally

been succeeded by an ultra-modern global cityscape. This most recent re-imagining, a consequence of fifteen years of devastating civil violence and self-destruction (1975-1990), preceded by fifteen years of futuristic urban landscaping (1), has become both a symbol of Lebanon's national recovery and a source of its post-war critique.

This paper seeks to examine the contradictory impulses of remembering and forgetting, erasure and recovery in the context of a divided post-war city. I hope to contribute to the growing debate concerning Beirut's rehabilitation, both on the level of its physical urban reconstruction and its national collective re-imagining. Beyond discourses that problematise the city's social amnesia (Hanssen and Genberg, 2001) historical myopia (S.Makdisi, 1997), nostalgic longing (Khalaf, 2006) and management of cultural heritage (Fricke, 2005); there is a need to understand how the next generation of Lebanese are negotiating Beirut. How do post-war youth imagine and spatially encounter their city? How does Beirut's rebuilt urban landscape, with its remnants of war, sites of displacement and transformed environs affect and inform identity, social interaction and perceptions of the past?

In addressing these questions I will draw on a Henri Lefebvre's (1974/1991) concept of three interconnecting modes of socially produced space: the perceived, the conceived and the lived. The first space is a product of human design, urban planning and spatial organisation. The conceived by contrast contains the abstract, the imagined space, as well as the visual order, signs and codes of the city, dominated by political rulers, planners and economic interests. Finally lived space, describes how people inhabit everyday life, the way they create their city as 'users' through practices, images and symbols (Hanssen, 2005). This dialectic particularly between conceived and lived space, offers an insightful framework for examining how Lebanese youth navigate Beirut's contested sites and places.

My observations emerge from extensive anthropological field work, involving over a hundred in depth interviews with Lebanese high school and University students (2), conducted from June 2005 to June 2006 in the aftermath of the Independence *Intifada* movement. These youth, ranging between 15-22 years old, are a generation without personal recollection of the conflict but with vicarious memories passed on by their parents, communities and localities. The paper comprises three parts: the first will briefly consider Beirut's official reconstruction process; the second part examines how Lebanese youth conceive Down Town Beirut, in terms of war memory, heritage

and nostalgia. The final part will explore their physical engagement with the city, in terms of inclusion, participation and spatial practice.

Erase and Rewind: Remaking Beirut's 'Ancient City of the Future' (3)

Beirut's historic dynamism is invariably born out of Lebanon's troubled national imagining. A mountain refuge for religious minorities (Druze, Shi'a, Maronites); a forged compromise of colonial powers and indigenous elites; a republic of tribes and villages; a cosmopolitan mercantile power-sharing enclave; a playground for the rich; a battleground for religious and political ideologies; a fusion and combustion of the Arab East and the Christian West; an 'improbable, precarious, fragmented, shattered, torn' (4) nation. The dichotomies and visions appear as endless and complex as the Lebanese experience itself. Certainly it helps explain the ambiguous and contested place downtown Beirut has always held in the collective understanding.

Throughout Lebanon's turbulent series of civil wars, Beirut's central district was both the epicentre of its fiercest violence and the focus of the most concerted reconstruction plans. While ongoing militia battles transformed Beirut's streets, buildings and public markets into a scene from an apocalyptic nightmare; planners, architects and politicians debated visions of the city's post-war recovery (5). A national peace agreement (Ta'if Accord) finalised in 1990, was swiftly followed by the creation of Solidère (6), a private Lebanese company, founded by millionaire politician, Rafik Hariri, and exclusively entrusted with the reconstruction and development of Beirut's central district. Solidère's legal mandate was provided in 1991 through an amendment (law '117') to the 1977 planning legislation, controversially enabling the Company to expropriate land and property of existing owners, who were to receive shares in Solidère stock in return (7). Throughout the early nineties Solidère cleared the way for their ambitious master plan, by systematically razing the war damaged urban fabric, creating a virtual *tabula rasa* at the heart of the city. Lebanese academic Saree Makdisi suggests that by 1993, as much as 80% of all the structures in the Down town were damaged beyond repair, yet only a third of this destruction was war-inflicted (8). This campaign of structural erasure, coupled with the displacement and dispossession of an estimated 2,600 families, owners and tenants, earned Rafik Hariri the dubious legacy amongst some Beirutis, as *Ammar hajar wa dammar basher* (9) – he who built the stones and destroyed the people.

Solidère's thirty year 'Master plan' (1994-2024) incorporates 472 acres: a third of which is reclaimed land, 175 acres which are allocated for new developments such as a marina, hotels and global commerce, and only 54 acres (including 265 key structures) of which are part of Beirut's original urban fabric (10). This partially completed project, envisions a global, tourist friendly, cosmopolitan Beirut, which draws on the Lebanese traditions of commerce, pluralism and innovation. Yet Solidère's concept of 'Beirut reborn', as a veritable 'layered city of memory' in which 'the past informs the future' (11) appears remarkably selective in the history it reproduces and the memory it evokes. Ancient Beirut is celebrated through the recent excavation and display of Roman baths, *Cardo Maximus* (12) and Canaanite Tell, while a 'heritage trail' weaves from manicured Mosques and Churches, to beautifully restored Ottoman buildings and French colonial promenades. Consequently the remnants of a traumatic and debilitating violent struggle have all but been erased, and replaced instead with an appeal to a more glorious, illustrious and heroic past.

Solidère's post-war reconstruction of Beirut has generated considerable public debate, academic criticism and civic activism, aimed at confronting political nepotism, challenging models of urban planning and reclaiming Beirut lost and ever endangered heritage. This first critical discourse which focuses on political corruption, invariably involves the role and influence of former Lebanese Prime Minister and leading Solidère shareholder, Rafik al-Hariri. Hariri's ascendancy to political office in 1992, which coincided with Solidère's reconstruction project, raised many questions over a possible conflict of private and public interests. These fears were further substantiated by government exemptions for Solidère totalling \$1 billion (13); the passing of new legislation to aid commercial exploitation of national resources (Beirut's coast line) (14) and the proliferation of legal suits by original tenants and landowners accusing Solidère of bribing judges, undervaluing shares and intimidating existing property holders (15). Saree Makdisi, terms the process 'Harirism' (16), the decisive withering of the State and common public space and the supremacy of private commercial interest and control. He comments,

'For, to be sure, 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 process defined by the same discourse' (Harirism).

Such sentiments are indeed difficult to dispute, given that while Lebanon's national debt rocketed from \$1.5 billion in 1992 to a colossal 32 billion in 2003, Hariri's personal fortune is estimated to have tripled during the same period. Resistance to Solidère's coercive power has most visibly taken the form of a 'Stop Solidère' campaign, headed by a local lawyer Muhammad Mugarby, who seeks a return of Beirut's national centre to its original landowners. This group have sought to confront Solidère through legal cases; public discussions and the use of giant posters in sites of ongoing controversy, such as St. Georges Hotel and Beach Club, urging the general public to 'Stop Solidère'.

The second critical discourse of Beirut's post-war reconstruction has emerged around the broader architectural debate concerning global urbanism and use of public space in cities (Boyer, 1993, Madanipour, 2000). Planners and urban theorists have increasingly questioned the neo-liberal model, in which city space becomes an arena for market orientated economic growth and elite consumption practices, thus stripping the public sphere of its social and political dimension. Local Lebanese architects, such as Hashim Sarkis have similarly warned against Solidère's dangerous trend towards privatization, commodification and commercialization of Beirut's rebuilt centre (17). His concerns are echoed by newly emerging civil society groups, NGO's and activists such as Archis, Partizan public, Beirutstudio, who seek to devise creative responses and forge new spaces to help unite Lebanon's fragmented society. These groups organised an international workshop in August 2008, entitled 'Rescripting Beirut', which sought to draw together architects, designers, urbanists and sociologists, in an 'alternative exploration of a city lacking in spatial history but rich in untold narratives' (18).

The final and perhaps most pervasive critique of Solidère's reconstruction project has been the emergence of memory initiatives aimed at confronting a perceived culture of forgetfulness, and seeking instead to preserve Beirut's war torn fabric and recover local histories and communal narratives. This 'heritage crusade' (Khalaf, 2006:35) based on nostalgic longings and impulsive reaction to the erosion of familiar landmarks and icons, has resulted in a variety of responses, such as environmental advocacy groups, workshops on post-war reconstruction, story-telling and the increase in novels and autobiographies recalling past times, places and experiences.

Specific interventions include Bernard Khoury's plans to renovate a disused central Beirut theatre (19), preserving its bullet holes and crumbling plaster as symbol of 'the city's tempestuous political history' (20). Studio Beirut's, 'The Lost Room' project, alternatively offers a multi-media memorial, highlighting city specific memories and personal narratives of random Beiruti citizens (21). Also the activist group, Abrand, have sought to challenge the repackaging of Lebanese heritage and tradition, through subversive posters which mock the process of global branding. One image shows the familiar Beirut Corniche promenade, which serves as a public space for evening walks, exercise and socialising, transformed into an elite exclusive setting. Rather than a street vendor selling cheap *Kaake* (a bread snack) from his three wheeled wooden cart, instead it covered with a pristine white table-cloth, adorned with vintage wines and spirits and surrounded by Lebanese elegantly dressed in formal evening attire. The criticism is implicitly aimed towards the gentrification of Lebanese public space. A second poster displays a traditional Lebanese dish of stuffed aubergine '*Koussa Mehchi*', transformed and masqueraded as Japanese Sushi, complete with chopsticks, carved vegetables and a wooden serving dish. This poster is a veiled warning against Lebanon losing its very soul, identity and cultural uniqueness, in its desire to commoditise and market its heritage.

These critical discourses undoubtedly inform the Lebanese general public's response to Beirut's reconstruction, yet it is questionable whether they fully represent or reveal the complexity of this engagement. Beyond the politicised debates of Lebanon's privileged elites and cultural producers, I want to turn to the perceptions of Lebanese youth, in how they are conceiving Beirut.

(Re)imagining the centre: war memory, heritage and nostalgia

Amongst the Lebanese youth I interviewed, Beirut's reconstructed Down Town exists more as a site of imaginative and emotive investment, rather than a place of actual lived experience. Few of the hundred high school and university students, drawn from 10 different educational institutions, regularly frequent the commercial district or are familiar with its refurbished streets, yet for each, the centre still evokes family stories, distant memories, and the hopes and anxieties of Lebanon's national future. As Beirut based journalist, Annia Ciezadlo, affirms, the Down Town, 'is where all the fears and fantasies about this little country have always converged' (22).

For many students, Beirut's vacant centre represents not only a physical symbol of Lebanon's lost past, but a blank screen on which diverse memories and narratives can be projected. Diana, a 20 year old student from the Lebanese American University (LAU) explains, "the Down town always reminded us of our loss, it was like having a city without a soul...interestingly I don't even remember what it used to be like, but I know that people believe in this area" (23). For Diana, absence is equated with personal loss and spiritless existence; although disconnected to the past visually, she is united through imaginative investment and the inspirational faith of others. Mona, a 16 year old from *Mansourieh*, instead focuses on her family's commercial property destroyed by militia fighting in central Beirut. The buildings she recalls is part of her own effaced past, a site of displacement, demolished and rebuilt by Solidère, yet perpetually existing in her mind as a ruined shell, with fire charred windows, graffiti strewn walls and collapsed floors (24). Other students recount parents and grandparents' nostalgic tales of Beirut's pre-war days of markets (*souks*), cafes and popular entertainment; romanticised tales of a cosmopolitan meeting place for all religions and every class. In the absence of actual lived experience, these narrative accounts form part of the re-imagining process, providing the next generation with a comparative framework in which to critique Solidère's contemporary work.

For youth who have grown up along side Beirut's reconstruction project it is the very act of transformation itself, which has raised the spectre of war and stirred debate over issues such as memory, history and architectural vision. Just as the hostile destruction of buildings can be an attempt to obliterate the past, rebuilding on top of ruins can be an attempt to negate tragic memory. Adrian Forty refers to this process as *Counter-Iconoclasm*, which involves 'remaking something in order to forget what its absence signified' (1999:10). For 17 year old Hanan (25), from *Ras Beirut* this may have been the intention of Solidère; to structurally cleanse all memory of the civil violence from the centre, but it has not been the consequence:

"Down Town is always the main focus of the past, because it was transformed and they always show you how it was and what it's like now...every time we are in the down-town, we remember the war, we remember the past and some places still look the same".

In Hanan's mind Beirut's rehabilitation is invariably tied to its war time destruction; the centre-ville fuses parallel time frames, the new reality invoking and recalling the

previous degradation. Indeed juxtaposed images of the Down- town 'before and after', have flooded the public domain, in the form of photographic anthologies, television programmes, exhibitions and numerous books.

Despite this mnemonic connection to Beirut's former degradation, students remain largely divided over how the visual traces of conflict should be incorporated with the city's rebuilt form. Some favour total erasure, believing forgetfulness both to be a remedy for the trauma and suffering of war and the only guarantee for a peaceful future co-existence. In the words of 17 year old Rima, "Perhaps the answer is amnesia, if everyone forgets what happened and then they move on" (26). Other students are less comfortable with Beirut's polished and highly selective historical narrative reflected in its showcase centre which abnegates the lived experience of conflict. As Yasmine, an AUB student from *Mar Elias* suggests, "the redevelopment involved a covering or hiding of the memory of war, and in this sense its unreal. You can't just talk of Romans and Phoenicians and our great heritage, without mentioning about militias, kidnapping and bombs" (27). Historian, David Lowenthal explains this tension, as the danger of history with its claim to truth, being supplanted by heritage, and its 'prejudiced pride in the past.' (1998:5-24) In Beirut perhaps this imbalance can be addressed through a war museum, a national memorial, the preservation of 'warchitecture' or the opening of the long-awaited 'garden of forgiveness' (*hadiqat al-Samah*). Nevertheless, many Lebanese youth remain unconvinced of the positive didactic function of 'Negative heritage' (Meskell, 2002) instead warning of the danger of memorialising shame, pain and victimisation. They appear to favour less visible, more ambiguous forms of remembrance, such as the bullet scarred 'Martyrs memorial' Statue, situated in the city's central square. The disfigured sculpture, originally a memorial to those killed in the struggle for Independence from Ottoman rule, now has become an unintentional national emblem, capturing both the shared suffering of conflict and yet the resilience and endurance, endemic of the Lebanese spirit. As one student explains, its significance lies in its inclusive ambiguity, which enables 'everyone to imagine their own story' and allows for multiple interpretations of the war.

'Going Down Town': Beirut as lived experience

Moving now from how Beirut's central district is conceived and imagined to how it is daily experienced and spatially encountered, it is helpful to explore the themes of inclusion and exclusion, spectacle and engagement.

I. Inclusion/Exclusion

For a majority of Lebanese students, Beirut's down town remains distant and 'out of place', cut off from the realities of contemporary society. This distance is experienced and understood on multiple levels. Firstly, there is the down town's spatial dislocation, a consequence of urban planning choices which have deliberately isolated and separated the centre from its neighbouring environs. This has been achieved through the construction of a series of vast car parks and motorways which virtually encircle and dissect the centre from the periphery. Secondly, greater space has been created through levelling densely populated residential neighbourhoods such as *Zokak el Blatt* and *Wadi Abou Jamil*, part of the traditional urban centre and reshaping the topography with Levantine style office blocks, health spas and prohibitively expensive designer flats and apartments. Finally, separation is made visible through the Down town's ultra modern and economically exclusive cityscape, which sharply contrasts the largely ignored, ever expanding urban Shia sprawls of *Dahiyya* in South Beirut and the deprived and needy Eastern districts of *Nabaa* and *Karantina*.

Students expressed multiple reasons for their perceived exclusion from the centre, reflecting political, economic and religious factors:

"It's good, but it should be more national, all of Lebanon or none...it's not national just for a certain religion" (Alaa 17, *Haret Harek*); "It represents a Westernized Lebanon" (Tamara, 17 *Moseitybe*); "The centre is beautiful but it doesn't represent Lebanon, perhaps the Gulf" (Pierre 20, *Zhgarta*); "Its cosmopolitan, perhaps it represents Rafik Hariri, it's mostly elitist and cosmopolitan" (Rafik 21, West Beirut).

While these responses suggest underlying prejudices and bias, they also reflect a common perception that Solidère has failed to reconstruct an inclusive centre; a place where all can identify in a new social, national and global context. The overarching impression remains that the centre has been turned into a playground for rich Gulf Arab tourists and an elite privileged class, rather than a meeting place for Lebanon's diverse population. An ethos of consumerism may encourage unity across both political and religious divides, but it fails to adequately engage or diffuse recurring sectarian tensions. As Sune Haugbolle, commenting on Lebanon's recent

spatial transformations affirms, 'a public space dedicated to reconnecting a divided population through expensive franchises offers a vision of pacification of conflicts, not one of solutions' (2006: 4).

Yet for some youth, this separation is the inherent attraction and allure of the Down Town, it represents a different world; 'Lebanon upgraded' in the words of LAU student Angela. To Maha, a LU graduate originally from *Kefraya* in the *Bekaa*, it embodies the hope and inspiration for an ordered and more stable future: "I love Down Town, I always go there. I wish all Lebanon could be like it...If you go to *Dahiyya* buildings are everywhere, there is no structure or order. Down town is planned and we don't have urban planning like this in any other area of Lebanon" (28).

For Tony, a Maronite Christian from *Keserwan*, Beirut's centre-ville, is not just a symbol of order and unity, it is a place of liberation and awakening. A refuge from the restrictions, sectarian demarcation and narrow confessionalism, which he believes still marks some Lebanese neighbourhoods and streets. Instead the Down town offers him an escape; a place where he can make Muslim friends, experience life and lose himself amidst the anonymity of a cosmopolitan crowd. He recounts,

"When I worked in the Down Town restaurant *al-Balade*- this was my real opportunity. I got to meet Muslim Arabs and people from the Gulf. I worked there for 3 years and will never forget the experience...Down Town Beirut is more cosmopolitan. You cannot identify the religion of the shop owners. It's a business area and Lebanese meet on business; they can join together on business" (29).

Beyond contradictory accounts that either celebrate the Down Town's new public spaces or berate its exclusive logic and artificial design are discourses which question the notion of a 'rehabilitated centre'. For many students, Beirut has multiple informal 'counterpublics' (30), which emerged during the years of civil conflict and continue to provide unique urban subcultures; reproducing cities within a city. One such district is Hamra, 'the real and true Down Town Beirut', according to one Lebanese University student. Hamra is home to the prestigious American University of Beirut (AUB); a variety of theatres and cultural centres; numerous bookshops and infamous coffee houses where rebellions, political parties and ideologies were born. This intellectual and cultural hub, despite years of neglect and degradation, remains a popular

meeting place for students from all backgrounds –regardless of class, sect or political affiliation. Although Hamra has increasingly become subject to gentrifying impulses, with global chains and brands replacing local cafes such as the Modco (2003 – Vero Moda) and the Horse-shoe (2007 – Costa Coffee), it still remains in the words of Diana, a 21 year old AUB student, “one of the most authentic districts in Beirut. It is multi-faceted and due to the mixed nature of its residents there is more space for discussion and free expression” (31). The emergence of civil society groups, reconciliation centres and artistic communities in Hamra, owes not only to the district’s liberal tradition but is a consequence of the constraining visions inscribed into Beirut’s Down Town. Unlike the highly regulated Down Town, Hamra’s lack of urban planning and official governance has enabled the development of a cosmopolitan, creative environ, which allows greater room for contested post-war visions and plural identities.

II. Spectacle vs. Participatory City

‘This new realm is a city of simulations, television city, the city as theme park...Here is urban renewal with a sinister twist, an architecture of deception which, in its happy-face familiarity, constantly distances itself from the most fundamental realities. The architecture of this city is almost purely semiotic, playing the game of grafted signification, theme-park building. Whether it represents generic historicity or generic modernity, such design is based in the same calculus as advertising, the idea of pure imageability, oblivious to the real needs and traditions of those who inhabit it’ (32).

Michael Sorkin, 1992.

Micheal Sorkin’s urbanist critique of the modern Spectacle city: ‘a city of simulations’ adorned with ‘architecture of deception’ and ‘theme-park buildings’ finds clear resonance in the experience of Beiruti youth. Few believe themselves to be little more than observers, mere spectators in a city centre designed for tourism and global interests rather than local considerations and communal needs. For 17 year old Ibrahim, the superficiality and façade, begins with the architecture, “It’s just a show, just buildings, what’s being built on the inside of Lebanon, nothing” (33). Lebanese academic, Saree Makdisi, is similarly critical of Solidère’s obsession with preserving the appearance of authenticity, the sense of belonging, the spectacle of history rather than acknowledging and engaging with the actual lived past. He concludes, ‘the spectacle here has assumed for itself, and hence has eliminated, the

very function of time; it has taken on tasks and duties of history: of a history cleansed not merely of pain, but of all kinds of other feelings as well; in short it has produced a prosthetic history. In their place, new prosthetic, feelings will be engineered to take the place of the old; new feelings to accompany the sense of spectacular history' (2006: 212).

Yasser (34), a third year university student, from Bourj al-Brajneh echoes the same sense of numbness and disconnection he experiences with Beirut's artificial centre:

"They are rebuilding a fake Lebanon...its like Disneyland. Down Town is fake in many ways. First the building style is not Lebanese, off course it's reconstructed but in a way that is very European (I haven't been to Europe, but my European friends told me that) and the term Disneyland was given by a French friend of mine, not me...They built it on top of ruins and how can a Lebanese working man afford a cup of coffee there...People going there are acting fake".

Interestingly Yasser refers not only to a falseness of architectural style, but an insincerity of those who inhabit that particular space. He implies that in creating a 'Disneyland', Solidère have not merely denied Beirut's indigenous history but have encouraged inhabitants to indulge escapist fantasies. For Yasser, superficiality is expressed most clearly in the down town's rampant consumerism, as elite fashion boutiques, exclusive restaurants and designer outlets dominate the main streets and central Etoile district; peering out conspicuously from behind Ottoman facades.

The limitations of Beirut's spectacle city centre are further underscored by students, who criticise the new Down Town for providing little 'neutral' space for young people to meet, socialise or engage with one another. Rami (35), a student of AUB from Kesrewan, elucidates, "what it [the Centre] fails to be (maybe that will change when the Souks re-open) is a real meeting place...somewhere of common culture. We need more parks, places to meet, don't build more churches or mosques which are very valuable, but they are in a sense divisive, why not build recreational facilities. We need to create bridging not bonding". As this student eloquently argues, Beirut's celebration of the Holy Triune: Mosque, Church and Virgin-Megastore, united on Martyr's Square, demonstrates a dominance of the religious and commercial over shared public and social space. This failure to provide a new national space that could bridge existing sectarian divisions, or at least be a meeting place for a

multiplicity of ideas, remembrances and experiences, may indeed be rebuilt Beirut's most serious flaw. Although Solidère's Master plan does incorporate open green spaces and parks, these are often located encircling archaeological ruins and official State buildings (Grand Serail- the Government Palace) which restricts both their use and public access. Similarly, despite the almost complete refurbishment of the traditional Beirut Souks, many Lebanese youth remain sceptical, as to whether they will be 'open spaces for all communities and classes' or simply new forms of gentrified exclusive shopping malls.

The question persists however, to what extent and under what conditions can public spaces live up to such grand and totalizing demands – how can Beirut's Down Town adequately diffuse Lebanon's post-war divides? These questions are not easily answered, but what remains evident from interviews with Lebanese youth, is that there exists a nostalgic longing for a dynamic centre inclusive of class, sect and political allegiance; freely accessible and embracing Lebanon's tensions and contradictions. This desire is made all the more salient, given the fact that Beirut is more religiously segregated, in terms of residency and educational patterns, than ever before (Nasr, 2003; Hanf, 2003; Khalaf, 2006). The militia checkpoints and physical boundaries may have vanished but they have been replaced with subtler signs and codes: flags, graffiti, banners and symbols that continue to impact how Lebanese youth perceive themselves, distinguish others and inhabit their spatial surroundings. This a dynamic kaleidoscope of changing social and identity markers: 'no-go areas', 'confrontation points' and 'places/spaces of belonging and exclusion'; a 'geography of fear' sustained not by artificial barriers but by 'the psychology of dread, hostile bonding and ideologies of enmity' (Khalaf, 2006:122). Political, religious, economic and family disputes can all too quickly become territorialised - resulting in spatial contestation, blockades and violence; impacting how citizens negotiate or imagine Beirut's streets and neighbourhoods. As Yasmine (36), a final year Law student confides: "On a recent bus journey I passed images of Nasrallah, Berri, Aoun, Jumblatt, Hariri. Each photo marked confessional boundaries; communities are defined by the boundaries and markings on their walls...the posters carry memories of war and identity, they make me feel different, I want to feel myself".

Beirut's 'spectacle' Down Town has more recently been challenged as part of a dramatic process of political confrontation. This has been most clearly observed in the mass demonstrations surrounding the 'Independence *Intifada*' of Spring 2005 in which Beirut's centre-ville became a screen for projecting a new Lebanon: free,

unified, modern and anti-Syrian. This was then followed by the Hizb'allah led Opposition's (*Mu'arada*) counter-demonstrations and 18 month sit-in protest (Dec. 2006-May 2008) and encampment of the commercial centre; which sought to destabilise the Western backed government and give voice to an alternate Lebanese vision. There are various reading and interpretations of these climatic events but three significant themes are worth highlighting.

First, the *Intifada'* has been celebrated by some commentators as the return of both civic participation and political mobilisation to Beirut's centre-ville. Samir Khalaf optimistically hails the participation of a new generation of Lebanese youth 'receiving their own overdue tutelage in national character-building.'(2006:17) This resonates with stories and tales of many students, who recounted 'March 14th' experiences which linked patriotic unity with physical occupation of the centre. Rola (37), a university student, originally from the Metn Mountains, captures this ebullient mood, "I'm Lebanese and proud to be Lebanese, perhaps I've become even more recently. I loved it when we went to the manifestation; I felt that Lebanon was really speaking, that I had a certain role, that I can bring change. I can make something. I went to all the parades, I was so into it and I still have my Lebanese flag on my balcony". In this instance, the *Intifada'* functions as a vehicle for empowerment; an opportunity for Lebanese youth to reclaim their voice, their role in society and consequently their city centre.

A rather more critical analysis of the *Intifada'* suggests that Beirut's Down Town, rather than being reclaimed by the people, was instead hijacked by political parties and leaders – making it a public stage for performing politics and contesting the Lebanese nation, both locally and through the medium of global media. Amongst a disillusioned and sceptical youth, the Down Town's transformation as an opportune stage and setting for political power games further undermines its position as a shared public space for reconciliation. A 'Garden of Forgiveness' may be located at the heart of the city centre, yet there is little room for such encounters given the current climate of political tension and mistrust.

Finally, some commentators, hail the emergence of Lebanon's socially and politically marginalised groups, in particular Shi'a Hizb'Allah, who through their physical encampment and blockade of the centre, managed to challenge the viability of the Lebanese government and the hegemony of Solidère's consumer cityscape. Through disrupting the political economy, by turning an elitist commercial centre into

a site of popular protest and dissent, these groups subverted and distorted the neo-liberal 'spectacle city' and posed questions concerning Beirut's national imagining. It remains to be seen what lasting impact this form of resistance will have on the public perception of the centre. Should it be understood and interpreted as a temporary aberration or will it prove to be symbolic rupture invoking new forms of engagement and participation from citizens previously marginalised from the city centre.

Conclusions

Although Beirut's weaknesses in reconstruction may be likened to the plight of many modern global cities, the consequences are rather more troubling. The rehabilitated centre both embodies and extenuates Lebanon's post-war failings: inequality, corruption and segregation. While full national recovery will ultimately depend on solving intractable issues such as decommissioning Hizb'Allah, political power-sharing arrangements, electoral boundaries, the patronage system, and defining borders with Israel and relations with Syria. Lasting peace-building and reconciliation necessitates the recovery of public spheres and common spaces that encourages new forms of engagement and encounter. For Beirut's centre to contribute to this process, it will involve the emergence of new forms of urban resistance, civic participation and multiple and complex negotiations with the historic past – thus challenging Solidère's hegemonic vision and upholding Lebanon's fragile social equilibrium. The next generation of Lebanese recognise that national reconstruction requires a rebuilt fabric and collective remembrance which balances narratives of loss and suffering alongside those of recovery and redemption.

Notes

1. Concerning the reconstruction of Beirut, see Samir Khalaf (2006) *The heart of Beirut- Reclaiming the bourj*; Peter Rowe and Hashim Sarkis (1998) *Projecting Beirut: Episodes in the Construction and Reconstruction of a Modern City*; Angus Gavin and Ramez Maluf (1996) *Beirut Reborn*; Samir Khalaf and Philip Khoury (1993) *Recovering Beirut: Urban Design and Post-War Reconstruction* and Friedrich Ragette (1983), *Beirut of Tomorrow: Planning for Reconstruction*.

2. Access to Lebanese schools and students was granted through personal contacts with teachers and headmasters, and with the help of conflict resolution centres and local civil activists. These included activists involved with the Centre for Conflict Resolution and Peace-

building (CCRP) based in Hamra, Beirut and '*Umam Documentation and Research*' based in *Haret Harek, Dahiyya*. Student interviews were semi-structured and open-ended; allowing themes and stories to emerge naturally; Arabic and English was used interchangeably depending on the context and fluency of the student. High school students were interviewed on school grounds, while university students were given freedom to choose a place that they felt most comfortable with.

3. Beirut: Ancient City of the future' is a motto used in Solidère's promotional literature.

4. These bracketed expressions are all titles of books and articles written on Lebanon. See for example Hudson (1968), Gordon (1980) and Picard (1996).

5. These include 1977 APUR, 1983, 1986, 1991.

6. Solidère is a Lebanese development company founded by Rafik Hariri in 1994 and in charge of planning and redeveloping Beirut's Centre-ville after the devastation of war. Its thirty year Master Plan (1994-2024) focuses on reconstructing Beirut as a global tourist commercial centre, replete with beautifully restored Churches and Mosques, gardens and Roman ruins. For more details see the website: <http://www.solidere.com.lb> (accessed 1 May 2008). For critiques of Solidère see Saree Makdisi (1997, 2006), Hanssen and Genberg (2001), Nagel (2000, 2002) and Fricke (2005).

7. This law was defended on the basis that post-war reconstruction would be impossible due to the displacement, fragmentation and dispossession that afflicted Beirut's down town. In 1991 nearly 100,000 claimants competed for legal priority over a mere 1,630 parcels of land (Stewart, 1996:487). Solidère take-over resulted in original landholders receiving 65% of the total number of Solidère shares valued at \$1.2 billion, while the remaining shares were sold to the Lebanese public. For further details on this process see Reinould Leenders (2007) 'Divided We Rule: Reconstruction, Institution Building and Corruption in post-war Lebanon'.

8. Saree Makdisi, 'Laying Claim to Beirut: Reconstruction, Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidere,' *Critical Inquiry* 23 (1997): 674.

9. Cited by Annia Ciezadlo in the article 'Sect symbols' for the digital magazine *The Nation*, <http://thenation.com/doc/20070305/ciezadlo> (accessed 2 May 2008)

10. See Solidère's website for complete statistical analysis: <http://www.solidere.com> (accessed 2 May 2008)

11. Phrases and slogans from Solidère's original master plan.

12. A Roman colonnaded road that originally would have dissected the city.
13. See Lysandra Ohrstrom 'Solidere: "Vigilantism under color of law"', *The Daily Star*, 8/6/2007.
14. Makdisi, *Laying claim to Beirut*, 1997:696.
15. See Zayan Khalil, 'Angry Property Owners Accuse Solidere of Bribing Judges' *The Daily Star*, 10/15/1999.
16. Makdisi, *Laying claim to Beirut*, 1997:698.
17. Peter Rowe and Hashim Sarkis (eds.), *Projecting Beirut: Episodes in the Construction and Reconstruction of a Modern City* (Munich and New York: Prestel Publishing, 1998).
18. This workshop had to be cancelled due to the volatile political situation that enveloped Lebanon during the summer of 2008.
19. This theatre officially known as the Beirut City Centre building is more commonly known by the terms the 'Bubble dome', the 'Blob' and the 'Egg'.
20. Wilson-Goldie, 'Beirut's icon of modernist architecture set to be revamped', *Daily Star*, 2/7/2004.
21. See webpage: <http://studiobeirut.org/thelostroom/> (accessed 1 September 2008)
22. Annia Ciezadlo in the article 'Sect symbols' for the digital magazine **The Nation**, <http://thenation.com/doc/20070305/ciezadlo> (accessed 1 May 2008)
23. Interview conducted on the 1st November 2005.
24. Mixed group interview conducted on the 15th February 2006. The group comprised three classmates, 2 female and 1 male from a Druze, Maronite and Sunni religious background.
25. This quote from Hanan was taken during a group interview conducted amongst four high school girls on the 12th May 2006.
26. Interview conducted on the 6th December 2005.

27. Interview conducted on the 19th September 2005 in Café de Prague, just off Hamra Street.

28. Interview conducted on the 10th October 2005.

29. Interview conducted on the 13th October 2005.

30. Nancy Fraser (1990: 67) helpfully defines Counterpublics as 'Parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses...Counterpublics emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, they help expand discursive space.'

31. Interview conducted on the 1st November 2005.

32. Michael Sorkin, 'See you in Disneyland' in *Variations on a Theme Park*, (ed.) M. Sorkin (New York: The Noonday Press, 1992) p.xii-xiii.

33. This quote from Ibrahim was taken from a mixed group interview conducted on the 11th May 2006. The group consisted of five classmates, 2 female and 3 male from Sunni and Christian confessional backgrounds.

34. Interview conducted on the 11th October 2005.

35. Interview conducted on the 2nd November 2005.

36. Interview conducted on 19th September 2005 in Café de Prague, just off Hamra Street.

37. Interview conducted on 2nd March 2006.

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