

# The quest of Beirut's public spaces, analysis of Beirut Central District

Mariam Eissa

Ph.D. Candidate, School of Architecture, University of Minho

## **Abstract:**

This paper presents an analysis of the renovation of the public space in Beirut done by Solidere -The company in charge of planning and redeveloping Beirut Central District- after the civil war. The aims of this paper are to identify -by using a **descriptive research** approach- what are the modification that went into the city's public spaces to reach their current form and how did the residents react to those measurements. The methods of the analysis will use the critical overview, starts by explaining the development of Beirut urban forms, then discuss the renovation methods adopted by Solidere, and conclude with the correlations between the final form of the public spaces and the social reception of the modification renovation process. This article will benefit the researchers and policymakers determine the expected social results of public spaces renovation in cases that simulate the Beirut case.

**Keywords:** Public space renovation, Beirut central district, redevelopment, post-war construction.

## **Introduction:**

The singularity about the Lebanese case is that the city went through many different conflicts and civil wars, which were the reasons to go through rebuilding and rehabilitation, done by many public and private organizations and governance.

The main and direct reason for Beirut deterioration, especially in the traditional city's centre, was the civil war between 1975-1990, and by the end of the war, the actions towards the rebuilding and the preserving of the heritage were the major concerns of the politicians, architects, and urbanists. Which started discussions of the definition of the heritage and the urban actions and legislations mandatory for achieving formation for the rebuilding which fits with Beirut urban specifications.

According to (Al-Harithy, 2008), there is three interpretation for the recovery of monuments in Beirut, the first one is religious, to investigate the spiritual value of the monument, the second is the archaeological questioning the outcome of the forthcoming rebuilding project and the danger it could impulse on the history of the sites, the last one is the architectural, where questioning the value of architectural traditional style of the building.

## **The Case of Beirut:**

The traditional city centre in Beirut is located on the city seaside, owing to the coastal emergence of the city, the war started as a tension between the Christian side and the Muslim and their Palestinian allies, as a result of the civil war, the city's centre suffered a lot of destruction including the foundress of the city's dividing green line, which is the separating boundaries of the city to two sides to inhabit both fighting parties while keeping the centre as an isolated service area for both. (Al-Taweel, 2015) (Yassin, 2011). Figure (1).

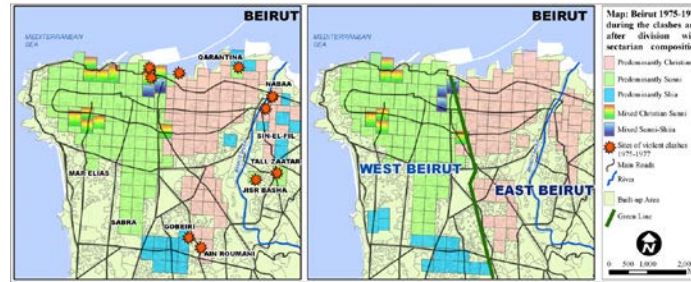


Figure 1. Beirut at war and division (based on news reports) (Yassin, 2011).

Due to the separation, many changes in the population of the inhabitations of the city have been made, later statistics showed the results of these changes, for example, the number of Christians in West Beirut dropped from 30-40% to 5%, while the Muslim population went from 4-10% to less than 1% and in eastern suburbs from 40% to 5% in 1989. (Yassin, 2011).

This war reshaped the morphologies of the city urban form, and by 1993 the government agreed to rebuild the city centre as a commercial and touristic area, the model set for the reconstruction of the destroyed city's centre assumed economic growth and connecting the city to the world new modern liberal system will help gain the peace and safety need at the end of the war. (Yassin, 2011).

An area of 191 hectares was granted to the new private real estate company of Solidere, an acronym of the Lebanese company for the development and reconstruction of Beirut Central District, a company that was set up for rebuilding the city centre, depending on the funding of the investors with a little help by the government, offering 50% of the land ownership to the previous owner of the area and 50% owned by Solidere itself. (Yassin, 2011). The approach of the company followed the master plan of 1991, which took a hybrid approach towards rebuilding the city, which imposed destroying many buildings, conversion of functions, and demolishing sites including the souks. (Al-Harithy, 2008).

The thirty-year 'Master plan' (1994-2024) for the rehabilitation (Larkin, 2009), contained many building conditions set by the government decree number. 4830, including:

1. Define the central district of Beirut with clear borderlines with the sea line from the north to Fakher Aldeen street to the west, Fouad Shihab avenue to the south, and Gorge Hadad street to the east.
2. Divide the area into ten regulatory sectors as a base for interpretation of the suggested primitive design to the foundation and conditions of the land use. These conditions include all urban restrictions from the required function and urban format in each sector, up to the preserving process for the heritage building and facades.
3. These conditions will replace the one in use by the time of the rehabilitation and will continue to be the one in the application for the central district.
4. Legislations for archaeological excavations were implemented in the central district by the general directorate of archaeology to ensure the announcement of any executive operation and its aim, duration, workload, costs, and funding.



Figure 2. The initial proposal of the central district showing the suggested peninsula (Angus & Maluf 1996) (Al-Taweel, 2015)

Figure 3. The Tanzimat city, Beirut Central district in 1920 showing the early modernization of the city centre by the Ottomans. (Saliba, 2013)

5. The conditions adopted various stature for the buildings in the preserving district, including historical or architectural heritage buildings and the ones with distinctive architectural character, also adopted suggested procedures for the rehabilitation of these buildings.
6. As for new buildings, the plan regulates many terms and controls for the commercial city centre, which reckon on setting the urban relation between buildings as strictly as possible.
7. As for the public spaces, the limitation, and regulations of the design of the public space relied on respecting the buffer zone of each historical building and consider protecting the old landscape of the city.
8. Redesign of the Shouhada (Martyrs) Square, as a public space open towards the sea without clear borderlines, and to be considered as the sea gate of the city.
9. The addition of an artificial peninsula on the sea line of the central district, as a high luxury area connected with bridges to the city, which later was changed to implement a full artificial section connected directly with the city and used as an entertainment and touristic area of Beirut. (Al-Taweel, 2015). Figure (2).

The transformation of Beirut city's centre went through three stages of modernization,

**The Early modernity**, 1920-1950, where the city centre and its peripheries formed continuous spatial entity with little to no breaks in the urban structure, where the differentiation of the building is by land use, where the old fabric of the centre was being modified to assemble late Ottoman to French urban silhouette. (Saliba, 2013). Figure (3).

**The high modernity**, 1943-1975 this stage had two major modifications, the zoning law (N.70, Decree 6285), which listed ten zoning areas with gradual densities from the historical centre outwards, the second is the construction of the city’s inner ring road around the business district which created an interval between the city centre and its surroundings. (Saliba, 2013).

**Late Modernity:** 1980-1990s, starting with the building of avenue Georges Haddad to Fakhreddine street, which is used as physical boundaries to the post-war rebuilding area. Which caused two urban planning formations to arise side by side, on the city centre The Solidere company designed a master plan subsidize by the stockholder’s intentions to go with integrated urban conservation strategy, while on the surrounding of the city centre it’s still forming the strategy of the ten zoning areas, that implemented high-rise residential building in the places of late Ottoman and French Mandate structures. (Saliba, 2013). Figure (4).



*Figure 4. Beirut Central District’s detailed master plan contrasts with the periphery, still regulated by outdated zoning legislation. Source: Solidere. (Saliba, 2013)*

By incorporating the traditional elements of the late French mandate architecture into the modern forms -required by the need of the clients in the periphery of the city central district-, as most of the buildings from these periods are a structure of maximum of four floors, the vertical juxtaposition was the economical solution most of the rebuilding developers went for, as shown on the project of L’Armonial where the Greenstone developing company offered the solution of preserving the façade of the original building and construct modern residence building. Figure (5).





Figure 5. L'Armonial residential tower source: (Saliba, 2013)

The same company also offered the reusing of a 1930 four-floor residential building as an interface for a boutique hotel with a vertical extension of three additional floors topped by a rooftop pool and Terrace, to keep the Ottoman-retro theme the company focused on the original layout characteristic of pre-1930 buildings.

The concept-based perspective is left for the designer interpretation, where some project tended to use the historical urban fabric as uninhabited, which require changes to fit more into its new purpose. Others consider early modern buildings as significant icons of a high value, such as the project to rebuild the Grand Serail, headquarters of Lebanon prime minister. Figure (6).



Figure 6. Hotel Albergo, left the original building. centre and right: later vertical extension, source: (Saliba, 2013)

The building traces back to the Ottoman period, the building has a unique urban setting to increase its landmark value, where it sits on a hill with a view over the city centre, but due to the severe damage, it required rebuilding the same façade with new interior up to the modern standers, to ensure the correlation connecting the past to the new progress.

The visibility indicates the relationship of the building exterior to its function, by the description of the professor Robert Saliba:

*«The controversy around facadism as a legitimate conservation strategy is far from being resolved. Ironically, it parallels Robert Venturi's postmodern reading of much of Las Vegas's strip architecture as "decorated sheds" where the sign claims precedence over the building. However, in Beirut, this controversy has been expanded from the architectural to the urban scale.*

***Beirut’s Central District reconstruction may be considered a reflection of this trend in a non-Western/postcolonial context. » (Saliba, 2013).***

While in the approach for the centre done by Solidere, Facadism was the strategy, this area obtains a different range of building styles, from early modernist to new Ottoman, each mark an important phase in Beirut chronological modernization, many of the buildings in this area were subject to not only the war destruction but also the illegal modification. The conservation plan handled this by allowing the uncompleted structures to reach their original design and the new addition to modify it to match the surrounding, to encourage the street to look like homogeneous unity. In addition to that, the suggested urban master plan for the Beirut central district consecrates on creating a physical and functional connection between the seafront, the historical area, and the city centre. These connections are resembled by four visual corridors. Figure(7), thus, Solidere as a developer real estate company had to take the role of guardian of the national heritage, she was responsible for creating a resemblance of the pre-war urban form of the city’s center. Which received many responses, a critical one for the using the facadism for touristic commercial marketing, on the other hand, the renovated facades were considered lacking the needed quality for a city with Beirut value. (Saliba, 2013). Figure (7).



*Figure 7. Visual corridors as a means for integrating old and new central district. Source: Solidere. (Saliba, 2013)*

According to Robert Saliba, three current interpretations for the early modern heritage in Beirut. The first one is opportunistic, the heritage value is an understanding between the designer and the developer, controlled by the economic, legislative, and programmatic needs of the site. Usually practiced by using facadism and juxtaposition to maximise the use of the site, which is justified as to preserve the identity of the street or to present the historical buildings as the face of the site. The second interpretation is the heritage normative set by the historians and specialists, two drastic opinions came from these interpretations, first is the purists who adopted the inclusion of the building exterior as part of the interior, and refused the facadism as the contamination of the city identity. The second opinion by the postmodernists which separated the exterior of the building from its interior and considered facadism as a way to represent the past with new opportunity for heritage buildings. (Saliba, 2013)

Professor Robert Saliba suggests a third interpretation based on the reception of the past by residents, with questioning if the people receive the presence of the early modern building facades as an effective strategy or a disrespectful way of preserving heritage. In the case of Beirut, the primary observations showed that residents see the facadism as an obtrusion of the

city landscape. This includes the preservation of façade with a new structure and using it as a frame for modern residential towers. The city's early modern heritage passed as part of the conservation plan for the central district, mainly the late Ottoman and French mandate. (Saliba, 2013).

According to Saree Makdisi, by 1993 almost 80% of the urban forms of the central district were damaged and only 30% of that was due to the war. In addition to the dispossession of around 2600 families and owners, in exchange for stocks in Solidere. (Larkin, 2009) (Makdisi, 1997). The concept of Solidere plan of «Beirut reborn» appears to be selective in the heritage preservation targeted site, the «heritage» in its consideration goes from ancient Roman baths, restored Mosques and churches to ornated late Ottoman and French mandate buildings, while the remains of the drastic violent of the civil war were all erased to show shinier and heroic past. Besides the rise of the Lebanese national debt. From 1.5 to 32 billion from 1992-2003. (Larkin, 2009).

Many critical movements against the plan of Solidere were set off starting in 1993, by many architects and local urbanists, and lawyers. To restore the city's spatial identity and history, the most famous is the movement to preserve the war memory as part of the Beirut past. Many views criticize the separation of the central district from the surrounding and the periphery, by building vast car parks and several highways to encircle the centre, which created a modern exclusive city centre that contrasts the neglected urban sprawls in south Beirut. These views consider Solidere's plan as a failure to present the identity of Lebanon, the centre is more like a field for the entertainment of rich Arab Golf countries tourists. It is more like Solidere was more interested in the appearance of the past than the realising what happened in the lived past. Now Beirut is more religiously segregated than ever. (Larkin, 2009).

In conclusion, Professor Robert Saliba demonstrate:

*«Colonial modernity has been both “historicized” and “decolonized” through its full semantic and spatial integration as heritage and as a guiding design principle for the present extension of the city centre.*

*Once a showcase of early modernity in the Levant, Beirut is now being re-created as a showcase of late modernity — a model that is being exported to other cities in the Arab World.».*

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**Author name:** Mariam Eissa.

Candidate of Ph.D. in Architecture in University of Minho, Portugal