University of Alberta

The Politics of Memory in the Reconstruction of Downtown Beirut

by

Rawane Nassif

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Dr. Marko Zivkovic, Anthropology

Dr. Lisa Philips, Anthropology

Dr. Dip Kapoor, Educational Policy Studies

Abstract

At the end of the Lebanese war in 1990, the newly elected Prime Minister, Rafic Hariri, assigned the reconstruction of Downtown Beirut to his own private company Solidere. Solidere destroyed most of the remains of the old Downtown and replaced it with a new modern one. Focusing on Solidere's urban plan, this work examines the choices contained in this plan, the effects it has on the memory of the war, the relationship between modernity and forgetting in terms of the Souks and the meaning of Downtown in a Beirut context. I base my interviews on the postwar Beiruti youth between the ages of 18 and 35 who never saw the prewar Downtown but who were old enough to have seen the destroyed old one and the reconstruction process. The present work also observes how memory became a discourse used by Solidere in order to market a Lebanese identity in a global market.

Acknowledgement

I would first and foremost like to acknowledge my supervisor Dr. Marko Zivkovic who guided me throughout my studies. I arrived at the University of Alberta in the summer of 2006 from Beirut that was under bombs during the last Lebanon/Israel war. I came with a filmmaking background, broken English and a love for anthropology hoping to begin a new life in Canada. Dr. Zivkovic welcomed me in his classes and patiently filled in my language and knowledge gaps. He also fought for me to get into the Master's program and helped me find my voice within the discipline. I feel very fortunate to consider having had what is the closest nowadays to a Master/apprentice relationship. Much of my analyses and approach to this thesis I owe it to him.

I would like to offer my sincere gratitude to my parents and brothers for their support, understanding and encouragements and to Jon for kindly accepting to edit my thesis. I also would like to thank my family of friends, who in Lebanon guided me through a constant dialogue and accepted to be my primary informants, and in Canada welcomed me in their lives and helped me throughout my difficult times.

Finally, I would like to thank my examining committee Dr. Lisa Philips, Dr. Dip Kapoor and the committee chair Dr. Helen Vallianatos.

For all of you who made this journey and thesis possible, thank you very much!

With all my gratitude,

Rawane Nassif

Table of Content

List of Figures

Introduction

Note to the reader

I come from Beirut, a city on the coast of the Mediterranean sea of roughly two million inhabitants, covering an area of 100 km^2 and the capital and largest city of Lebanon. A city full of contradictions and laughter, history and art, dust and taxi drivers, noise and Turkish coffee, young men and women actively fighting for their opposite views of a better future, war lords and old families, travelers, intellectuals, memories, modern aspirations and Arabic traditions, music, nouveau riche, Palestinian camps, vegetable markets, sushi bars, falafel shops, political demonstrations and countless prayers. It is messy, dirty, illogical and loud. It speaks three languages at least and uses both Lebanese and American currency. It is filled with traffic jams and construction sites by day and garbage trucks by night. It has seashore but its inhabitants have to pay to go to the privatized beaches and it only has two crowded parks. Its structural design is not particularly pretty though some places, some houses, some windows, some roofs, some streets, some trees or just some old cars are just magical. The city as a whole has no specific architectural identity and lacks an urban plan; it is a mosaic of old, new, destroyed and partially destroyed buildings from all eras, styles, colors and building materials standing side by side.

Much has been said about it, books written, songs sung and pictures framed. It has been in movies, on the news, on tourist destination maps, travel warnings reports and in the western imaginary. It has been portrayed as the villain and the bride, the exotic and the dangerous, the victim and the killer. Much has been fought about it also, 16 years of civil war, Israeli invasion and countless other smaller wars. Much has been fought in it. Blood has been shed, bombs dropped, cars exploded, streets dug up, archeological remains exposed and populations displaced. Its history spans to the first settlements in the region some 600 000 years ago and was first mentioned as a city during the 12th Egyptian dynasty and is believed to have been continuously inhabited since then. It has been ruled, invaded or conquered by the Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Crusaders, Ottomans, French and Arabs. It has been destroyed by tsunamis and earthquakes seven times (according to an urban myth). It has been spoken off as a bridge between the Orient and the Occident and as a portal city between Asia, Africa and Europe. It is a city to live in, not to visit. It is a city that doesn't sleep; a city that occupies my personal life.

All of these are what I imagine Beirut to be, what I think to put in writing for others to read about it or what I have been told indirectly to tell by the media, school, books, my parents and all the other influences on me. Many of what is said above can be considered part of the clichés that surround Beirut, the stories that Beirut tells itself and the world about itself but whether these clichés are true

is not really important; what really matters is the ways people perceive the city and live their narratives.

Being born and raised in Beirut, my inherited history, my social interactions, my opinions and preferences, and most importantly my own history and biases are rooted there. I grew up living in communal spaces, adopting communal selves and sharing many communal dreams of the future and aspirations of my imagined yet lived city. Therefore, instead of trying to adopt an artificial distant objective view which is impossible in my case since I am part of the Other that I am writing about (not that I believe it is ever possible), I prefer then to explain and shed light on my eventual biases and opinions within the study in order to give a better chance to the reader to be able to situate me in relation to what is being said. I also have to admit my own limitations that will tint my perception of my city: I see it as I think it looks according to my own abilities to grasp it; I see it as an amalgamation of the places I physically saw from it in the specific times of the seeing; I see it as I was told to see it by all those who introduced it to me; and I see it as it tries to portray itself to be for political, touristic and economic reasons. I see it as I remember it given that I left it some four years ago. I see it in comparison to other cities I have lived in. I see it as it is imagined by my friends who never saw it but through me. I see it through my friends and family who are there. I see it as home now that I am away from it since homes are only discovered when they are left.

Research question

At the end of the Lebanese war in 1990, newly elected prime minister Rafic Hariri assigned the reconstruction project of Downtown Beirut to his own private company Solidere. In my work I want to look at the politics behind the privatization of Downtown; the choice of the plan; its effect on the memory of the war; and the construct of the Lebanese identity in relationship to a renovated nationalistic space. I also want to see how the new Downtown of Beirut is perceived by Beiruti residents and especially by the youth. My main motive behind my query is based on my own relationship to Downtown: I wanted to find out why I, and the majority of the people my age that I know, have a repulsion towards the Downtown. What makes Downtown different from the rest of Beirut, and most importantly, what does it lack? People from my generation born during the civil war did not have the chance to see the prewar Downtown during its glorious days, but instead saw its destroyed remains in the early 90s which enabled them to be able to form a mental image of how they thought it looked like in the past. They also witnessed the complete reconstruction process from its beginning and therefore could see how the space transformed and could compare it to the image they had of the old Downtown. My generation is labeled the first postwar generation that lived the war but did not participate in it; it is the generation that was promised a new beginning at the end of the war and by extension, a new Downtown. It is a generation that lived the excitement and hope of a transition to a new era, and lived to see its results in the reconstruction of Downtown among other things. Without lingering too much on the psyche of my

generation, I would like to highlight the fact that at the end of the war, my generation was told and narrated many stories of the past of Lebanon, as if to offset the bitter realities of the postwar and the image of a destroyed country. Therefore, kids from my generation dreamt of a better future while trying to reconstruct their own past and mainly inherited through stories of their parents a nostalgic feeling for an old Beirut and an old Downtown that they never knew. As a result, the new Downtown, even with its shiny facades, leaks for many an inherited feeling of loss.

I am hoping that my research will shed light from a new perspective on the relationship between memory, urban planning and modernity in the context of the reconstruction process of Downtown and especially among those of the first postwar generation. Since in my research inquiry I am trying to determine the nature of the relationship of Beirutis (and more specifically my generation) to the Downtown, their perception of it and the root causes behind those perceptions, I will then look at my query from different angles, and my research will resemble more a mosaic of different factors then a linear narrative. In the chapters ahead, I will introduce the background of the reconstruction process in Chapter 1; the urban planning approaches taken by Solidere in Chapter 2; the ways this approach affects the memory of the war and the ways Solidere uses the memory discourse in Chapter 3; the effects of modernity on memory and forgetting in Chapter 4; and finally, a more personal look into the nature of the city Beirut and why I think all this matters in Chapter 5.

How I have gone about doing my research (or Methodology)

My methodologies are mainly divided into three parts: ethnographic fieldwork including an auto-ethnography; a qualitative analysis of a survey; and a discourse analysis. In my ethnographic fieldwork that was done in Beirut in May of 2011, I examined the reactions of Beirutis towards the new Downtown and recorded a recollection of some of their memories about the old Downtown. As a native anthropologist, or an 'insider' so to speak, different forms of participant observational methods best fit my purpose, notably informal interviews, group discussions, recounting general observations and recordings of daily encounters. For the informal interviews and group discussions, the snow ball technique was the most productive and I started by having conversations with my friends and family who are residents of Beirut and who then referred me to other people whom they thought would be interested in my topic or interesting to talk to.

While conversing with elder people who knew the old Downtown, it was mainly a sweet plunge down memory lane: hearing stories about their youth; learning about the shops, cinemas and cafes they used to meet at in Downtown; identifying the connections that they used to have with the place as business owners, renters or landlords; and many other stories of student demonstrations and political dissent that happened in Martyrs' Square. Many of the conversations just ended naturally with a deep sigh and lots of food, or just took another turn—mostly a political one. I tried to meet some of my interviewees at cafés in the current Downtown

and go with them on walks in it in order to have the setting of our talk laying beneath our feet. I also asked them to physically show me the locations of the places they mentioned or remembered. This part of the fieldwork felt more like a painful investigation into a hidden past that was totally foreign to me and whose remains have been destroyed. I walked the streets of Downtown trying to superimpose the old memory of places on top of the current surroundings, tried to read and follow the Solidere maps, went to Solidere's head office and just stayed in cafés and corners writing down elements that I felt were worth noting. In my daily moves in Beirut, I asked many people about their perceptions of the new Downtown, notably taxi drivers. As a result, my ethnographical fieldwork became more of an auto-ethnographical fieldwork that follows the paths of my existing social circles and connections, lives by my daily rhythms and encounters and records my memories and opinions as a valid informant from Beirut.

During my stay in Beirut, one of the main realizations that struck me was how little my friends and I, and mainly people from my generation, knew about the old Downtown. It was an immense pleasure discovering it, looking up its pictures in the archives of newspapers and hearing about it in detail. My research also excited some friends who started asking their parents for the first time questions about their memories of the Downtown, and they reported their talks back to me so we could share our precious findings.

> Nisrine: much of what I wrote is questions and opinions, your study incited me to talk to my grandma, we spent good moments together.

While I had already in mind the second part of my method, I could not but be surprised during my stay in Beirut at the reality of it. I had put together an online secure survey using Question Pro in which I explained briefly my research purpose and listed ten optional open-ended questions and an optional recollection of name, gender and age; I then sent the survey via Facebook to all my Facebook friends who have lived in Beirut for more than 5 years and who are between the ages of 18 and 35, and asked them to forward it to their friends who also fall under the same category. The civil war started in 1975 and ended in 1990; therefore the people between 18 and 35 of age currently in 2011 were all born during the war and did not have a chance to see the old Downtown Beirut. It is also a generation who saw some of the war and some of the Downtown in different periods of destruction and reconstruction and could witness the whole reconstruction process. Below is the text of the survey and the questions:

Ten Questions about Downtown Beirut

> I am researching the memory of Downtown Beirut for my masters in cultural anthropology at the University of Alberta and one of my aims is to see how the after-war generation views Downtown Beirut and reclaims it as a personal space.
>
> Please try and answer all the questions as detailed or briefly as you like, and you can answer in either Arabic, French or English. All questions are optional and the information that you give about yourself will remain confidential unless I ask for your permission to use it first. The information collected might be

published in my master's thesis at the University of Alberta and might also be mentioned in conferences or part of a publication. The information about age and gender will only help me determine the differences between different ages and genders regarding views of the Downtown.

Also if you would like to withdraw your participation from this survey after you submitted it, I will gladly accept any cancellation requests up to two months after your submission date.

You can contact me at:

Email: (…)

Phone: (…)

Thank you for your collaboration.

Rawane Nassif.

Can you please write your name, gender and age? (Optional)

1. What do you call Downtown Beirut and how do you define it geographically?
2. Do you recall the first time you ever went to Downtown? If yes please describe.
3. Do you have a happy or a sad memory that happened in Downtown? If yes please describe.
4. How often do you go there and what do you go there mainly for?
5. Do you find it affordable and/or accessible for all?
6. What is your favorite spot in Downtown and why?
7. Do you prefer Downtown to another area you spend a lot of time in? Can you compare?

8. Do you remember the old Downtown? If yes which one do you prefer?
9. Do you find that Downtown represents the heart of Beirut?
10. Do you have anything more to add?

Most of the results of the survey arrived a few days after I sent it, and a few weeks later the numbers of respondent stabilized to 32. The majority of the respondents gave their first name, age and gender and answered all the questions while a few answered only some of the questions. I could identify several respondents and some mentioned as an answer to the last question that they got the survey from a friend and that they are pleased to know that I am doing such research. Once the number stabilized, I then proceeded by doing a qualitative interpretation of the results, first as a direct answer to my questions, and second, upon a closer look, I could extract recurrent themes and ways of perceptions of the Downtown that shed a new light on my analysis.

My third method was to do a discourse analysis of Solidere's websites and publications regarding the building of the new Downtown, and more precisely, the buildings of the new Beirut Souks and the layout of the online directory of the BCD (Beirut Central District) as referred to by Solidere. I did not follow a specific form of discourse analysis but I tried to find common threads in Solidere's discourse around issues pertaining to modernity, the selective uses and definition of collective memory, the identification of the Lebanese 'essence', and the choice of its architectural language. I also analyzed these themes in relation to

Solidere's use of power and the economical and physical translation of these discourses.

The three main methods that I used are present and interpreted throughout the thesis and their results are intertwined in most cases. Finally, a few things to keep in mind:

- The names of the informants mentioned are fictional but the choice of the names keep the social indications the original name had of gender, nationality and sometimes religion. Furthermore, any indications of relationship to me, profession, and age are accurate.
- I will mainly refer to the area I am looking at as "Downtown Beirut", City Centre or just Downtown with a capital D. Solidere refers to the area as Beirut Central District.
- Given that my respondents and interviewees answered in Arabic, French and English and sometimes in a combination of the three languages together, I therefore translated all the non English accounts and for the sake of simplicity, will not specify what the original language was.

Chapter 1

Background

Personal stories

The first time I saw Downtown Beirut I was eight. It was 1991 and the Lebanese war had just ended. Eight was also the age of my mom when she saw Downtown Beirut for the first time. She took the bus from her village in Mount Lebanon and arrived at the bus station in the centre of Downtown, the core of Lebanon. Nonetheless, her Beirut was very different than mine. Mine was after fifteen years of civil war, a ruin of a city my mom once saw. Since at the time I did not know what the old Beirut looked like and all that I had seen in my 8 years of existence was war damaged buildings; I then was fascinated by the beauty of war-torn Downtown just as much as she did when she saw it during its golden years. I loved it. I remember the statue of martyrs with bullet holes all over it, the old clock on a wall that does not work and the vegetation growing inside buildings; all seemed so alive to me. The frenzy that was present in the place made it even more magnificent. At the end of the war, parents like mine took their kids in their best clothes to show them their Downtown for the first time. It marked the beginning of a new era and the space served as a gathering point for celebration and joy. While my parents were saddened to tears to see familiar places torn apart, we were excited to finally see what they described to us as the jewel of Lebanon. They named to us few places and buildings, told us stories about the martyr statue

and took us on a walk in empty streets while trying to recall the names and the markets from the empty stone shops. I was hearing them and was trying to visualize what the place could have looked like by imagining it bit by bit. I then walked in a city of my own creation, my own dream.

Later on, in the chaos of the postwar, I do not remember ever going down to Downtown or what we called El Balad (the country) except for once. The bombs that fell on El Balad during the war opened the ground and uncovered various archeological finds of the Roman and Phoenician eras. So after this discovery, mom sent us (me and my two brothers) to archeological summer schools for kids. They taught us how and where to dig, told us what kind of pottery they were looking for and showed us examples of statues and vases they already had found. At first I thought it was a huge playground and that the organizers hid some statues in the dirt for us to find. When I understood that this was really a land full of hidden gems and histories, El Balad transformed into a treasure hunt beneath the ground of artifacts belonging to ancient civilizations. In my adolescent years I went back several times to Downtown to listen to free street music, more notably jazz concerts and 'la Fête de la Musique', or to wander in flea markets and buy nothing. It was a deserted Downtown under reconstruction with polished yellow stones and old style lighting, very different from what I thought I saw as a kid. And since it was empty, I could wander freely and discover its streets and corners and dream of how it will look like once completely reconstructed and inhabited or how it looked like before. For many the dream happens in the house, as it has

been put so beautifully by Bachelard: “The house shelters day dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace” (Bachelard 1969, 6); in my case, it is Downtown that allowed me countless times to dream in peace and feel free.

Later on, bit by bit, high end businesses began to open in Downtown and jazz concerts and careless wanderings began to disappear and were replaced by security guards and businessmen. The concentration of solely high end foreign shops and ridiculously expensive restaurants drove the Lebanese population away from the core and catered solely to Arab tourists from the petrodollar states like the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. It was the time when the names of places where changing in the local appellations and on the tongues of people and taxi drivers. El Balad became Downtown (in English), Martyrs’ Square became Virgin (Virgin Megastore), the waterfront became Biel and the general region became referred to as Solidere, the name of the private company that took the public function of rebuilding Downtown. During that period, a wave of hatred towards Solidere’s politics and the new identity of the place were present among many but were not expressed publically. Though since Downtown was and still is a centre for government buildings, UN headquarters and other international organizations, the only experiences of Downtown I remember at that time were ones of participating in political activities and demands, primarily a dismantled one month sit-in in Martyrs’ Square, a painfully ignored hunger strike in front of the UN building and a heavily suppressed protest on Rue Foch. In the protest I got

beaten very badly by the army while being watched by Gulf tourists dining in luxurious restaurants. This image changed my perception of the place. I began to see it as a security fort for tourists.

Map of Greater Beirut (http://mappery.com/map-of/Beirut-Map)

In 2005, Downtown and most notably Martyrs' Square became the theatre for the so called 'Cedar Revolution' on March 14th and later the 'Independence Intifada' which was a series of mass demonstrations against the Syrian influence in Lebanon and a reaction to the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. These protests were mainly from supporters of Hariri and believers in his modernist, privatizing and free trade approach. A counter pro-Syrian demonstration led by Hezbollah and other opposition groups also took place in Downtown on 8 of March and organized an 18 month sit-in in the central district and Martyrs' Square to freeze the economical gains of Solidere and protest against the western

backed-government (Larkin 2009). These protests signified the beginning of a new division between the Lebanese into two main blocks: the March 14th alliance and the March 8th alliance. These alliances are not divided along the same old Christian / Muslim confessional lines but instead along opposing political stances towards globalization, modernity and the influences and interests of different foreign governments. The presence of a strong unified third alternative to these alliances was practically nonexistent; therefore, since I did not adhere to any of these alliances, the Downtown during that time became a televised place far removed from me.

Brief history of Downtown Beirut

Ottoman period

Downtown Beirut is the region that surrounds the old historical city of Beirut and the central district; it presently contains the major governmental, administrative, financial and public buildings. In its recent history, the medieval city resembled a Kasbah and had a wall surrounding it with seven doors that were closed at night. Nowadays, a region like Bab Idriss (the door of Idriss) is named after one of the long gone gates to the city.

Bab Idriss in Ottoman times (http://souwar.yaacoub.com/categories.php?cat_id=17)

Such place names record the history for those who can read it and eventually detach themselves from the places they were supposed to define to become an imaginary meeting point (Connerton 2009). During the First World War, the Ottomans ruled the region and made large changes to the city by putting a new urban plan in place. The plan entailed the building of the Grand Serail (used presently as the Prime Minister's residence as well as the cabinet room), the destruction of most of the city's remaining Arabic medieval fabric and the creation of large roads named after ottoman generals like Rustum Pacha. Historically, Beirut did not have squares and open spaces; however, as remarked by sociologist May Davie in an unpublished study of City Centre, "it was the Ottoman rule over Beirut that introduced the notion of planned open space as a reflection of political authority" (Kabbani 1998, 249); therefore, one of the most

important additions to the urban fabric under the Ottoman rule was Al Burj (the tower) which later became known as Martyrs' Square.

The Grand Serail (http://souwar.yaacoub.com/categories.php?cat_id=17)

French Mandate

At the end of the First World War, the Ottoman Empire collapsed and Lebanon became part of the French mandate along with Syria. The French modified the urban fabric of the Downtown by erecting new buildings in the colonial style around axial roads named after their generals Foch, Gourot and Allenby and by constructing on top of the medieval fabric of the City Centre a mini Place de L'Étoile, again using Davis words, as a "showcase of France in the Levant." This new plan asserted the new colonial ideology by shifting the centre of political attention and symbolic national identity from Martyrs' Square to Place de L'Étoile (Kabbani 1998, 251).

Present day Place de l'Etoile. (Photograph by the author)

Independent Lebanon

After the independence of Lebanon from France in 1943, the political and public attention came back to Martyrs' Square as a gathering place for celebrations and political insurgencies, and during the years, the new republic saw buildings in the International Style flourishing around the old city. As a result, the architectural mixture in the City Centre at the beginning of the Lebanese war recorded the history of the country in stone and was an intricate recollection of medieval Arabic, Ottoman, colonial French and International Style (Salam 1992). During the 60s and 70s or what was considered the heyday of Lebanon, Beirut was a major tourist destination in the region and became a culture hub and banking centre. The lifestyle it portrayed and its image in the media gained it the name "Paris of the Middle East".

Martyrs' Square in the 60s. (http://www.habeeb.com/beirut.war.lebanon.02.html)

Civil war

To understand the possible causes of the initial destruction of Downtown and the following procedures to erase it, one should understand the nature of the Lebanese war and the role Downtown played in the national psyche. The Lebanese Civil War started in 1975 and ended in 1990 and divided Beirut between a Left-wing, mainly Muslim West-Beirut which was favorable to the Palestinian struggle and presence in Lebanon, and a Right-wing, mainly Christian East-Beirut unfavorable to the participation of Lebanon in the Palestinian struggle. Very fast the war got transformed into a sectarian war between Christians and Muslims, and religious cleansing affected all the regions. Beirut that was mostly mixed throughout got divided into a Christian East side and a Muslim West side; the majority of the Christians of the west were killed or deported to the east and the Muslims of the

east were killed or deported to the west. Downtown, the geographical centre of this division and the link and gathering place of the different parties, became a much contested space and got transformed into a no man's land throughout the period of the war. A line that passes through Downtown and more specifically Martyrs' Square divided then Beirut into East and West and became known as the Green Line due to the vegetation that took over the region in absence of its inhabitants. The green line was ruled by snipers who shot at anything that moved; therefore, while crossing between the two regions became impossible, behind the destroyed facades of Downtown, life was quasi normal.

Green line in 1982. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Green_Line,_Beirut_1982.jpg)

Reconstruction

The civil war officially ended in 1990 after the Taef agreement (named after the city in Saudi Arabia that housed the agreement) in 1989. The agreement was facilitated by the Saudis and Hariri and set the beginning of the reconciliation process. The reconstruction of Downtown Beirut became then crucial to the psyche of the country and a symbol of a postwar beginning and became an attempt to translate into reality the aims of the constitutional pact of reconciliation. However, history repeated itself and "the civil war officially ended by the invoking of former Lebanese Prime Minister Saeb Salam's famous dictum of 'no victor, no vanquished', which explicitly tied the notion of reconciliation to an understanding of war without victors" (Silverstein and Makdisi 2006, 17). While what has been referred to as 'the 1958 crisis' ended with that dictum, the 1975-1990 civil war also ended in the same manner but with a promise of a reconciliation and a new beginning that put Downtown Beirut on central stage.

The politics of the reconstruction of Downtown

Downtown before the war

Before the war, Downtown Beirut (or City Centre) like all the other historical City Centres in the region, was centralized and served as a microcosm of the country. It had people from all social classes, religions and nationalities visiting or working in it: "more than 130,000 people lived or worked in this 120-hectare area, representing a variety of social classes" (Salam and Capezzuto 2003, 58). It

incorporated religious places, government places, theaters and cinemas, hotels and cafes, bus stations and train stations, banking districts, a port and Martyrs' Square. It was busy day and night, and everything that it offered tailored to all classes and tastes, especially the Souks. Souks are central markets where a great deal of the daily exchanges are made and are characterized by a web of pathways and usually covered streets that are lined on both sides with merchants specializing in making and selling one specific item. The item gives its name to the street. In old Downtown Beirut there was the gold Souk, vegetable Souk, fish Souk, egg Souk, imported goods Souk, fabric Souks, soap Souk, artisan Souks… and even the prostitution Souk, ironically located in Moutanabi Street, the name of the famous poet. These Souks because of their nature were an outlet to all the producers of the country and created jobs for villagers, artisans and small business owners as well as renters and landowners. Thus the general memory that the people I spoke to have of Downtown was one of finding all kinds of people in perpetual contact with each other, doing business that created a local web of connections and a renewed trust. The following recounts the 'narrated' and 'transmitted' memory that one of my informants told me when describing the old Downtown that she never knew:

> Nisrine: The Downtown was first and foremost a place of work; the prominent families had their businesses, there were vegetable vendors, cheese, meat.... Some of them lived in the city around the DT, others commuted daily from the mountains. (And here I ask myself about the rural exodus). An Italian seamstress who lived on the 3rd floor of a building in the very centre of the city etc … Then you had around the Place de l'Étoile the lawyers, the big private companies (petroleum, industry ...). There was Mikati the wool seller, the great carpet

salesman, you had a very good pastry chef who made the best Arab pastries near the vegetable seller. There was a lot of trade. I should check and see if there were any mechanics ... the streets were not clean, it is far from the brilliance of the bright streets of today but all this was very friendly.

Martyr' Square 1974 (http://oldbeirut.tumblr.com/post/5549179500/martyrs-square-at-night-1974)

Damage during the war

During the Lebanese war, the first 2 years were the most damaging to the Downtown due to the severe fighting in the region, but according to Assem Salam, former president of the Order of Engineers and Architects in Lebanon and an avid critic of Solidere, those damages were not irreparable. Salam goes on to explain that after a lull in the war in 1977, a reconstruction plan was proposed focusing on preserving the urban tissue while making limited interventions, but the war resumed before the plan could be put into place. The major demolitions of

Downtown and especially of the old Souks were made in 1982 after the Israeli occupation of Beirut, not only because of the war but mainly by an order of demolition given by Rafic Hariri who was then still a businessman with special relations to the Saudi king before he became later on the head of the reconstruction project and prime minister of the country in 1991 (A. Salam 1992). Therefore, bulldozers, under the pretext of cleansing the City Centre of war debris, demolished entire regions still standing including the medieval Souks, and threw the rubble in the sea.

Martyr' Square at the end of the war (Salam and Capezzuto 2003)

The beginning of Solidere

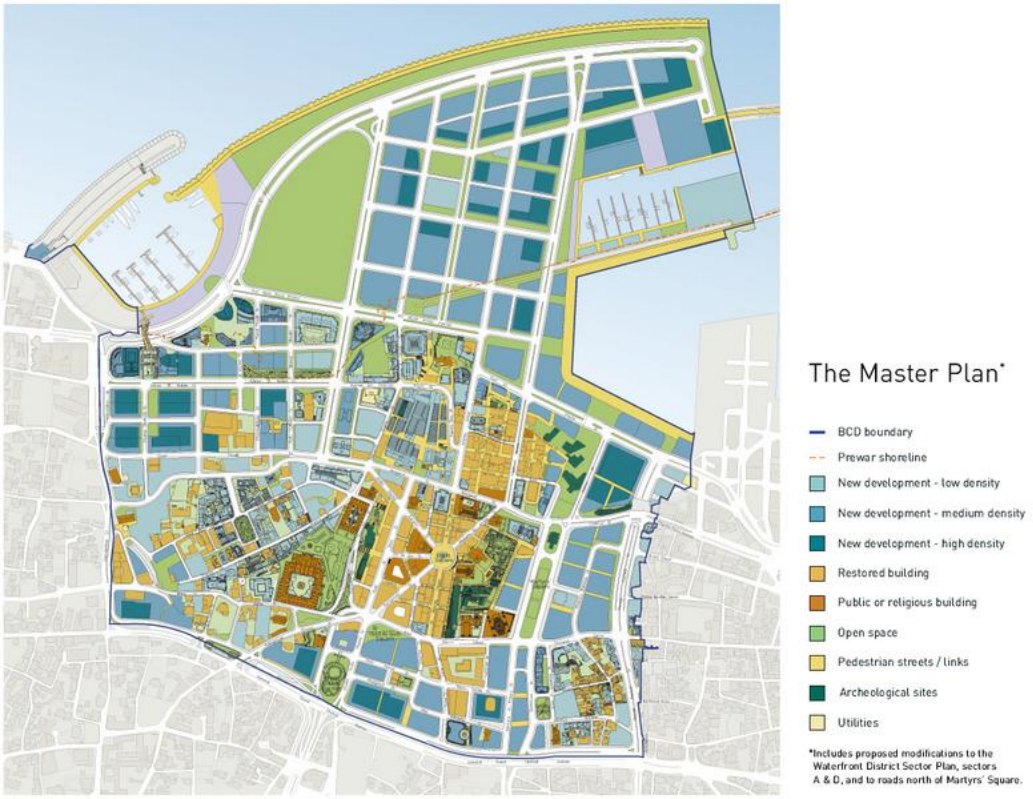
When the war ended in 1990, a Franco-Lebanese reconstruction plan was already put in place; however, Hariri who was highly influential for his role in the Taef

accord, made himself familiar with the plan and placed people in power in the Higher Urbanism Board to commend and approve a private plan of reconstruction (Kassir 2003). As a result, a law passed in 1991 authorizing the municipal administration to create real estate companies in war damaged areas and to entrust them with implementing the urban plan presented by Hariri. The state was then "reduced to playing the role of a shareholder within a private company: only one seat on the board of directors of Solidere was reserved for the state while the rest of the board was dominated by Hariri" (Schmid 2006, 7). This entailed the total and uncontrolled privatization of the reconstruction operation and the monopolization of the project by one company: Solidere, which is the French acronym of 'the Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut'.

The Master Plan

The reconstruction plan was presented to the public in 1991, and was characterized by gigantism: towers, a world trade centre, an artificial island, marinas, highways and especially a Martyrs' Square larger than the Champs-Élysées with an opening towards the sea which entailed the destruction of all the surroundings of Martyrs' Square (Kassir 2003). The Master Plan that was put into action in 1994 destroyed 80% of the town centre and consisted of two terms. First was a compulsory participation of owners and occupiers in the project, the conversions of their deeds into shares, and the expulsion of the refugees. This deprived them of their rights of return to their premises and obliged the current

residents to vacate while being given arbitrarily cash payments as compensations. Second was a dissolution of the physical boundaries between lots, merging the entire region into a single unit called Solidere to be rebuilt freely by investors, divided differently and sold to the highest bidder. As Lebanese sociologist Samir Khalaf explains, "by bulldozing vast areas of urban space, urbanists now have access to priceless real estate resources which could not have been freed by the normal, costly process of expropriation" (Khalaf and Said 1993). As a result, and as predicted by Salam, the law destroyed an age old hereditary ownership system, eliminated any opposition from landlords and tenants, and deracinated the social fabric of the city. Such an approach is arguably inspired by Hariri's experiences in Saudi Arabia and other oil rich countries where there was a lack of urban heritage and an ease of a radical urban revival; but in the case of Beirut, the 1.8 million m^2 construction zone of Solidere seemed to be closer to an amputation than to a reconstruction. Therefore Beirut, as describes so well in the title of the article by Salam and Capezzuto became "The City With a Hole in its Heart".



Solidere's Master Plan (http://www.solidere.com/project/mastplan.html)

New Private Waterfront

Later on, the debris of all the demolitions of the 'reconstruction' was added to the island of rubble of 1982's demolitions and together with garbage remains formed a new waterfront of reclaimed land of 6.5 million m^2 over the sea that became the prize owned by Solidere. Therefore, the physical remains of the city, its buildings and its Souks became 'landfill' that helped cover the old public seashore and create a private land and a marina that pushed the sea further from the inhabitants of Beirut. The waterfront area is also scheduled to become a high density area with high rise buildings which will block the sea shore view for the rest of the visitors or inhabitants of Downtown. This thrust to have a bigger waterfront and a larger opening of the Solidere area towards the sea was at the core of the project

for economical reasons since it increases significantly the real estate asset value of the City Centre.

The new private land and the waterfront behind the fence. (Photograph by the author)

In order to reach the sea and open Martyrs' Square, the society decided to dynamite the hotel Rivoli that was in a good standing condition and that had become the symbol of the good days of Lebanon in the prewar era and a landmark of the city since it was present on all the postcards of Beirut. Ironically, the Rivoli resisted the explosion three times before it finally collapsed in front of people gathered to see it for the last time, a resistance to dynamite which was interpreted by the romantics and the critics of the project as the resistance of the symbol and the fighting soul of the city. Angus Gavin, the Head of the Urban Development Division of Solidere and Director of Urban Development for Solidere International, vindicated the dynamiting of the Rivoli and the 'need' to have an opening to the sea: "This view from city to mountain has always been the

hallmark of Beirut, favored by Orientalist painters of the last century, but was in danger of being lost through overbuilding and encroachment of the landfill. These realities of modern Beirut also threatened another traditional feature, the avenue that descends to the sea. Beirut had dreamed for almost a century of opening Martyrs' Square to the sea" (Gavin 1998, 223).

Rivoli in 1969. (http://www.lebanonpostcard.com/en/posters/p_sepia_9.shtml)

Dynamiting the Rivoli. (http://almashriq.hiof.no/lebanon/900/930/930.1/beirut/reconstruction/)

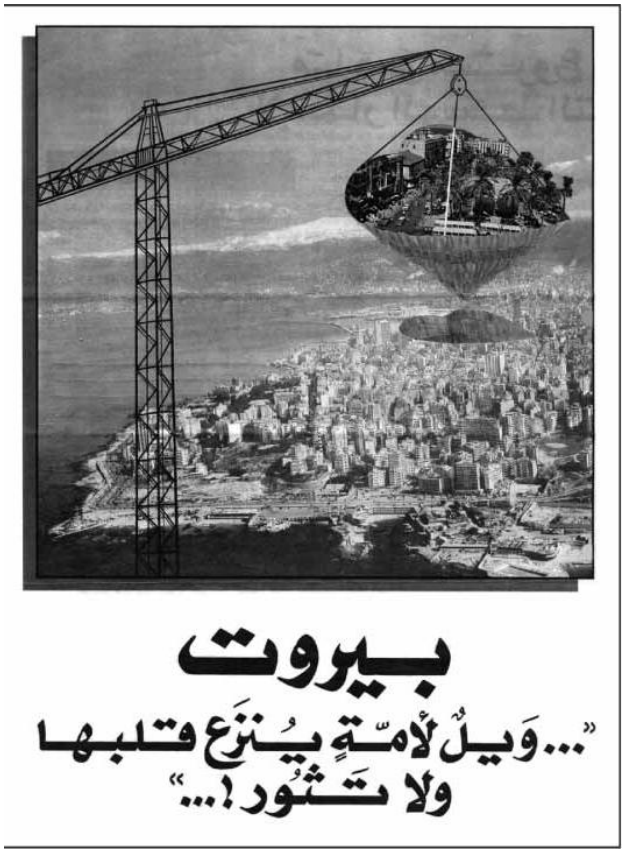
I will get back to Gavin's quote later, but for our purpose now it is enough to note that Gavin preferred to imagine Beirut the way Orientalist painters viewed it

instead of how the new republic of Lebanon viewed itself or how the people viewed their city. By giving Beirut a persona and a dream, he justified the costly and capital-maximizing project. George Corm, historian, economist and past finance minster under Prime Minister Hoss and a critic of Hariri's economical strategy, wrote as a comment on the Master Plan: "Dallas sur Mer: this could be the better name for Beirut, nothing to do with the city before it or with its surrounding" (Corm 2005). By 2003, Solidere had dynamited 900 historical buildings and built 7 new ones on the reserved territory while transforming the rest into empty parking lots (Corm 2005).

Where the Rivoli was is now a parking lot. (Photograph by the author)

Resistance to the project

In 1982, on the eve of the Israeli invasion of Beirut, people did not have the means to protest against the destruction of the Souks and many did not even know about it since the Downtown was still a no man's land. After the war ended and when the project was put in place, fierce resistance from the civil society, critics and intellectuals began to take place. Heiko Schmid made an encompassing study of this resistance and pointed out the ways it has been crushed: the tenants and owners who have been excluded from any decision-making process from the rebuilding tried to mobilize themselves, but due to the differences in the interests they had as owners and tenants, they could not form a solid unity against Solidere. The civil society tried to launch a media campaign against Solidere and a leaflet denouncing Solidere's exportation of the City Centre, notably this poster that reads: "Beirut … pity a nation whose heart is being ripped out and it does not revolt!...". The quote is a direct allusion to the famous poem "Pity the Nation" by Khalil Gibran, published in 1933 in *The Garden of the Prophet*, in which Gibran lists all the circumstances where we should pity a nation. The poem was also sung by the most famous Lebanese singer Fairuz, making the poster strike even a deeper national emotional cord.

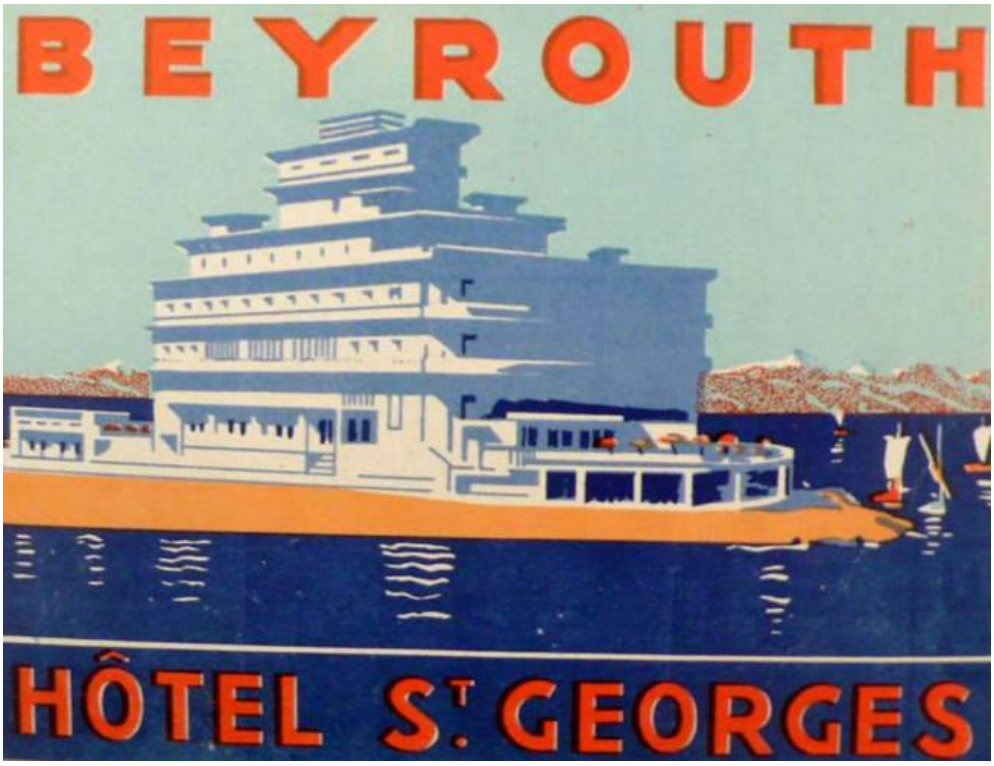


"Beirut … pity a nation whose heart is being ripped out and it does not revolt!..." (Schmid 2006)

However, since Hariri supported his own media empire and owned shares in the majority of the various media enterprises of the country, the opposition's public voice was rendered very feeble, and finally, the audio-visual law of 1996, drastically reduced the number of TV stations in Lebanon and removed any trace of a media outlet for the opposition (Schmid 2006). The demolition of the partially destroyed buildings was viewed as necessary by some, but when the demolition reached residential neighborhoods untouched by the war like the former Jewish neighborhood Wadi Abu Jamil, people were forcefully and illegally vacated and a building was destroyed with its protesting inhabitants to kill any form of resistance against the project (Salam 1992). Solidere being

backed by the government and owned by the Prime Minister had all the power to act as it pleased while the residents had no governmental body to complain to especially after the dawn of a war.

Another unfruitful current resistance project is the owner of the famous Saint Georges hotel with its own private beach and marina who refused to sell his shares to Solidere or to vacate the premises. The Saint George was one of the prewar icons of Lebanon that was visited by many international stars, shot in many movies and hosted fashion shows and international beauty pageants among other things.



Prewar era stamp with the Saint Georges on it. (http://middleeast.about.com/b/2011/06/26/beiruts-st-georges-hotel-still-trying-to-slay-dragons.htm)

As a result of the owner's refusal to sell his premises, Solidere forbade him to restore his hotel under the pretext that it is not following Solidere's architectural laws (explained later on in the chapter 'Homogenization of style') and limited his access to the sea by building a large Solidere owned marina on and around the Saint Georges waterfront. Later in 2005, it was kind of ironic that the assassination of Hariri by a car bomb explosion happened in front of the Saint Georges hotel, which further destroyed the non-restored Hotel. Currently a legal fight is in progress between the owner of the Saint Georges and Solidere and as a result and as a sign of protest, the owner placed a huge banner that reads 'Stop Solidere' on the façade of his hotel.

Stop Solidere banner on the Saint Georges. (Photograph by the author)

As for the more recent campaigns against Solidere, in 2010 and again in 2011 activists marched in various regions of Beirut in protest against Solidere and the

general destruction of the urban heritage in Beirut with slogans of “Our History is not for Sale” and “Beirut is not Dubai.” Also lawyers and interested parties of the civil society formed “Save Beirut Heritage” with its own Facebook page and 24/7 hotline where people can call if they think a nearby old building is under threat to be demolished and are encouraged to take pictures and report any vandalism.

Our History is not for Sale. (http://www.fanoos.com/photos/photo.asp?id=5672)

Downtown as a microcosm of Lebanon

While talking to a family friend about his war memories and their physical locations, he stated that Downtown for him stood as a symbol for the unification of Lebanon with all its religious, political and ideological differences; and that during the war, his hopes were that Downtown would be able to “survive” because “if Downtown could make it, the whole country will.” Nowadays he thinks that neither the country nor Downtown made it; therefore, he felt that he

lost all that he had fought for during the war. Such a perception of the important role of the Downtown was common and as stated by Lebanese architect Rodolphe Khoury, "in mass media representation as in the collective imagination, the Beirut Central District represents the city; its fate implicates, metonymically, the entire country" (el-Khoury 1998, 184). Consequently, looking at the politics that surround the reconstruction of Downtown could give the war generation a possibility to read its own future regarding the reconstruction of Lebanon and the processes of war reconciliation. As for some people from the postwar generation; notably the youth, their current feeling towards the Downtown can be best described by the answer of an informant of mine:

> Nisrine: The City Centre represents the breath of a city, its heart, its beats... and it is from this centre that the ramifications to the rest of the city gets developed. War has certainly contributed to the distancing of the population from the centre and to the development of the suburbs. But despite this, would the City Centre remain the City Centre? Yes.

The City Centre is still then perceived as a geographical, symbolical and political centre of attention due to its history and location, but is it still filling the role and function of a centre of Beirut?

Chapter 2

Urban perspectives

The politics of naming

As mentioned in the introduction, Downtown Beirut has had many names and is referred to differently by the inhabitants of the city, though for the sake of simplicity I am referring to it as "Downtown" or "City Centre." The appellation "Downtown" (in English) used in the streets of Beirut was introduced by Solidere. According to Paul Connerton, "Place names are semantically opaque: they cover the past of a place, half-hide a history" (Connerton 2009, 10) and the replacement of the old names by a new English one marks the entry point that Solidere is fostering by re-creating new name to Downtown with no link to the previous one and by trying to erase the role that Downtown had in its recent history.

The results of my survey show that when asked "what do you call Downtown Beirut and how do you define it geographically?"; the majority of the participants answered either "Downtown" or "El Balad" (the country). Few called it "Centre Ville", "DT", "Solidere", "El Aswak" (the Souks), "El Wassat" (the centre) and some even gave their own name-attributes to it. The names "El Balad" or "El Wassat" were the most popular naming of the City Centre in the prewar era and both pointed out to the importance of this space as the centre of the city and to its metonymical representation of the whole country. As for the term "El Aswak," it

shows us the importance of the Souks to old Beirut to the extent that the whole central region became referred to as “the Souks.” It is important to note that these appellations are all in Arabic, the language of independent Lebanon, and were used during its cultural peak along with an embracing of its Arabic heritage. It is also the language that the people and commoners speak on a daily base. The term “Centre Ville” is a reminiscence of the French influence on Lebanon and Lebanese francophones still to this day call it “Centre Ville.” As for the more common uses of the term “Downtown” to refer to the area, the shift happened recently in the last five years due to Solidere’s campaigns and brochures.

> Maha: I used to call it El-Wassat or El-Asswak when I used to live in Beirut five years ago but during my last visits I heard people call it “Downtown” therefore I started to call it “Downtown” from time to time.

The switch to the name “Downtown” marks the participation of Lebanon in the globalized English speaking world and is used as an effort to assimilate Beirut to the international community and place it along world cities that are supposed to all have a Downtown along with a specific concept of what is expected from a Downtown and how it should look like. This symbolizes the winding down of the French impact on Lebanon but also the rejecting of the Arabic heritage; it therefore breaks with the old Beirut and ‘launches’ a new city with a new name.

> Elaine: I call it 'al Balad' when I am asking a servis (communal taxi) driver to take me there, and 'Solidere' when I want to be dismissive of the place and its contemporary role in the cityscape.

The problem with that switch is that the name is aimed at a specific middle and upper class population that is supposed to speak English and that identifies itself

and its city in English terms. By doing so, Solidere automatically excluded the rest of the population and created a language barrier between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’, or worst, imposed a persona of an international English speaker on the average Beiruti.

The rarely used term ‘Solidere’ is more of a political appellation used by people wishing to indicate the ownership of the place and highlight its privatized character. The appellation ‘Solidere’ refers then to a plot of land owned by a company named Solidere, not to be confused with a Downtown. As for the shortening “DT,” a concept nonexistent in the Arabic language, its promotion adds a branding factor to the City Centre and arguably a marketable benefit on the international market.

> Yasmine: I define it like our parents used to call it "el-Balad", but it's been taken by Solidere and renamed "DT" and it's an area that has no more popular character, it is brand new, and it is for rich people.
>
> Ziad: I call Downtown Beirut, the privately owned re-constructed part of the city by Solidere.

Therefore the choice of what to call Downtown differs greatly and can switch according to whom one is talking. It also becomes a political stance, sometimes a class attributes but mainly it mirrors one’s opinions towards the place and Solidere’s politics in a given interaction which depends on the context and interlocutor. It also reflects one’s position towards the uses of English words to designate spaces in Beirut. Consequently, the normalization of the name “Downtown” created some resistance of people who insist on calling it “el Balad”

as an effort to re-Arabize its name and therefore place it in the bigger context of an independent Lebanon with an Arabic language and part of an Arabic Nation.

> Hala: It's the old center of Beirut and I call it "Wassat Beirut" (center of Beirut) or "El-Balad" (the country).

Using the name “el-Balad” or “el-Aswak” creates a continuous link between the current Downtown and the Downtown of the prewar generation. It helps to preserve the memories of the old Downtown for the postwar generation as well as keep the memories of the older generation alive in “el-Balad.” Again as Connerton puts it, those who do the naming of places are particularly aware of the memories they wish to impose/evoke and therefore the new naming of the Downtown as “Downtown” is trying to make a new set of memories that extends only as far back as the reconstruction period.

> Zeina: I call Downtown a beautiful memory, and a sad reality. Geographically it is by the sea, sandwiched between East and West Beirut.

Downtown as a separator between East and West

Becoming the Green Line

Before the war Downtown was the link between East and West Beirut and a unifying agent that helped provide a focal point for the growth of the city in the 1950s and 1960s. During the war, the severe bombing and destruction of buildings came as a shock to many because it was arguably viewed as unnecessary since the Downtown was empty, which led many to believe that militia men had orders to do fictive attacks in Downtown in order to destroy it and reinforce the political/confessional segregation of East and West (Kassir 2003). In

addition, the destruction of Downtown was necessary in order to build independent homogenous 'religious republics' in East and West Beirut and to decentralize and duplicate the social, cultural and political aspects of Downtown. According to Salim Nasr, the proportion of Muslims living in the Eastern suburbs of Beirut was 40 percent in 1975 and shrunk to about 5 percent in 1980 (Nasr 1993); this shows the extend of the internal forced migration that happened in order to create separate, exclusive, and self sufficient religious homogenous spaces while the common spaces where people from different religious backgrounds could meet shrank even further. Downtown that was the major Lebanese common ground between the different factions became their separation ground, and since it was not hegemonized by any religious sub-group, it then became their battlefield (Kabbani 1998). Territorial and confessional identities more so then ever converged and created the postwar reality of Beirut with a dominant religious regionalization: Cinemas, coffee shops and civil organizations closed in Downtown and new ones opened in Hamra (the centre of West Beirut) and in Ashrafieh (the centre of East Beirut) hence making those two neighborhoods the new centres of the divided city. Therefore, for nearly 16 years, Beirut remained a city without one centre, divided physically and culturally (Salam and Capezzuto 2003).

Green line and Martyrs' Square in red (http://www.leftish.org/129-BMS/BMS1.htm)

Current separation barrier

But at the end of the war, Downtown still had the chance to be again what it once was, a common ground for all and a unification factor for a new beginning. However, some of the answers to the question "what do you call Downtown Beirut and how do you define it geographically?" showed how the description of Downtown, within the geographical context of Beirut is still very much seen as a separation space between two complete entities which highlights the failure of Downtown to erase the marks of the Green line:

> Nisrine: geographically, it is situated towards the coast; it stays on the demarcation line of the period that splits in an equal manner the city in two.
>
> Chadi: el Balad, splits the city of Beirut into two parts.
>
> Nabil: Downtown geographically is between Ashrafieh and Hamra.
>
> Layla: It is more or less in the centre of Beirut, between east and west, where the parliament is... However, it is supposed to be a crowded area in which all sides of Beirut meet, while it is more of an empty space that everyone bypasses

While Downtown remains empty, Hamra and Ashrafieh continue to expand and cater more and more to their inhabitants. I remember a few years back just after the opening of ABC Mall in Ashrafieh near my University, a professor of mine at lunch time commented that with such a mall he will never need to leave Ashrafieh again since he has everything he needs in it (school, work, house, cafes, pubs and now a shopping mall) and he added that as of now, the "Ashrafieh fortress" is complete. In his mind, the division of Beirut is still present and even necessary. The Downtown failed then to fill the gap and attract people from both sides. Furthermore, the living characteristics that we expect of a Downtown are still missing in it, which was reflected in Petra's answers to my question "Do you prefer Downtown to another area you spend a lot of time in? Can you compare?"

> Petra: I don't like Downtown. I think Hamra or Ashrafiyeh would fit more in the description of a Downtown!

But on a more optimistic note, the ring road that links Hamra to Ashrafieh made it possible to cross and bypass Downtown easily. But also it helped bridge the two sides and make all of Beirut accessible for those who want to cross to the other side.

> Nabil: Downtown is like a big wound. I like it because it's where the original city is. It is Beirut-the old city, but unfortunately I don't go there. I spend most of my time crossing the bridge between Hamra and Ashrafieh.

As for Martyr' Square which is the only open space where people could meet, its integration into a north-south running highway axis reinforces the religious separation. The square thus got transformed into a huge empty space inside a

roundabout without sidewalks, benches or gardens and without crossing lights that could facilitate the access to the middle of the square. This is pointed out in the answer of Carole to the question "what is your favorite spot in Downtown and why?"

> Carole: I like Virgin (in Martyrs' Square), but I don't need to head Downtown for it, park my car and try to cross the highway without getting killed by a raging driver (there's no walking signs there!). Virgin is opened in many shopping malls where safety is at least available.

Not only is Martyrs' Square now a difficult place to reach, it also lost the element that made it for years the focal point of the country in the prewar era: the bus stops that linked Beirut to the rest of the country. My mom for example used to take the bus form her village to Beirut and my dad used to wait for her at the bus stop. People from all walks of life, all regions and all religions used to meet and cross paths at the bus stop which has formed the heart of the web of circulation that physically brought Lebanon together. Nowadays with the absence of a centralized bus stop that serves all the regions of Lebanon, different bus stops are scattered throughout the city and each stop is designated for a specific region which eliminates the possibility of daily contact between people coming from different confessionalised places like the South of Lebanon that is mainly Muslim and the Mountain range that is mainly Christian. Also it cuts the access of rural commuters and workers to Downtown. While talking about confessionalised spaces, it is important to make a distinction between religious and confessional identity; as Peleikis mentioned in his notes: "when I talk of Christians and Muslims, I am aware that these categories are social constructions that are not

static. It is important to draw the lines between religious and confessional identities in the Lebanese context. Whereas a religious identity expresses a person's confessional beliefs and practices, a confessional identity is first and foremost a political one" (Peleikis 2006, 148). Furthermore, in *Downtown is for People*, writer and urban activist Jane Jacobs states that "no matter how interesting, raffish, or elegant Downtown's streets may be, something else is needed: focal points" (Jacobs 1958); Martyrs' Square was the focal point of the prewar era, but it is presently severed from its limbs, silenced and reduced to become a roundabout to be bypassed from all sides.

Busses in Martyr 'square in the 60's. (http://www.discoverlebanon.com/en/photos/img-Martyrs%27-square-Beirut-961.htm)

Did the war really end?

At this point some of the questions I ask myself are: Is Downtown an actor in the wellbeing of the Lebanese society? And why is it failing in bringing the people

together. Other than the failures in the urban planning aspects that I will continue to detail later, I would like to dwell a bit on the political aspect of this separation. At the end of the war in 1991, one of the reconciliation measures was to declare a general amnesty for 'war crimes' under President Elias Hrawi. "This decision made it impossible to prosecute notorious war criminals and led to the Lebanese postwar reality that those responsible for the massacres and gross violations of human rights are now sitting in the cabinet and in the high government positions" (Peleikis 2006, 146). Therefore the same warlords that divided Downtown in order to create and reinforce sectarian political entities got together and formed the 2nd republic of Lebanon. Hence, it shouldn't come as a surprise that the new republic doesn't look drastically different than the previous one and that the war on the common places of Downtown is still ongoing. However, instead of being fought by snipers and militia men, it took the shape of corporations and business men. The ways the reconstruction of Downtown is happening with a forceful expropriation of buildings, an expulsion of the population, a clearing out of Martyrs' Square and a reduction of the role of the state in the process suggests that it is a continuation of war politics in conflict over territory. Khoury then asks himself to what extent the architectural project is a covert warfare and "can we confidently speak of 'postwar reconstruction' or should we refer to this latest stage in the building boom as 'war construction'?" (el-Khoury 1998, 184).

Beirut, a city without a heart

Given that Beirut is still the largest city, the capital and the centre of the political life in Lebanon that acts most of the time as the microcosm of the country, its centre is still at the heart of the matter. The war and the division of the city deprived Beirut of its heart for more than 16 years and currently, after 21 years of relative peace and reconstruction, Beirut seems still to be heartless. The geographical, material, seemingly political (due to the parliament location) and arguably commercial centre still exists in Downtown, but it is a gleaming new place that many Lebanese feel disconnected from. When asked "do you find that Downtown represents the heart of Beirut?" all the respondents answered negatively, which shows that Beirut is still divided and separated around mainly two hearts: Hamra and Ashrafieh.

> Fadi: the heart of a certain Beirut, perhaps. But not the Beirut I love. Hamra would be the heart of the Beirut I love, but my Beirut has many hearts.
>
> Yasmine: of course not! The heart of Beirut cannot be so empty of character! The heart of Beirut is Hamra for me. Another person who lives in Ashrafieh may say it's in Sessine (a square in Ashrafieh)...

While every Beiruti might choose the heart of his/her own city, what is being felt here is a form of purposeful distanciation from the heart and a rejection of a certain Beirut that doesn't appeal or open itself to its own people. It also reflects the concept that Beirutis have of their own city; its identity and character are viewed differently than what is being presented to them as a new Downtown.

> Rouba: Downtown does not represent the heart of Beirut. It is too preserved, too perfect, there is too much police.

Beirut's current centre became then a preserved, plasticized and perfectly manicured heart that was made to fit into a postwar present reality. It tries to reconstruct the past glory of Lebanon but seems instead to divide the city even further. The Downtown is a centre still indeed but it has no heart at its centre.

View from the Ring road, east Beirut begins with the church, West Beirut with the mosque and Martyrs' Square in the centre. (Photograph by the author)

Isolation of Downtown from the rest of the city

Physical isolation

When the reconstruction began, Solidere had to define the area it wanted to rebuild as a 'Downtown' and cut it out physically and metaphorically from the fabric of the city. Since Beirut, like many cities of the region, grew organically around a core, the concept of a distinct Downtown with clear boundaries from the rest of the city didn't really exist and thus Solidere had to invent one and delineate it from the adjacent neighborhoods via the uses of maps and different urban

strategies. In the prewar Beirut, certain parts of the presently defined Downtown were considered as "el-Balad," mainly Martyrs' Square, Place de l'Étoile and what is between them, but the other neighborhoods that are now part of the new Downtown were in the past different neighborhoods of Beirut. In order to delineate a bigger chunk of land and consider it the new Downtown, one of the strategies used by Solidere was to adopt the already existing Ring road that loops around the area as a physical boundary (or barrier) of Downtown, placing it then in an isolated section between the Ring road and the sea. While the ring road and seashore boundaries are known to many as the North and South boundaries to the current Downtown, the west and east boundaries remain unclear. When I asked my informant to define Downtown geographically, I had many different answers that show to what extent contrary to what Solidere believes, the idea of a defined Downtown is still foreign to Beirutis and its incision as a bloc out of the city is just an artificial marketing approach.

> Fadi: to me, it includes Place de l'Étoile, up to parliament, just short of Hammoudi's, then down to the seashore from l'Étoile. Including Virgin, Nahar, up to (but short of) Gemmayze, and on to (but short of) station Charles Helou.
>
> Suzie: From the west, beginning at Bab Idriss extending to the border with Gemmayze. Down to Biel, and up to the Ring Road.
>
> Yasmine: from Saifi area to Starco from the sea to Fouad Chehab bridge.
>
> Rim: from the ring bridge towards the sea.
>
> Elaine: from Martyrs' Square in the East to the end of Wadi Abu Jamil in the west and inland from the sea until the highway above Riad el Solh.
>
> Rouba: between Riad el Solh and port, I guess
>
> Maha: East of Phoenicia, west of Gemmayze and north of Spears.

Destruction on the outskirts of the ring road that appears on the left. A quasi demolished building is covered by a campaign slogan of Saad Hariri, Son of Rafic Hariri. (Photograph by the author)

These differences in orientation and in the incapability to place the area on a mental map according to its surrounding also demonstrates that my informants (and I) don't really know Downtown let alone the plans and projects that are being implemented in it. Since Downtown was planned as a separate bloc and is being developed independently of the rest of Beirut, it then got alienated from the

rest of the city with its image of a gleaming new place contrasting with other districts that also experienced destruction and general degradation. Therefore, according to Kassir, the reconstruction of Downtown appears to be done against Beirut (Kassir 2003). Furthermore, the use of the Ring road also helped in the bypassing of the place altogether and further isolates the area:

> Salma: Weirdly enough, I never defined it 'geographically'... Downtown Beirut is not the same of what I call Downtown Montreal or Calgary for example. It doesn't seem defined by its geographical location in relation to its surrounding. It's the same as asking me how I do define 'geographically' a mall, spa or hotel... Downtown is just this big place that was built 15 minutes from my place.
>
> Ghassan: Geographically the existence of it or the non-existence of it is the same which is very weird. I can go wherever I want without passing there and since I don't visit it often it becomes geographically useless.
>
> Nada: I am indifferent to this area

Another factor that fostered the isolation of Downtown is the uses of large cement blocks and other obstacles to cut the roads and accesses to the area in the beginning of the project in 1993 in order to transform it into a large construction zone for over a decade. These cement blocks became part of the daily urban landscape and a gate to a private space with its own rules. One interviewee while answering what he remembers of Downtown recalled these blocks:

> Karim: no not really, but I recall that it was still destroyed and plenty of these big concrete blocks with "Beirut" (in Arabic) written on.

‘Beirut’ written on the cement blocks. (Photograph by the author)

Throughout the reconstruction process, and by order of Solidere, people were not allowed to approach the site to see the unfinished product or to take pictures of it. Buildings and digging sites were covered by huge pictures and computer generated images portraying what the place will look like in the future; but in the meantime no one could experience the space. Therefore, under the pretext of building a safety zone and since it became a private entity, people could not wander around anymore in the remains of the destroyed old Downtown and see how it looked like. All traces of the war were just covered behind big curtains. The Grand Theatre for example which was a famous theatre house and that from the outside appears to be still fully restorable (I tried to enter it twice and was stopped by security), will be completely destroyed from the inside and transformed into a restaurant that will keep the same façade. This works as a

metaphor of the new Downtown; it tries to keep the reconstructed façade of the old Downtown while changing the content, the owners and the function of the place.

Grand Theatre behind a trompe-oeil that portrays its past. (Photograph by the author)

Homogenization of style

While Downtown was being rebuilt solely by Solidere, the rest of Beirut was being rebuilt by its inhabitants at different rates and using different styles. This led to the actual urban chaotic identity of the city that tells its history through its buildings: even now while walking it Beirut, one can see traces of the war next to renovated condos. As for Downtown, it is a different story. In order to maintain a visual harmony of the place and as a decision to create a quasi singular architectural identity in certain parts, Solidere made reconstruction guidelines to be followed during the building of every element including roads, sidewalks,

parks and other public spaces. It also made a mandatory list of pre-approved ten or so architects that any builder or developer who could afford buying a site from Solidere has to contract and abide by their construction rules. The majority of those architects are international ones belonging to very expensive firms which made it almost impossible for the original owners to try and buy back their own residences and restore them according to the esthetic requirements of Solidere. According to Salam, Solidere has embarked on a policy of gradually attracting some of the world's most distinguished architects which gave a higher price value to the project. But it also brings up the question of the architectural language of the place and its ownership. In order to justify the homogenization of the architectural styles, Solidere explains: "While it is obvious that people's tastes cannot be identical and that individual creativity should be encouraged, it is important to maintain the visual harmony achieved so far, and to develop a shared sense of aesthetics and responsibility towards the community, based on culture and civic pride" (Saliba, Robert; Solidere 2004). But the problem with this homogenization (even if it is trying to create a diversity of styles within one architectural concept) is that it creates a constructed diversity. Thus the fear is that "without a mixture on the streets, our Downtowns would be superficially standardized and functionally standardized as well" (Jacobs 1958).

Again imposed on the backdrop of Beirut, Solidere's harmony or homogeneity stands out in isolation against a very diverse city. Also the fact that Solidere has the power to exclusively decide on the character of the visual harmony of the

Downtown and its intended public alienates even more the old owners and tenants who are robbed of their rights to reconstruct their places the way they want. Solidere instead proposes a handful or international and national architects that are supposed to develop a 'shared' sense of aesthetics with a silenced community; while what could have made this sense a 'shared' one are precisely the freedom of innovation and the participation of the community in the rebuilding project. According to Connerton, people build in a certain way because they think in a certain way and they think in a certain way because they build in a certain way; a relationship between buildings and thoughts and beliefs that Beirutis are well experienced at since they produced a variety of different buildings throughout the postwar in accordance to the different ways they see the world. As Jane Jacobs puts it, "buildings come first, for the goal is to remake the city to fit an abstract concept of what, logically, it should be. But whose logic?" (Jacobs 1958); Solidere might want to forge a unity by imposing one style of buildings and try to create a shared sense of aesthetic and history, but an imposed 'sharing' can only feel artificial since it didn't come from the people.

In praise of dirt

A remark that came more than once in the accounts about Downtown is its cleanliness regardless of how it is perceived. When asked in the survey "do you recall the first time you ever went Downtown?" the few that saw it as adults for various reasons (mainly because they were not born in Beirut originally), saw the reconstruction period only and pointed out that it appeared clean and new:

> Nabil: I am not sure when specifically. But the first time I was capable of remembering it was when I was 17. I remember that I liked the clean streets a stark disparity to where I come from. It did not look "Lebanese". It belonged to a different world from where I used to go visit in Beirut.
>
> Nada: not really, but I remember that it looked NEW (like a huge doll house/neighborhood) and I remember liking the architecture and the lighting. I remember preferring the Downtown by day because the people looked more natural, relax and not over dressed.
>
> Nadine: yes I was 15 years old and I went with my friend from school. It was new at that time and we were amazed looking at all these renovated and beautiful buildings.

While the 'new feeling' factor is obvious given that the reconstruction largely destroyed the remnant of the city and built skyscrapers, high density buildings and large highways; the cleanliness part was what made it feel as an un-inhabitable sanitized place where only dolls can live. I am not saying that Beirutis like dirty places, but I would like to linger on why the noticeable cleanliness of a place makes it artificial to many. Beirut is a somewhat dirty city in comparison to other cities in its size and economical level. The dirt of the city, the traffic, the bad infrastructures and the general degradation of the place can become less noticeable by the daily user of the city since with time he or she might get accustomed to it. For sure cleaner streets are needed in Beirut, but when only the Downtown is spotlessly clean, its artificial shine then makes it even more isolated and cut out from the rest. Cleanliness means that no one is able to dirty the place, or if the place gets dirtied, it is then cleaned and wiped of any trace before anyone can notice the dirt. The dirt can be garbage and remnants of the wastes of the past,

but it also can be marks on the walls, heterogeneous buildings, partly erased images and general signs of daily uses. This dirt is a trace, human traces left by people who passed by the place or lived in it. A non inhabited place is a clean unmarked space, and vice versa, a non-marked place appears to be perceived as a non-inhabited place. One wonders then why the Downtown which is an already owned space and supposedly habitable, is not showing signs of aging, ownership and traces of the people that passed by it. "To live means to leave a trace" observed Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1989, 155), and for that reason I presume replicas of monuments like the Eiffel tower in Las Vegas can never replace the real tower, not only because it is a replica and taken out of context, but largely because it is not allowed to be touched, marked and changed. Also, the area around it is fixed in time and space in an ever cleanliness that resembles a museum more than the core of a city. As Connerton puts it, "modern space is, at is where, space wiped clean" (Connerton 2009, 121), this is also valid for Downtown Beirut, where it is hard to leave a trace on the clean restored buildings and thus hard to live in it or get attached to it. The place becomes then lifeless, sterile and bereft of any form of existence; its future is placed in the hands of urban planners and asset developers who consider the common people to be a disturbing nuisance to the perfect plan of the city.

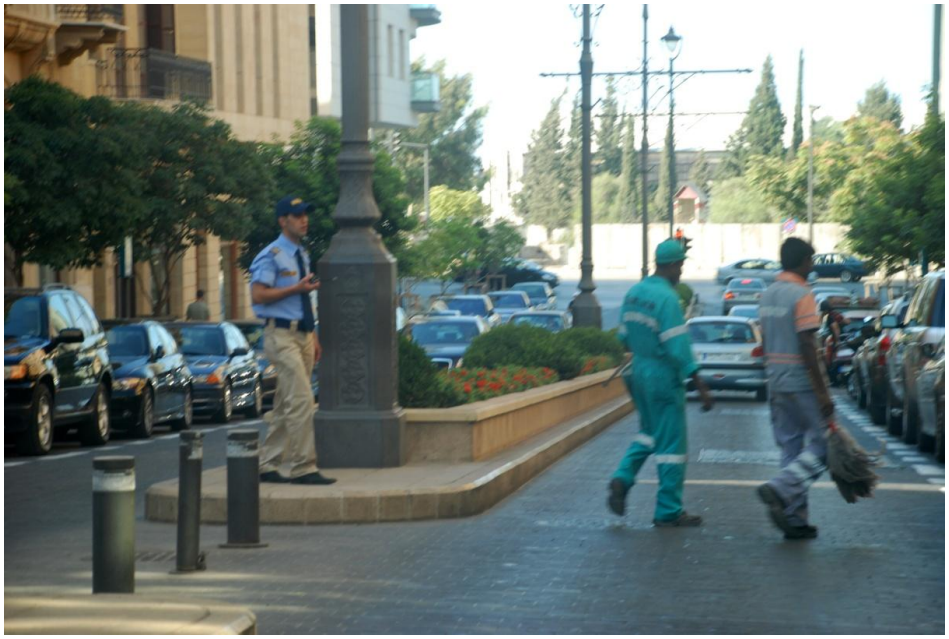
> Nisrine: in Downtown the food also is sterile, if you want to eat you have to sit down, the smell of the food is what is missing in spite of all these restaurants, you cannot walk with 5000LL in your pocket, oh maybe yes only to be able to buy the famous chocolate ice cream from Milano. Walking in the Downtown is

> like being in a ‘chic’ street and even here the ‘chic’ can be controversial. But what kind of ‘chic’ does it propose to us? A standardized ‘chic’.
> Nabil: As my socio-economic class rose in the past years, I was capable of affording going there but I found it distasteful exactly because it's inaccessible. Feels like a mall with fake police officers, a sterile environment.

One consequence of the sanitized cleanliness is the mandatory distancing of the passerby from the sensorial experience of the city and therefore from the sensorial knowledge of the place. The Downtown cannot be touched or marked as one pleases, cannot be smelled due to its sterile nature and cannot be fully seen behind the giant pictures covering the destroyed buildings. It also cannot be tasted in its diversity since street vendors of all kind are forbidden by law to be in the vicinity of the Downtown. This prohibits the street food experience along with its smells that is prominent in other places in Beirut thus making Downtown the only non-smelled (or olfactory absent) place in Beirut. In addition the majority of the restaurants present in the area are international chains that offer a standardized variety of food but help eliminate the true diversity of the small scale Lebanese restaurants that might offer different flavors and experiences. Therefore with the majority of the senses being masked, the Downtown then became a non-sensed place. Consequently, based on ethnomusicologist and anthropologist Steven Feld’s statement “as place is sensed, senses are placed” (Feld 1996, 91), when the place is not sensed in the first place, senses cannot then be placed in it and thus the place will not register in our sensorial memory as an inhabited space which disconnects us further from it.

Salma: another major difference is the presence of security and the army there, it was completely uncomfortable; it didn't make me want to stay long.

Layla: no one lives there, no little shops, it doesn't give you the impression of randomness, security guards are everywhere, you can't put your feet on the public benches, they even tell you how to sit...



Private waste management and private security both owned by Hariri. (Photograph by the author)

Furthermore, the added factor that makes it quite impossible to leave a trace in the Downtown is the prominent presence of private security guards that have instructions to stop the 'citizens' from 'destroying' the space. Also the presence of security guards, beside being private and thus technically having no formal authority to check IDs, imposes a set of rules and a certain code of ethics that becomes necessary to adopt while in the vicinity of this new clean space. The general public is thus placed under a close scrutiny to 'behave' well in the presence of tourists, as if it is assumed that Lebanese are dirty and need to be constantly monitored in order to not dirty their own Downtown. They are

considered as a potential hazard against the perfection of the City Centre that needs to be ‘cleaned’ from its original inhabitants in order to be preserved.

> Nisrine: The current City Centre has a tendency to barricade itself, and here we go back to the first definition of a City Centre. Once constructed, like in the middle ages, it protects itself with fortresses from fear of being contaminated by the surrounding “dirtiness”.

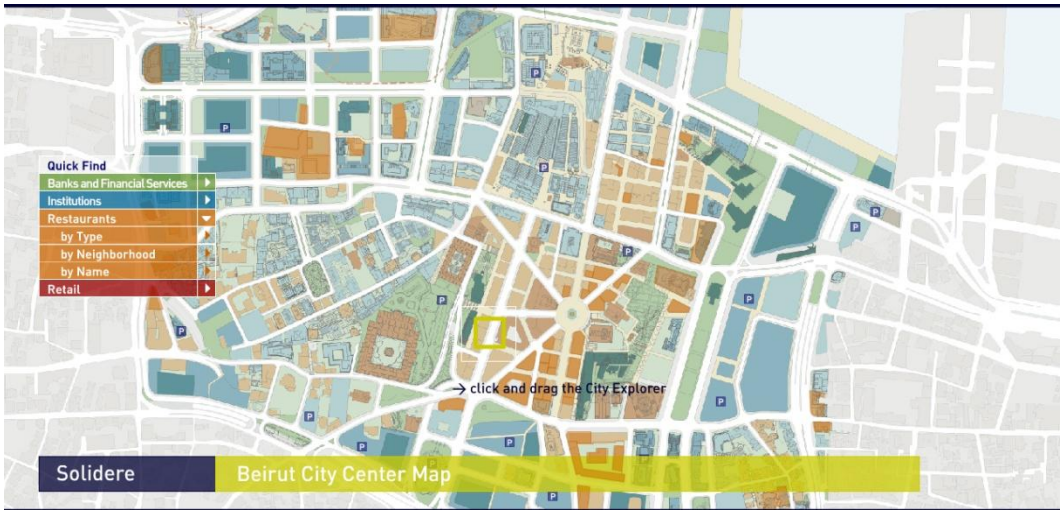
The over securitization of Downtown makes it feel like a fort protected against its own self and removes any possibility of random interactions away from the set boundaries of market rules and ethics codes. Such cleanliness approach can be interpreted as a way to discipline the society and put order in what was the vibrant heart of Beirut. In talking about the one who loves, Benjamin stated: “wrinkles in the face, moles, shabby clothes, and a lopsided walk bind him more lastingly and relentlessly than any beauty” (Benjamin 1989, 68), and in a similar fashion, the love and the attachment to the old Downtown was possibly due to its messy, lived, marked and smelly streets and markets. Consequently the non attachment to the current Downtown can be largely due to its sterilization and its securitization.

More private security in an empty space. (Photograph by the author)

Mapping and spatial practices

Maps and miniature model

Another kind of a social alienation from the Downtown is made by the heavy uses of maps. Since the majority of the people of my generation don't know the Downtown and the rest can't remember it since it changed a lot, Solidere had the courtesy to place maps on every street corner and directions. The maps placed by Solidere and the ones accessible on their website have neither names of neighborhoods nor names of buildings. They only have street names and a legend that indicate with color code the nature of the place according to their classification: religious places, open spaces, restored buildings, residential quarters, new projects, public buildings, archeological site. Places are not linked with any history and their function is not present, for example: a public building can be a municipality or the parliament, a restored place can be anything, and an open space which on the map is characterized by a green color is actually any concrete empty space even if it is a parking lot. I tried to follow the map and I was lost. The interactive map on the website has an option to show us restaurants, shopping places and businesses all inscribed under categories such as Chinese food or women clothing. It resembled more a mall directory than a map.



Beirut City Center Map. (http://www.solidere.com/bcc/index.html)

I then went to Solidere's Media Centre that is located in the company's headquarters and I asked for a tour of the Downtown. They gave me a tour of the model of Downtown placed on a table and pointed mostly to the restored buildings. This is a model of a city supposed to be finished in 2030 so it was a virtual tour in the future of my city. I asked if they would give me a physical tour of the site but they refused. De Certeau pointed out that the elevation on top of the city puts the pedestrian at a distance from his own city and transfigures him into a voyeur looking down and deciphering the urban text. In the case of these models, it even places the person on the creation level of one's city but without being able to touch it. It transforms the complexity of the Downtown into a simple studied harmonious model that lies beneath one's eyes: It "makes the complexity of the city readable", "it allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god" (de Certeau 1984, 92). If the Beiruti becomes god like and thinks he can grasp the totality of the Downtown by looking at a model, he will most certainly

then be able to “detangle himself of the daily behavior and makes himself alien to them” (de Certeau 1984) since he can wrongly consider himself part of its creation and knowledgeable with all its aspects. This process while on the surface gives information to pedestrians, it in fact helps facilitate their alienation from the reconstruction process and pacifies them with a presentation of a technical bird eye view of the whole project. If following de Certeau’s concept that “spatial practices in fact secretly structure the determining conditions of social life” (de Certeau 1984, 96), we can deduce that through this procedure of transforming the chaos of a Downtown into an organized physical model characterized only by certain qualifications of ‘new’, ‘restored’, ‘residential’, or ‘public’ Solidere can then create a disciplined space which by extension fosters a disciplined and disengaged society.

Model of Downtown Beirut. (http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=462700)

Jane Jacobs while criticizing certain Downtown developments remarked that in this “dependence on maps as some sort of higher reality, project planners and urban designers assume they can create a promenade simply by mapping one in where they want it” (Jacobs 1958). The people will then need a map to know where they are supposed to go to, where they are supposed to walk and what they are supposed to discover according to what is mentioned in the map. Furthermore, since the Downtown has not been built organically from the bottom up by its people, Solidere had then to make an opening day to the area just like with any mall and introduce it to the passerby via maps and directories. In these maps and digitized bird's-eye views published of the forthcoming projects, the surrounding areas around what is highlighted as Solidere, appear all blurred, nonexistent or marked in grey and white colors. Therefore even on a map Downtown stands out as a splash of colors on a hazy background called Beirut and as a result, separating it even more from the rest of the city. However, if Downtown appears legible and organized on a map; it is a non readable map for the complex Lebanese eye that needs to read into the ownership of a building or the history behind a certain site; the Lebanese society has then needs other than what few planners and graphic designers decided to offer and label. “Downtown has had the capability of providing something for everybody only because it has been created by everybody” (Jacobs 1958), and when it has been created by a company, it then can only provide for the customers of that company.

Information map in the street. (Photograph by the author)

Place names on maps and Souks

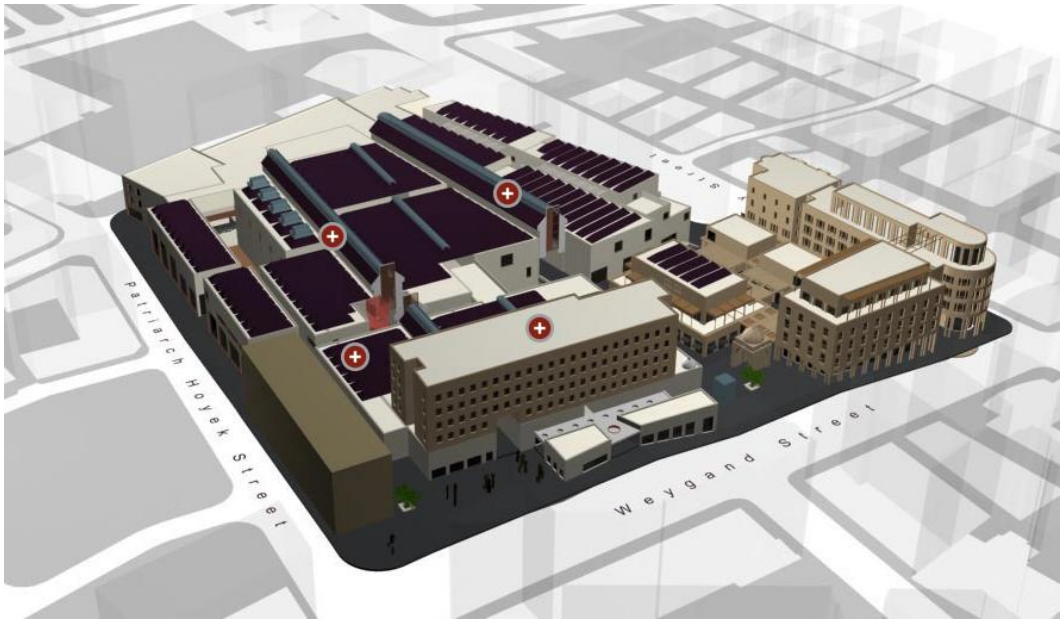
For my parents and others I spoke with, place names became keys to certain happenings or memories especially names of certain Souks like Souk Eltawileh or certain cafes like Laronde and cinemas like Capitol. I asked my dad to tell me where these places were but since the geography of his memory is different than the actual one present, he failed to do so. Even when we were walking in

Downtown, he could remember the location of certain places but could not recall the rest.

> Nabil: I don't remember the old Downtown. No. But, my father when he visited it couldn't recognize the streets. He speaks of landmarks I don't know about. Like the old bus stop, the old mosque, the old cafe and the cinema. I met also a bus driver who gave me a tour in it, where he was born in the fish market (which is turned into restaurants) and the old tomato markets etc.

Basso observed that the Western Apache spoke with place names and shot them like arrows to tell meanings and stories to someone: "all these places have stories. We shoot each others with them, like arrows" (Basso 1996, 48). In Lebanon, people also speak with place names about the Downtown to point to certain qualifications that these places give to what it is pointed to. Bad smell from the fish Souk, cultural glory of the grand theatre, architectural jewel of the Rivoli, beautiful and expensive clothes from Souk Eltawileh and countless other places that now don't exist or became expensive restaurants. Also similar to the Apache, the more a place name is used, the more powerful it becomes or more symbolic to those belonging to that place; however, differently from the Apache, the meaning invested in these place names gets lost in translation when told to people from my generation since these places are gone and we never knew them. The transmission of a certain memory of the place is forever destroyed, though in the case of the Beirut Souks that opened in November 2009, the original names of the old Souks have been maintained while the design, contents and general feeling of the place has totally changed. Retaining a few names becomes more confusing to the passerby (and misleading) since certain aspects of these names are chosen to

remain like the fact that Souks are shopping places, but the other meanings behind the names are completely destroyed.



A virtual representation of the new Beirut Souks. (http://www.solidere.com/beirut-souks/)

Incorporating different neighborhoods

My dad was unable to help me find places I was looking for in the Downtown and after asking many others who also could not place their memories on a physical location, I then decided to search for the old maps of Beirut. I went to Solidere and they didn't have copies, I went to the municipality of Beirut and they had the maps that Solidere gave them or the new maps of the ministry of tourism, I went to the ministry of tourism and they didn't have the old maps. I was looking for maps of 1983, not ancient maps and I was surprised to not be able to find them easily. Finally the father of a friend of mine who worked 10 years ago in the ministry of tourism gave me a copy of his own archives of the maps of the different parts of Beirut. I was ecstatic to see the placement of the Souks and the

names of the streets I always heard off. But above all, I actually learned that the core of Beirut was composed of 9 sectors, four of them I had never heard their names before while the others I could never locate. The maps of Solidere changed the names of the neighborhoods into the names of the business or residential projects: Saifi village (in English) is located in the neighborhood that was Mar Maroon before; New Marina (in English) instead of the port, Biel for the new waterfront while the old one, Minet el Hosn, became parking lots, Serail for the Serail and Bab Idriss neighborhoods merged together, Ryad el Soloh for what was Assour (the area of the old medieval wall that is now a parking lot) and Maarad for Place de l'Étoile. In addition, the name of the whole place is now referred to as Downtown, a single unit that merged together many parts of Beirut and practically erased the old regional names along with their physical spaces and didn't leave a trace for the postwar generation to hold on to. Even the few buildings that Solidere restored to their original state have been given corporate names that nowadays also refer to the area surrounding the building in question like 'Virgin megastore' referring to the building and to Martyrs' Square. Added to this, the hiding of the war damaged buildings behind giant trompe-œil of forthcoming projects conceals the traces of war and history: "The more total the aspirations of the new regime, the more imperiously will it seek to introduce an era of forced forgetting" (Connerton 1989, 12) especially when the actual regime is still constituted by the same people that fought the war and gave the order to destroy the Downtown in the first place. Solider therefore created a new city that

has no continuity or references to the old city it replaces and with no direct memory.

Trompe-oeil covering a building in restoration. (Photograph by the author)

Uses of Downtown

Going Downtown?

After asking my informants "how often do you go there and what do you go there mainly for?", I could distinguish some themes that are all encapsulated in the answer below:

> Yasmine: There are many periods:
>
> - 16 to18 years old, I went there for a walk and for hanging out with friends or with my boyfriend.
>
> - 18 to 26 years old, I went there for showing that place to tourists. I went there for having a walk. I went there for the 'la Fête de la Musique' [a French free music event that happens on the 21st of June all over Lebanon and began in

> Downtown]. I went there for a coffee or a dinner. I went there for visiting Virgin megastore. I went there for demonstrating.

The 'la Fête de la Musique' was mentioned five times as an event to go to in Downtown but sadly, it happens only once a year. The attracting element in 'la Fête de la Musique' is that it is open, free and chaotic, just like the rest of Beirut. Also it is a showcase of new talents and a meet up of expats and Lebanese living abroad with their local friends in the busy summer season. Virgin megastore was also mentioned several times and mostly in my opinion because it was the only quasi-affordable space to shop at for the longest time before the opening of the Beirut Souks; it then became a meeting spot for the Lebanese youth who wanted to explore the latest in the arts and literature. Also in the absence of libraries, it served as an open library concept where people could sit on the floor and read books, listen to sample CDs and watch sample movies without having to pay or being kicked out. It was a place to wander around and therefore it attracted the strollers and the wanderers of the city:

> Salma: I also used to go to the Virgin Store (the only store I would go into), I never bought anything, but I liked sitting there as well, going through books that I couldn't afford.

The other obvious element of visit to the Downtown was to show it to tourists or to friends from out of town. Therefore it is a place that is not visited for itself by the residents of the city but instead became a showcase to foreigners in its 'perfect' 'clean' entity. It is presented as an example, an idea of what Beirut is, but not as a lived and practiced everyday space. When outsiders or Lebanese emigrants want to see 'Beirut', the museum city, the locals take them to

Downtown for a walk or for dinner but don't participate themselves in the choice of the restaurant most of the time and would probably feel disconnected since they don't frequent the area often:

> Layla: maybe twice a year at the most... in case I have to meet someone in a restaurant, and I don't get to pick the place, it is often when expats come to Lebanon, they usually pick the place more than the people who live here.

Downtown is not for Lebanese

Lebanon has always been a touristic destination in the Middle East and had a heavily tourist and service based economy. Once Beirut was called Paris of the Middle East, it attracted equally Europeans tourists and Arab tourists from the Gulf countries, but lately the tourism industry has focused its attention solely on the Arab States of the Gulf. This is in a large part due to the special relations that Hariri had with the Saudi king and the various times that Saudi Arabia bailed out Lebanon economically after it received severe hits from Israel between 1995 and 2006. In exchange, but mainly illegally and with the help of corrupt administrations, Arab Gulf citizens received favorable treatment and a special status regarding the right to buy land in Lebanon at a higher quota than it is allowed for foreigner investors. This increased the price value of the land and as a result, the average Lebanese cannot afford anymore to buy land or properties in Lebanon, which created a general frustration among Lebanese against the 'oil money'. In the case of Downtown, the place seems to sell itself as a land for Gulf tourists and not for Lebanese anymore.

> Lama: Downtown is not sensed as the centre of the capital anymore and in the summer we very rarely encountered Lebanese. After its renovation, it is not destined for Lebanese but instead for tourists from the Gulf countries.

The general Lebanese culture, history, life style, dress code and gender relations (knowing that these vary widely between different areas in Lebanon) are extremely different from the ones from the Gulf States. Consequently since Solidere transformed the Downtown into a touristic destination that targets Gulf tourists in order to be able to cater solely to them, much of the Lebanese ways of life had to be altered in order to fit the needs of those tourists. One of the examples is that pubs have been banned from the area since Gulf countries have an alcohol prohibition law for their citizens. Therefore, the general feeling is that the Lebanese people have to 'fake it', and pretend to fit the impressions that Gulf tourists have of them in order to please and sell their merchandise in an economy that has become solely service based:

> Hiba: It became only a touristic area for rich people and in the summer it is full of Saudis that you can't even find a Lebanese in it. Even the restaurants in the summer play Saudi music instead of Lebanese music which I find really weird, no?
>
> Layla: Downtown is lifeless, you only see Arab tourists and fancy people.

<u>Walking in the city</u>

Two other main themes have been mentioned by my informants as potential attractions in the Downtown, firstly is the new Beirut Souks and secondly, Downtown as a space to walk. Walking in Downtown was mentioned over 15 times as an answer to different questions and therefore I will linger on it.

“Ordinary practitioners of the city live down below. They are walkers whose bodies follow the thick and thin of an urban text they write without being able to read it” (de Certeau 1984, 93). In order to know one’s city, one has to walk in it and discover it; reading it from a map isn’t enough and neither is knowing it from within the car bubble.

> Rouba: I don't go very often I have to say. Sometimes I walk through it because I like it. But I would not go out there.

Downtown Beirut’s main walking access that joined it to the rest of the city were cut and transformed into large highways making Downtown accessible primarily by cars. Some walking accesses are still possible but with the absence of large sidewalks and after passing by numerous construction zones, the passerby is discouraged from arriving Downtown on foot. Only the practiced walkers of the city will know their way safely through shortcuts to the centre and will enjoy walking in it. According to Connerton, freeways are a labor of representation, and in this case a representation of a concept of accessibility, connectivity to the rest of Beirut, modernity and the celebration of a car-based culture that further isolates the City Centre. By doing so, in order to walk in Downtown, one has to get there first by car which can explain the innumerable parking lots that took over the open spaces, and then get out and walk. What is lost then is the possibility to ‘read’ the city as a whole at a pedestrian pace instead of having to transition by car from one separate space to the other in order to walk.

> Elaine: No. I don't find it accessible or inviting. It's not even a place that registers on my mental map of the city, of places I could go for lunch or for a walk. My sense of Downtown is that there are loads of families with nannies

> running after little kids on expensive tricycles. It feels like only a narrow class of people takes advantage of Downtown.

While the Downtown is not accessible by foot, paradoxically Place de l'Étoile which is at its centre is zoned as a separate pedestrian space. This seclusion of a walking space transforms the 'walking' and 'commuting on foot' into an offered 'activity' that none-pedestrians can enjoy. People, in the absence of a bus station, can then drive or take a service (communal taxi) to Downtown, park and walk there, using the space more as a park than as a City Centre and kids can then unload their expensive tricycles and pretend they are in a European city. Beirut currently has only two mains parks and desperately needs more to accommodate the growing population which might explain why people are mainly using the Downtown as a park. However, a private manicured park replacing the City Centre is definitely not the solution and does not fit into the vibrant city life that Beirut has. As put by Jane Jacobs, "there is no magic in simply removing cars from Downtown, and certainly none in stressing peace, quiet, and dead space" (Jacobs 1958). If a park is needed, it should be accessible to all; it should have trees, public bathrooms and street food vendors. But a concrete dead pedestrian space is not a park.

> Salma: Downtown was an open, fairly empty (at that time), 'clean' and un-crowded space, which was very hard to find especially if you live in a fairly crowded and 'tight' neighborhood right in the middle of Beirut, like I did. For me it was like a park but without the green! Nothing more, nothing less.

According to Kabbani, "historically Beirut did not embody squares and urban spaces but like most Arab cities, the Beiruti prime public space was the street"

(Kabbani 1998, 249) and it is only under the Ottoman rule that Martyrs' Square got introduced as the first institutionalized open space. Nevertheless, the main urban life of Beirutis remained concentrated in the streets and the crossing and re-crossing of people's paths helped regenerate daily the social ties that bind the city together. Walking in one's city affects the quality of urban life and lets the walker appropriate the buildings and streets by seeing and living them: "there is a type of experience recognizable only to those who have walked through a particular building or street district" (Connerton 2009, 32). This experience is a personal one of a dreamer in a city; an experience that will bring closer the walker to the city by inscribing its trajectory in his memory.

> Hala: I go there walking, to see friends! To have a nice time discovering the lovely corners and the streets!

The heavy dependency on cars to reach the City Centre reduced the role of the street as a gathering space leaving only the designated manicured and protected pedestrian area for such a gathering. According to Benjamin, "only he who walks the road on foot learns of the power it commands" (Benjamin 1989, 66); therefore, strolling in a car 'tames' the street and its gathering influences. For sure, while Beirut needs pedestrian streets, marking a street as pedestrian will not necessarily make the street more alive neither its interactions more fruitful since it is the contents of the street that makes it a real place of gathering and exchange not its designation. Otherwise it will remain a closeted space for rich families and their nannies. Beside Place de l'Étoile, the only other space that was used as a gather space in the prewar era was Martyrs' Square, but as noted above, it is now placed in the middle of a roundabout and contrary to the promises of the original

Master Plan, the square recently has been contracted to a UAE development company that is planning to build condo buildings in the middle of it:

> Yasmine: today Martyrs' Square has changed a lot. It's been a 14th March area [the political coalition that formed after the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri and that follows his legacy]... and it seems Solidere will build a building in the centre of Martyrs' Square. It is the contrary of what they put as a future picture of Beirut in the end of the 90's in Martyrs' Square... Where it seemed the square will be back like it was in the past.

As a result, the Downtown looks like what Jane Jacobs so correctly predicted: "What will the projects look like? They will be spacious, park-like, and un-crowded. They will feature long green vistas. They will be stable and symmetrical and orderly. They will be clean, impressive, and monumental. They will have all the attributes of a well-kept, dignified cemetery" (Jacobs 1958).

Advertisement for the new towers that will be in Martyrs 'Square. Notice the cement blocks with 'Beirut' written on them that delimit the street. (Photograph by the author)

Taking back the streets

The streets are still the most fruitful public space in Beirut and hold the ever regenerating political and social life; taking important matters to the streets is then the best translation of societal concerns or a way to make pressures against the government, and as Goebbels said, "whoever can conquer the streets also conquers the state" (Connerton 2009, 115). But on the other hand, the streets in principle belong to no one, a characteristic that makes them the only neutral space that can enclose all, a space to be conquered and asserted when needed, a space in the middle. In the case of Solidere, the streets also became a private property owned and controlled by the corporation while Martyrs' Square, the main square of demonstrations and manifestation of public dissent will be transformed into condos that only expats and tourists from the Arabian Gulf can afford. This will be a blow to Beirut's political expression and it threatens to remove once and for all the City Centre from the memory of the inhabitants since demonstrations have already begun to be taken to the streets in other areas of the city. But if taking the streets of Downtown was a way to reassert ownership over it and over its history, similarly to the French revolution, "taking the streets of Paris, walking in it, was a tangible way to diminish the social and political distance between the masses and the bourgeois state" (Connerton 2009, 115). When asked "do you have a happy or a sad memory that happened in Downtown? If yes please describe," many of my informants considered their happiest memories to be when they joined in political demonstration in Downtown (for very different reasons and supporting opposite

sides) but what united them was the freedom and the power invested in taking back the streets:

> Nabil: (Happy) during the demonstrations against the Syrian occupation.
>
> Rim: (Happy and sad) the protests after Hariri's murder.
>
> Rebecca: (Happy) in the spring of 2002 we held an open-ended sit-in at Martyrs' Square in support of Palestine and the intifada, and we launched an underground newspaper. I went with some friends into Place de l'Étoile to sell the paper and try to collect donations. Before the private security guards chased us away, some guy from Kuwait or Saudi Arabia gave me a $50 donation.

The desire and joy in taking back the streets emanate from the feeling that the streets are being owned or robbed from the citizens, and that only in certain times, people can reclaim them back. It also shows the strong civil society movement in Lebanon, the immense desire to change the status quo and the involvement of the youth in political matters and their eagerness to voice their opinions. All of this is not represented in the current 'concept' of a city presented by Solidere as the current 'Beirut'. It is again the complete privatization and marketization of the City Centre and its control by security guards that probably produced this urge to have to assert back a presence in the streets; a feeling that can produce an immense joy when the streets are finally empty and open for all:

> Elaine: (happy memory) I remember very well the first day of the July War in 2006. I was walking from Qantari through Downtown to a sit-in for Gaza on Martyrs' Square with a friend. And the cobblestone streets around Place de L'Étoile were completely abandoned by the usual Gulf tourists. We yelled and could hear our echo and were sort of delighted initially by the sudden absence of all the summer tourists.

This sudden absence of tourists at the eve of yet another war left finally the Downtown to its original residents and brought back Beirut to its everyday political reality that Solidere tries forcefully to hide behind the facades of brands and restored buildings. It might be the creeping back of the truth, the authenticity of the hollow centre that exalts for a moment Beirutis who can identify with the place as part of their own reality and history. When the country is on a verge of a war, in a political turmoil and has many issues to deal with on a daily base, an overly sterile Downtown that speaks English and offers cobblestone roads for nannies and tricycles couldn't feel more false and alienating. But the uses of Downtown as a demonstration place isn't enough to make it again a centre since it is only lending its space from time to time to the people that forcefully occupy it. It is not becoming part of their daily struggles and is not being affected by them either. While the demonstrations are still partly taking place in Martyrs' Square, the square (until the condo projects start) retained its capacity to regroup the people, but it lost its capacity to retain them and represent them.

> Nada: concerning being a political centre, Downtown was a witness to many demonstrations and sit-ins but personally I think it is not enough to make it a centre. It was the only available large space in Beirut at that time that was able to welcome that huge number of people…

The perception of how Beirut should be (or what is missing in Downtown)

<u>Fake vs. authentic</u>

Throughout the answers, some words and concepts kept coming up again and again that define the perception of how Beirut ought to be and how 'un-Beirut-

like' is the Downtown. The most obvious is the dichotomy between 'fake' and 'authentic', where many aspects of Downtown were described as 'fake' in comparison to the more 'authentic' neighborhoods of Hamra and Ashrafieh that 'real' people frequent.

> Nabil: Hamra has an intellectual edge to it, with seemingly real Lebanese. You can find everyone. Downtown is like a continuous Sunday church, everyone is there to exhibit themselves. I like Ashrafieh because architecturally it still preserves the old part of Beirut. It is like Downtown but with more life in it: Old people, poor people, rich people, vegetable shops, it's alive.

The artificiality of Downtown is characterized by the absence of the things it offers to the people. The term 'real' that also was repeated in the answers refers to the people from different economical classes and social statuses who actually live and work in Beirut. What make them real are exactly their diversity and the diversity of their needs, and what makes a neighborhood then 'authentic' is the fact that it is a residential neighborhood that fulfills the needs of those 'real' people: "They banish the street. They banish its function. They banish its variety" (Jacobs 1958). In Beirut the division between residential neighborhoods and non residential ones do not really exist, every neighborhood has places of work, places of residence and paces for entertainment where the community can meet in cafés, restaurants and internet shops. The differences between a neighborhood and another will be in the kind of work; residences, cafes and music in clubs it offers and the kind of people that frequent it; but it is precisely the diversity and the intertwining of these elements that makes the neighborhood seem like a 'real' lived one. Besides the fact that Downtown is a gleaming new English speaking

space with private security, another flagrant difference in the urban planning is that the new Downtown has separate residential neighborhoods and separate areas for offices and restaurants. Furthermore, Downtown is completely closed and deserted at night. Beirut is a city that doesn't sleep. Activity is constant day and night and all the other neighborhoods have at least one or two places (if not the entire street) that stay open all night long.

> Yasmine: yes I prefer Hamra area because in Hamra I can see all kind of people. And people go there for working too. I also prefer Hamra for pubbing, there are not pubs in DT. I also like Hamra because it is residential and truer. The buildings are more alive. They have true history. In DT it's like a new Barbie house for everyone to visit for an hour or two only. In Hamra I can spend all the day without getting bored. I can have a coffee outside, I can do shopping, I can see friends by accident, I can have a nice lunch, I can sleep there in a nice hotel, I can assist a conference, I can have a professional meeting, and I can rent an office… I am richer there, not in appearances only like in DT. I am richer as an alive person.

In order to have a life in a neighborhood one needs to be able to afford it and to be able to do the majority of the aspects that constitutes their lives: this is what makes them feel richer in experiences and alive. For sure not every neighborhood can cater for all the population and some neighborhoods have been heavily gentrified, but the function of the City Centre in an Arabic city and especially in Beirut was crucial to bring the people together. Other elements mentioned in the interviews that are present in many neighborhoods but are missing in Downtown include: book stores, small shops, casual bars, the capacity to walk everywhere, a

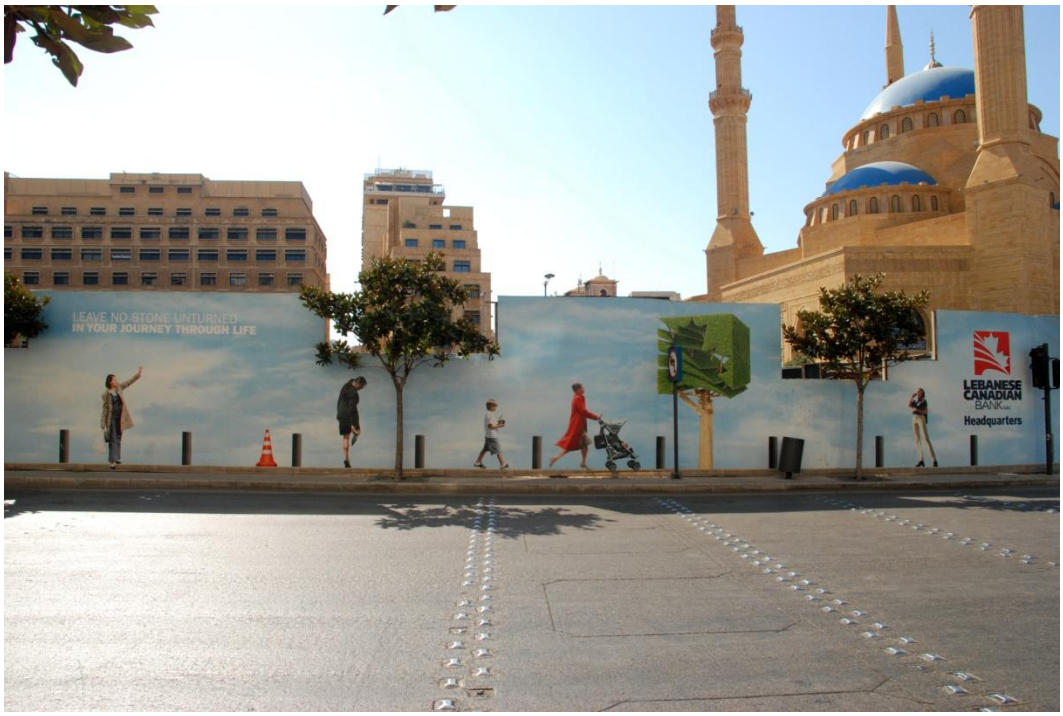
sense of neighborhood and community, the fact of being able to live and work in it, accessible and affordable places, a sense of continual ownership of the shops and mainly buildings that are reconstructed (or not) differently by their own owners that gives a sense of diversity. “The most interesting open spaces were those in which several currents of life came together: working-class people, well-dressed junior executives, mink-stoled ladies at their shopping, and, above all, children, who add a quality of noise, excitement, and vibrancy to the urban scene that is altogether indispensable” (Jacobs 1958).

> Salma: Rawsheh is more part of Beirut, 'real' people would go there to relax. We can find all kind of affordable restaurants in the area and it felt more 'natural' with the beach and its heavy humidity in the air. Downtown was definitely the opposite. Fake, constructed, out of place and people went there to play 'pretend'. On another hand you can see the differences between these two places from their 'touristic identity'. Rawsheh had horse car rides, the view, the beach, the simplicity and ice cream, turmos (street food) etc... Downtown felt like a trap, and the main goal is to get as much crumbs as they can from the big fat Arabic cake made from oil!! Downtown is simply a business deal.

The fakeness of Downtown is apparent in its sophistication, its wannabe international standardized market, its elaborate fusions menus, the images and ads of its shops and brands showing plastic-perfectly looking Europeans or Americans faces and bodies, and the harmonious homogenously studied architectural style that is supposed to appear Arabic. Added to this is the invested effort to please and attract Gulf tourists and thus to invent and market an identity that is favorable to them while branding it as Lebanese. It then became a place where people have to ‘pretend’ to be something else when they visit it, pretend to have different

tastes in order to fit in and pretend to be able to afford the merchandise. 'Barbie house' is then an ideal description of the Solidere area that has been designed with a uniform set of consumers in mind; a place where only plastic dreams can live; a perfect place unable to accept the chaotic complex Lebanese society:

> Zeina: I would certainly choose Hamra, because it accepts me as a space before I decided to accept it.



Advertisement fill people in the empty Square and block access to the construction site. (Photograph by the author)

Chaotic

Another term that came more than once in the interviews and that I have used frequently, is the description of Beirut as a chaotic city. While this description might appear to be influenced by an orientalistic perspective of an Arab city, it nevertheless has been adopted by the inhabitants of Beirut and has been regarded as a general characteristic that governs the daily life in the city. Of course those

who never left Beirut might find it normal and wouldn't necessarily call it chaotic since such an attribute can only be given in comparison to other cities, but even then, as an internalization of how tourists and expats view it, Beirutis tell tales and take pride in the chaos that reigns in their city. As a result, there is a sense of survival for those who live in Beirut and when mixed with some Lebanese humor it produces T-shirts for foreigners that read: I Survived Beirut. Also not to forget that Beirut is a small city on the Mediterranean Sea and just as if the sea calls on people to travel, it is quite hard to find a Beiruti that hasn't traveled outside of Beirut.

> Maha: Downtown cannot be the heart of Beirut because of its lack of authenticity, I cannot say that a place represents the heart of a city if it is not true to its spirit. I see Beirut as a chaotic city; beautiful in its chaos. Downtown does not fit at all in this chaos. While writing, I realized that most of the good times that I associate with the Downtown are moments of "chaos" ('Fête de la Musique', outdoor concerts, demonstrations in front of the ESCWA, sit-in for Palestine etc). It's weird.

While Solidere is trying really hard to plan and create an organized Downtown that is supposed to reflect the essence of Beirut, it is missing the point of what some people expect of a Downtown. A Downtown cannot be offered; people make a Downtown, people choose how to experience it and appropriate its corners in the simplest ways. People also choose what to remember in it. This is apparent in the answers to the question "what is your favorite spot in Downtown and why":

> Miro: there is a nice tree there I like to sit under it makes feel good.

> Salma: There used to be a spot between several buildings. It's not a specific place; it was more of a corner, so unless you know it you don't just end up there. It was cool, it felt like we're in hiding and no one could see us. I don't even know anymore where it was exactly.

At the end of the day, what registered in people's minds today of the billion dollar Downtown are little pieces of hidden urban experience. People furnish their own cities and there is a certain joy in discovering its hidden corner and transforming it into a giant playground. There is also a joy in sharing the space with others while being able to personalize it at the same time, and in using it for a different reason than what it was intended for, an experience that urban places can offer so generously. However, on a positive note, even in the absence of a welcoming Downtown that doesn't 'accept' or cater to all Lebanese, not surprisingly, resilient Beirutis are still able to find their places in their city and inhabit it as an extension of their own homes, a concept I will get back to later on.

> Salma: My house had a great location, but sometimes you just needed a break, or an escape, and Downtown was, for a while, my break, away from home.

Chapter 3

Memory

On memory

Remembering the war

"In its countless alveoli space contains compressed time. That is what space is for" (Bachelard 1969, 8). Thus to look at history and memory in physical terms, one has to instead look at the space of its happening. Therefore, in order to locate my own childhood memories and to be able to construct my own timeline, I began by asking my parents about our whereabouts as a family during the war and the duration of our stay in each place. One thing we both noticed immediately is that they could easily remember the places that we occupied but had a very hard time fixing a date or even a year, and their stories did not always fit with the logic and timeline of the war. The general appellation of the 16 years of Lebanese war is actually an umbrella term that refers to a cluster of many small wars and in between them different times of relative peace in different parts of Lebanon. People typically attach their own personal memories onto the war timeline, which in its turn became a reference point and a background for their personal lives. Stating an event is then easily recognizable if referenced to a war period. For example, I was born at the end of the Israeli invasion, and we fled to Cyprus at the beginning of the Aoun/Geagea war. I also remember that besides moving temporarily countless times inside of Beirut, we were obliged to flee several times

from Beirut for different extended periods: we went to my mom's village (Qusaibeh), to a village in the south west of Lebanon (Ksarnaba) and to a village called the meeting of the two rivers (Moultaka Elnahrein) that for the longest time I thought was Iraq, since I had learned later at school that Iraq had two rivers and it was only a few years back, when asking my parents about our whereabouts in Iraq, that I realized we never went there. As Bachelard puts it, "for a knowledge of intimacy, localization in the spaces of our intimacy is more urgent than determination of dates" (Bachelard 1969, 9), and this is why my memories of these places are quite vivid thought even now, neither me nor my parents can agree on what place we fled to first, when and for how long. Our memories recorded spatial changes but not durations. Our life during the war was an intimate family experience and the space of its happening is what mattered and what gets remembered.

Remembering the Downtown

While I began in the first chapter by recalling some of my first memories of the Downtown, the majority of the people that answered my survey and who are from my generation also saw the Downtown either right after the war when it was in complete ruins or during the reconstruction process at various stages, and some of them only at the end of the reconstruction. Those who saw the ruins of Downtown at the end of the war were too young to remember details or to know the place other than to have a general feeling of destruction. The place was completely

foreign to them and in need of interpretation by someone who could encode its past through the rubble.

> Fadi: Shortly after the civil war, Downtown was still destroyed. I remember the one street: grass growing in the middle of the street, muddy holes, bullet-ridden facades, torched and graphitized walls, gutted buildings.

Though we have different recollections of the Downtown since we saw it at different times, a common theme that emerged is that we were all taken there on a tour by our parents to see the place for the first time, as if being taken to see the Downtown became a postwar ritual in order to mark the end of the war by showing its effect, its remains and its past. Remembering or allowing oneself to remember and talk about the times before the war marks in itself the end of the war since during the war the practice of everyday life took over and made it close to impossible to remember what it was like before it. You also can only confirm the end of the war by actually walking on the most forbidden territory which is the Downtown that was a no man's land and by crossing the infamous Green line.

> Rim: right after the war stopped and they got rid of the rabid dogs, my father took us to see the remains of DT.
>
> Hala: It was during the civil war, I was 5 years old, and I was in the car of my father... it was ruins! Destroyed and remains of bullets covering all the buildings! It was a horrible memory; I did not understand what it was!

Downtown was a land that none of us saw during the war. We all grew and were familiar with different parts of Beirut: me in West Beirut, many of the respondents in East Beirut. Downtown for all of us represents then the prewar land, the space that unifies us all and that was hidden from all of us. Also our parents might have had the desire to transmit a part of their history to us and a

better image of their country than the one we grew up seeing, but "when the landscape goes… it destroys the past for those who are left. People have no sense of belonging anywhere" (Khalaf and Said 1993, 93). The postwar generation did not have a clear idea of what it meant to be Lebanese, neither to what 'Lebanon' they belonged. This desire to transmit the memory of the prewar time comes also from a civic duty that many parents had towards the education of the postwar generation in order to foster in them a peace perspective. It is as important to stress the fact that Lebanese lived happily together as Christians and Muslim in peace before the war as to also mention and remember the war and its atrocities in order for it to be remembered and therefore hopefully never repeated. This was also the slogan of a civil society campaign: "let it be remembered so it doesn't get repeated" (my translation).

> Maha: I have a special remembrance of a building that had so many holes, it looked like a Swiss cheese. One of my teachers showed me this building in particular and told me we had to keep it as witnesses to the horror of the war with a large sign: lest we forget.

In present day Beirut, the fight to have the memory of the war kept alive and not just hidden behind giant reconstruction project billboards is still going, and the first Memory Museum is scheduled to open its doors in 2013 after a long public debate on the matter. As mentioned earlier, the end of the war was marked by a general amnesty and therefore by an imposition of a forced forgetting without a resolution of the issues that started the war in the first place: in postwar Lebanon, national unity is built on an official refusal to address the details of the conflict (Silverstein and Makdisi 2006). To add more to the memory confusion, many of

the current key political figures are either the same ones that were during the war, or if the war-time political figure had been assassinated (which is the case with many), then it is their sons who are holding their position and therefore keeping the same family name. As a result, while reading the news, it is sometimes difficult to locate oneself in a post, during or prewar era. The problem is further aggravated by a failure and even a refusal to adopt or agree upon a history book. "The republic of Lebanon gained its independence in 1943; its history came to a sudden end in 1946" (Makdisi 1997, 201). The official Lebanese history book curriculum ends at 1946, leaving the rest of the history to be learned by each individual according to the memory, stories and telling of their parents and social/religious/political group, therefore creating multiple histories and multiple stories of the war. It also generates multiple memories produced by different narrations. According to de Certeau, stories "traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories" (de Certeau 1984, 115), and Downtown Beirut being the centre stage of many stories, it is woven into different narrations told to us by our parents and vice versa. It also creates its own stories for us kids who can imagine them:

> Layla: I was little, I don't remember well, maybe five, or most probably a bit older, logically if it was when the war ended, maybe was it in 1990? Not sure, I don't have a clear memory about my age. I know it was all destroyed, and my parents were showing me the ruins, what was left of the buildings and the streets, and they kept mentioning the places and buildings that no longer existed. They both had a nostalgic tone when recalling the memories and a very informational tone while talking to me, as if explaining very seriously what was

> where, maybe for me to know what they once knew and lived that I would never see. It was most probably on a Sunday, and to me, it was as if, instead of going to some touristic site to spend a normal Sunday, we were kind of sightseeing in the destroyed down town...The stories sometimes nice, when they involved people I know (grandparents, parent's friends), but often, I just disconnected as I couldn't relate to any place they were mentioning (Rivoli etc..); I felt there was a little story about the place, it was entertaining the adults, it was about them more than about me, I was just walking in the black streets. It was an impressive site, but I wasn't feeling danger or anything. I was as impressed as if they had told me that many many years ago, Romans had built this huge temple, with huge stones etc... It was the feeling of walking between the ruins of a historical event, civilization that I was trying to imagine with the little information and huge imagination of a child.

Whereas Downtown could tell stories of many wars, rulers and political insurgencies that passed by it, each one of its inhabitants or passersby can tell their own stories in it as well. My own stories are 'inherited' and composed from the multitude of narrations that my parents told me about the life that used to animate the presently destroyed shops. These narrations enabled me to imagine the Downtown, and when I finally saw it, I started to form my own impressions. Therefore, my memory of it is a combination of my personal experiences mixed with a culturally transmitted memory. Moreover, stories mark out boundaries with other stories, other notions and other places. By adopting and believing and remembering a story, we create and delimit a particular reality of a space and fix it in its physicality; consequently, my own stories create the physical boundaries of my own Downtown and the time frame of my memories.

The politics of memory

Erasing the Arabic past

Memory is a selective recollection of the past based on personal, physical and cultural factors. While asking people about the Downtown, I had different answers depending on the recollection and the memory of each. Some remembered it as a glorious past, others as a dirty old rotten city; some adore the new Downtown and think that the old one was garbage, while others lament its destruction: "as Maurice Halbwachs averred, multiple memories and 'counter memories' always exist in mutual conflict within any given social formation" (Silverstein and Makdisi 2006, 9). Of course the cultivation of taste and social distinction also plays an important role, but what concerns me here are the mechanisms of memory and the political aspects behind it since the "control of a society's memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power" (Connerton 1989, 1). Analyzing the ways memory is represented can perhaps explain to us the motives behind the specific power in question. Looking at the Downtown, memory became a central theme in the politics of Solidere and as alleged by Gavin (Head of the Urban Development Division of Solidere and Director of Urban Development for Solidere International), "historical or city memory has become the bases of the master plan. Beirut is an ancient layered city containing the surviving features of some twelve distinct civilizations" (Gavin 1998, 222). Solidere is also advertising on its website the future launching of the 'Heritage Trail', a trail that is supposed to walk the visitors throughout the various parts of Downtown to experience the remains of those civilizations, and since it has not

opened yet, in the meantime, the website is offering a virtual tour of the trail with text describing in detail every landmark and its origins. Moreover, in the overview section of the website, the chapter 'History and Culture' begins with the following: "Beirut City Centre contains sites and monuments spanning 5,000 years and layers of civilizations from the Canaanite to the Ottoman, including the Phoenician, Persian, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Umayyad, Abbasid, Crusader and Mamluk periods." It is interesting to notice that, while the Umayyad and Abbasid are part of the Islamic Caliphates and the Mamluk part of the larger Muslim empire and all three civilizations spoke Arabic, on the website of Solidere both in the 'Heritage Trail' and the 'History and Culture', Solidere did not mention once the word Arab or Arabic. It is also worth mentioning that the website is solely in English. As for the most recent layers of history of the last century, its physical memory in Downtown was destroyed mainly by the war and by Solidere; the architectural memory of Arabic, Ottoman and French past is largely lost and has been replaced by new buildings and parking lots while the "unconscious memory: the archeological finds that lies beneath the ground" (A. Salam 1992) has been partially salvaged due to international pressures by UNESCO and by some urgent archeological digs that halted the construction for a while. Solidere on its website presently claims to preserve the memory of the place by restoring some of the buildings, but even after a perfect reconstruction identical to the original, contrary to the effect desired, demolishing the surroundings of the buildings and erasing the social fabric that created them can only remove them from their context and diminish their real value.

> Maha: I must admit that I like the architecture of the buildings and I am glad they preserved much of the colonial and Ottoman architecture and some little Roman sites, and others. In fact, it is only when I showed the city to foreigners that I realized how much I could not admit that the buildings were beautiful from an architectural point of view, probably because I know how this city was built.

In a book published by Solidere and Robert Saliba entitled *Beirut City Center Recovery: the Foch-Allenby and Étoile Conservation Area* that explains the reconstruction processes and the policies behind it, Solidere explicates: "as explained by Nan Ellin: 'to design by analogy means borrowing past city forms (morphology) and building forms (typology) - the formal aesthetic of the past- without their meanings because the meanings of these forms have changed with time… the significance of a place, for Rossi, lay not in its function, or even in its form, but in the memories associated with it'" (Saliba and Solidere 2004). The trouble with this statement is that first, choosing a past is inherently political and reflects on the future vision of the developers; second, ridding the past of its meaning gives us a city made of stones with no memories attached to them, ready to be filled with any memory-narrative imposed by the builder. Also if we are to project ancient forms into the present, the question will be what exactly is considered past; what is going to be preserved and what are we omitting? According to Lebanese law, "antiquities are those human products that belong to whatever civilization prior to the year 1700" (el-Dahdah 1998, 73), and therefore the law does not protect the artifacts that are not considered 'ancient' and buildings that are not made of stone are not considered architectural heritage and

thus are left unpreserved. As a result, in the reconstruction of the Downtown, Solidere preserved some of Lebanon's colonial legacy but destroyed all the buildings that were built in the 50s and 60s, "any masonry building with a red tile roof is preserved while modern architecture (which helped construct an identity for a young republic's postcolonial freedom) remains unseen and demolished or disfigured at will" (el-Dahdah 1998, 73). However, the conservation of the physical memory is crucial to the formation and conservation of the personal memory since "something closed must retain our memories while leaving them their original values as images" (Bachelard 1969, 6). Therefore the physical presence of the place of the formation of the memory is crucial to its preservation and continuation, and as soon as the physical space of the memory is destroyed, the faster the memory will disappear. Moreover since space can serve as a representation of a focalized time, the stones of the Downtown contain in them the memories of happiness and sadness of many Lebanese; consequently the different times and durations of these memories are literally inscribed on these stones as witness of a frozen history. In the case of my parents, the Downtown contained the memories of their happy moments and a reminder of their national struggles of the 60s and 70s. Like many Beirutis, they live "fixations of happiness" (Bachelard 1969, 87) each time they think about the old Downtown, as if their happy memories were literally buried in it. Presently Solidere erased almost entirely the physical recollection of the prewar architecture that was the product of the cultural glory of Lebanon in the 60s. Instead, it created a Downtown that reflects solely some of the French mandate era and a very small

part of the Ottoman period, thus making Beirut look more like a French colonial sea side town than a capital of an independent young Arab nation. Dahdah while talking about the problems that accompany the erasure of the modern architectural history of the city, states that this "position can be fatal to an architecture that wants to be divested from rooted political notions, which is precisely what a democracy in its youth would want to have abolished (dynastic and genealogical rights)" (el-Dahdah 1998, 77). Omitting this period obliterates the most leftist, pro Arabic, revolutionary period that Beirut saw since the independence of Lebanon, and a replacement of it with historical symbols of past conquerors therefore further alienates people who lived during that period and gathered in Martyrs' Square.

Remembering in separate groups

The social memories of the war and the Downtown are disparate and contradictory and resemble the actual social fabric of Lebanon. While "in a village (…) individuals remember in common" (Connerton 1989, 17) since all that happens is witnessed collectively and what is not witnessed is gossiped about. The memory of the war in Lebanon is a multitude of different memories shared by different social and religious groups separated from each other. However, entire neighborhoods have been cleansed and massive internal migration changed the demography of the place; people from same villages and neighborhoods got separated and had to emigrate according to their religious affiliations. Therefore, people who used to share the same reality within the same neighborhood presently

experience a set of different memories from their old neighbors and share a set of new memories with newly met people from their own religious background. Consequently, the memories of the old days were shared between different social groups than the memories of the war since the prewar groups separated, migrated and became part of new religiously homogenous groups. These new groups had no particular common ground to build their identity on other than their religious/confessional identity and the memory of what they had experienced together. What they did not experience or what they did not greatly experience together according to where and when they where during the war is outside of their scope of memory. How they remember the Downtown depends then heavily on what happened to them during the war, what part of Beirut they lived in and what religious group they belonged to, which confirms Connerton's depiction of historical reconstruction as being dependent on social memory. The memory regarding the old Downtown also changed with the different shifts in the political scene. This indicates how selective and influential memory can be, and reveals its hidden powers as a political tool. As such, some people I interviewed who were directly affected economically by the destruction of Downtown but who also happen to belong to the same religious/political group as Hariri unsurprisingly defended the politics of Solidere and the reconstruction plan, and accordingly remember the old Downtown as an ugly cluster of dirty houses. As put by Connerton regarding the processes of memory reconstruction of a certain period, "what the shape of the twentieth century looks like will depend crucially upon what social group we happen to belong to" (Connerton 1989, 20). Similarly what

social group Beirutis happen to belong to affects greatly their memory of the old Downtown, but also it heavily tints their likes and dislikes towards the new one and in general dictates their current interactions with the space.

Places memories in the Downtown

No memories

When asked "do you have a happy or a sad memory that happened in Downtown? If yes please describe," some respondents described their happy memories in the music concerts or the political activities, other described their sad memories of seeing the Downtown transformed into an island of luxury, but curiously, the majority stated that they had no memories at all that happened in the Downtown:

> Ghassan: no memories. Oh ask me about Hamra-- I will write down my life! :)
>
> Petra: I don't have any specific memory.
>
> Layla: Nothing much... All memories are very neutral. In the new Downtown, I just remember the day Hariri died. It was very sunny and my friend and I were arguing whether to go sunbathe in Saint Georges (near where the bomb blew) or to go to Place de l'Étoile. I wanted Saint Georges, insisting on it. The bomb exploded while she was parking in Downtown... then we were having a coffee and saw all the cars coming to the parliament… It took some time to figure out what was happening. Until now, I remember that every time I go there... But it's probably because I hardly go, and I don't really have memories of any kind there.

This neutrality reflects the dissociation from the place; a place that holds no memory is a place that has not been lived in, and therefore has not offered itself to the people as a place to be occupied. Even worse, some have a feeling of

repulsion of the Downtown each time they visit it, as if the place is throwing them away, or the flagrant injustices that happened in it are so clear that it becomes difficult to view it even as a neutral foreign space:

> Fadi: Overall, I get a sick feeling in my stomach when I go down there.

In this memory vacuum where not much is being said or remembered by the prewar generation and not much is remembered by the postwar generation either, Lebanese artist Nada Sehnaoui was inspired by the double destruction of Martyrs' Square to make an installation in 2003 in the middle of the square entitled *Fractions of Memory* and asked the public to respond via the press and the internet to her question: "Do you have a memory of daily life in Downtown Beirut before the start of the war in 1975? If you wish to share this memory with the public, please: write a text recalling this memory, on one white page or more, in the language of your choice, handwritten or typed, signed or anonymous, and send this text to the following address." As a result, 360 structures that resemble buildings were constructed in the middle of the square in rows using 20 tons of newspaper; many structures had the public's responses while others were just blank pages representing the missing texts and lost memories. The installation ironically is maybe the first real rebuilding of the Downtown, where stories, narrations and buildings filled the space again through a shared rebuilding project of memory.

Installation *Fractions of Memory.* (http://www.nadasehnaoui.com/)

On her website, the artist features also a painting entitled *No Memories* that is a piece constructed with the text 'No Memories' that was sent to her as an answer to her same question. To me, the painting looks like building blocks of a wall; windows of apartment buildings; a city grid; or even names on tombstones… either way, art conveys a feeling and can be interpreted differently, and to my eyes, it reflects the necessity to realize the absence of memory in Downtown

Beirut and reflect on those empty buildings in the Downtown that are neatly constructed with white polished stone next to each other but contain no memories of the old Downtown before the war. There are many causes to why Downtown does not lend itself to memories, but as one of my respondents explains:

> Ziad: I do not have memories in Downtown. I think the place is too plastic to be suitable for memories.

No Memories painting. (http://www.nadasehnaoui.com/)

New spaces of meanings

The previous generation constructed its identity on certain places in Downtown, notably the Rivoli, Martyrs' Square, La Ronde, Birket el Ayntabli and many other key neutral meeting places that gave life to the city. In the case of our generation, despite being offered a restored, private and exclusive Downtown, people could find their own personal 'places of meanings' and as a result appropriated spaces and meeting points. When asked "what is your favorite spot in Downtown and why?" almost all the respondents answered either the 'Roman bath', which are long steps surrounded by archeological remains of Roman baths and delimited by a small garden; or the 'ruins', which is an excavated area in the middle of Downtown that shows different archeological layers below street level and that is bordered by a strip of luxurious cafés.

> Fadi: I suppose that it would be the 'roman steps'. It is just a place to sit down without being part of something.
>
> Maha: The Roman baths, because they are genuine, historical and not superimposed.
>
> Rouba: The Roman baths, it's beautiful.
>
> Petra: The "half-park half-ruins". It is beautiful.

While Solidere offered Beirutis a billion dollar project, markets and cafés, the general attraction towards the Downtown is still in order to occupy open and accessible spaces that are free of charge. The Roman baths are a very positive and much welcomed new addition to the Downtown, an addition that has been popularized during 'la Fête de la Musique' and the free concerts that take place on the stairs. It therefore nowadays has become the only real public space in

Downtown, and the attraction to it is also fueled by its neutrality since as Kabbani puts it, “for a space to be truly public specifically in the context of a post civil war urban environment, it should posses a high degree of neutrality. Neutrality allows the general public to feel equal” (Kabbani 1998, 244). Kabbani in this quote is talking about the religious neutrality that is needed to make a space public for Lebanese, but in the case of the Romans steps, it is more an economic neutrality that does not impose a capitalistic vision on the passerby and does not transform one into a faceless consumer. However, this vision is not shared by all and is not so rosy for the trained Lebanese eye that can spot the erasure of the memory even in the conservation of the ruins:

> Salma: I didn't mind the ruins either; it was often uncrowded.. But I couldn't sometimes look at these ruins without being disgusted. I visited these ruins before they rebuilt Downtown, and it was fascinating! I was young, so probably easily impressed, but even then I could understand the value, history and the importance of these ruins. Now it feels artificial, 'shrank' and staged; I didn’t even look at them much when I went there.

Ruins in the middle of Downtown (Photograph by the author)

During the war, the inaccessibility to certain key places and the division of Beirut into different parts changed the geography and topography of the city, created its own new spaces of meanings and "produced its own lexicon and iconography of places" (Khalaf and Said 1993, 108). While prominent places of Downtown lost their identity, new locations within the city that mark certain crossings between opposite fighting groups, or infamous towers filled with snipers became the new landmarks, and their names circulated as the identifiers of feared and avoided space. They "became fearsome points of reference and demarcation lines, part of the deadly logistic of contested spaces" (Khalaf and Said 1993, 109). Also other crossings and safe meeting spots rose to the surface and new plazas and centres emerged out of ordinary urban fabrics. In the same manner, the postwar generation picked its own meaningful landmarks in Downtown, and chose places that did not have great significance in the prewar time but, unlike many, are still standing nowadays in their destroyed form. According to Zivkovic, "places of power" are places that "have become widely shared symbolic tokens in a particular polity because they accumulated many and varied layers of meaning". Such places also "tend to act as 'pegs' or 'anchors' not only in the 'national geography of the mind,' but also in the 'social frameworks of memory'" (Zivkovic 2011, 169). One of those 'pegs' that the war generation chose to attach meanings onto is a modern architecture movie theatre that was built in the 60s in the shape of a giant egg and that was called Beirut City Centre. Nowadays the building is partly destroyed but still standing, has clear bullet holes and destruction marks on it and is currently referred to as the Egg, the soap, the

bubble theater, or the Dome. Upon answering my question "what is your favorite spot in Downtown and why", three informants chose the Dome:

> Ziad: the Dome because it is still in ruins and still forms an original work of architecture.
>
> Rebecca: The "bubble theater" next to Martyrs' Square - one of the only places not yet "reconstructed" and so still looks and feels real and accessible. I went to a number of amazing arts events there.
>
> Nisrine: the Dome, our magnificent Dome. It became obsolete but is still full of poetry, and architecturally very interesting, not to consider its fair value is a serious mistake. It is bizarrely the only real cultural corner of the city. There are all the others but it is the only building that still perspire the sense of HISTORY, pains, death and life.

The Dome, or the Egg (http://www.aadip9.net/flavie/2009/11/the-beirut-city-centre-buildin.html)

Going back to Zivkovic, he states, and very rightly so, that "the new generations are hanging their intimate memories on different pegs," and in the case of the

Dome, maybe because it represents a past attempt to modernize, maybe because its shape stands out and no one could imagine how it would look if not destroyed, maybe because it has the sequels of the war on it and mostly because it was unknown and unimportant for Solidere and the older generation, for all these reasons, the new generation decided to embody its constructed sense of history and engrave its imaginary memory on the walls of the Dome. The place was closed and deemed dangerous to be in for the longest time, but after many groups of young artists and curious wanderers ignored the warning and occupied it, they then obliged Solidere to let others in and made exhibitions in it, projected movies on its walls and transformed it into the primary space of the underground music scene, rave parties, art installations and experimental videos. While every year the Dome is declared by Solidere to be unfit for public use and slated for destruction, every year the public continues to ignore the policies and use the space. Finally in 2009 Solidere sold the Dome to a UAE investment house that will transform it into a 600 million dollar 'Beirut Gate' tower. Fierce resistance from young activists has been organizing since then and a Facebook group *Save the Egg* followed by a Facebook cause with more than 5000 adherents has been formed in order to discuss the ways to pressure the company and stop the demolition. On the day of writing this, the group still could not yet stop the destruction and was discussing on the main page the new half measures that the construction company will be willing to take to keep part of the egg, notably the foundation but not the top of it (and therefore not the Egg shape). If the Egg will be destroyed, Beirut

will lose yet another icon, a memory and a public space and will be even a step closer to becoming another Dubai.

Historical continuity

Beirut, an ancient city for the future

According to Angus Gavin, "the master plan team of Beirut in the early 1990s believed that (…) the plan should deliver a message of cultural continuity and pluralism; not the imposition of a foreign order" (Gavin 1998, 219). With the results of the archeological digs, Solidere constructed its new image on the basis of a historical continuity (Kassir 2003) and launched its slogan "Beirut, ancient city for the future" with a logo "Beirut" written in Arabic letters as a signature engraved on cement blocks all over Downtown. Beirut the city is now branded "Beirut." However, this concept of historical continuity embedded in the slogan was supposed to incite the national imaginary to see Beirut as a glorious city from the past, propelled in time toward the future, via Solidere. In this case, Solidere appears as the only link between Beirut's past and its possible future, an inevitable link that is only transitory and therefore not considered as a period as such but as work in progress that cannot be criticized before it is completed. Most importantly, the slogan ignores the present with its war torn buildings, the economic situation of the country and the demolition of the Downtown, and inscribes itself within the general politics of forced collective amnesia. Under the pretext of building a historical continuity and conserving the memory, buildings like the Phoenicia have been restored to their identical shapes, and by a cruel

irony Solidere proposed to rebuild in Wadi Abu Jamil buildings identical to those it destroyed (Kassir 2003). Whereas restoring old buildings and rebuilding a war torn city are a necessity, one has to wonder of the values of rebuilding something identical to its past, especially that the restoration of the buildings alone makes the city look like it made a jump back in time while its inhabitants are living in the present: "Beirut" (the slogan) does not look like Beirut the city anymore, but instead looks like a vacuum sealed past. On another note, Dahdah while commenting on the motto "Beirut, ancient city for the future," points out that "what is currently being returned to, namely the ancientness to which our motto refers, predates the very identity of the country itself, born in modern times" (el-Dahdah 1998, 77); it turns the words 'ancient' and 'future' into commodities that are being sold to us instead of the present. The search for historical continuity and the obsession with digging up a nation's roots has been the pillars of many political parties that manipulated those roots and the memories attached to them. Although "societies are self interpreting communities and have the images of themselves as continuously existing" (Connerton 1989, 12), in the case of 'Beirut', the society it is interpreting has existed continuously since Phoenician times but has accidently dropped 15 years of war from its memory.

War postcards

Nowadays Beirut has not only dropped the war from its memory but it still has kept some aspects of the prewar era frozen in time, notably the post cards of different landmarks of Lebanon that are sold to tourists in Downtown. While

some parts of the Downtown have been restored back to their identical prewar shape and thus let the visitor think that we are still living in the 60s, all the postcards that are found in Lebanon presently date from the 60s and 70s, which adds to this historical confusion and creates a false sense of history.

Current/old postcard (http://postcardglobe.blogspot.com/)

"In being frozen in visual form, history threatens to become an aesthetic object, a commodity, a spectacle, a fetish, rather than a narrative, a process or a struggle" (Makdisi 2006, 206); thus the historical aspect of the 60s is removed from its context, especially since the majority of buildings in the postcards are currently destroyed, and is being used only as a commodity to sell an image of a prosperous Lebanon that never knew wars. These postcards show "neither nostalgia nor amnesia. They are prosthetics devices" (Makdisi 2006, 203) that only replace the

images and memories of the present with the ones of the past and therefore transpose a morbid fixation on a past that is in constant need to be literally revived from under the rubble in order to continue refuting the present. The postcards are the responsibility of the Ministry of Tourism, and similar to Solidere's reconstruction project, they "offer to free Beirutis from the burden of history itself" (Makdisi 2006, 203) and resurrect for them another reality that was buried in the past. Nowadays, the only real postcard that Beirut could claim to have is the result of an art project presented by filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige featuring the work of Abdallah Farah, a professional photographer who was commissioned by the Lebanese State to take pictures that were edited as postcards between 1968 and 1969. Farah made some of the most famous postcards of the Downtown which contributed to the prewar romanticized image of Lebanon, but during the war, when the buildings present in the postcards were being bombed, Farah started to burn his negatives on the spot of the damaged buildings therefore damaging their image and documenting the war. His negatives nowadays are maybe the only war-postcards of the Downtown and the best representation of its past and present:

War postcard 1of Martyrs ‘Square
(http://lebanesephotographymagazine.wordpress.com/2010/10/15/abdallah-farah-1968-lebanon-beirut-postcards/)

War postcard 2 of Martyrs ‘Square
(http://lebanesephotographymagazine.wordpress.com/2010/10/15/abdallah-farah-1968-lebanon-beirut-postcards/)

An opening towards the sea

Narration of historical continuity and talk about memory are both used by Solidere to justify architectural and urban design choices made in the master plan, notably the destruction of the Rivoli and many other buildings in order to open Martyrs' Square towards the sea: “The war had not obliterated the past. Where the fabric has been destroyed, the site’s topography and historic views to the sea and mountains revealed a pre-existing order, other patterns and remembered places that had survived in the collective memory, and the wealth of the city’s archaeological heritage that lay beneath the soil awaiting the influence that it might exert, once exposed, in shaping and enriching the city of the future” (Gavin 1998, 219). In this sense, the past referred to is most probably the Roman one that, according to Solidere, should logically affect the ways the current city should look since it ‘survived in the collective memory’. Memory is then transmitting ancient street layouts but ignores the recent past of Lebanon. Gavin also give a personal logic to the site and space itself, independently of the people that lived in it, as if the stones of the Downtown have become what matters most for the project and thus have full authority to dictate the future for the inhabitants. Solidere in this sense is a savior that helped Beirut gets rid of its 60s and 70s past in order to shine again as a Mediterranean, Phoenician city. In a quote previously cited in chapter one, Gavin personalized Beirut and considered that it dreamed for almost a century of opening Martyrs’ Square to the sea; a dream that only Solidere knew off, and that surprisingly, is very lucrative since it gives a sea view to the project. In this sense, memory talk is adopted by Solidere as a narration

used for political and economical gains and should be read as such especially after the private building company branded the city 'Beirut', defined it as a city memory and declared itself the preserver of this memory.

The empty square, with an opening towards the sea. Virgin megastore is the building to the left. (Photograph by the author)

Again, working with the theme of memory, Nada Sehnaoui in an installation in 2004 entitled *Plastic Memory Containers*, that took place in the northern coastal town of Byblos, was invited to make a site-specific work near the 6000 year old ruins. According to her website, she states that after some research, she very fast realized how proud were the residents of their 6000 years of history, but also how little they knew of their recent history, especially the civil war. She then decided to install 100 white plastic buckets with 3000 crumpled paper balls written all over with the same text: "How meaningful is it to have a 6000-year old history when we have no memory of our recent past?" The same question is relevant to

Beirut and its memory politics that constantly bombards us with our Phoenician past but hides our more relevant recent one. The retrieval of the civil war memory and the reconstruction of the Downtown should both be an imperative matter discussed by civil society. As Salam warns us, "the reconstruction of a city that has been divided, as well as damaged, by war is an ever-greater responsibility; neglecting it may result in permanent harm to the nation as a whole. If war is too serious to be left to the generals, the reconstruction of a city destroyed by war should certainly not be left in the hands of the developers" (Salam and Capezzuto 2003, 59).

Plastic Memory Containers (http://www.nadasehnaoui.com/)

Nationalistic perspective

The end of the war in 1991 resulted in the creation of the 2nd republic after the Taef accord and was headed by Prime Minister Hariri. Therefore the reconstruction of Downtown inscribed itself in a nationalistic effort to build a new image for the new republic: "The reconstruction of the capital's central district became, symbolically, the most important challenge for the unification of the nation" (Salam and Capezzuto 2003, 59). The narrative that promises progress and salvation and tries to say that the war is over, that there is a happy-ending and that the war can be said to have reached a blissful fulfillment, is the narrative of reconstruction of the Downtown (Makdisi 2006). At the beginning of the reconstruction project many Lebanese who needed to leave the war behind them believed in this narrative and dreamed of hope for a better Lebanon; the Downtown became in the 90s the land of promises and an image of a beautiful tomorrow. An informant, while recalling the first time she saw Downtown, transmitted this feeling of hope in such a poetic way that I cry each time I read it and I recall the thought of the immense horizon that was believed to be awaiting us back then:

> Nisrine: Yes it was a beautiful Sunday afternoon some 10 years ago. Towards the end of the rebuilding of the Downtown, we found ourselves by chance there, as if we had been invited to discover the new premises of the city. I was with my family, amazed, and like us, many other families and couples all Lebanese for the most part. It was spring, and I remember smiling faces, we took pleasure in walking throughout the empty streets. Walking, with no cars, without too much noise around us, like we walk in a park, trees ... something new, something different has been offered to us: a sense of novelty, beauty and especially

> rebirth. I remember the discussions around. Finally something that moves, that changes; a place which, on the surface, was offering us all a better future. But it was mainly an empty place waiting to be filled with people who could pay. Faceless people, people who live in their car. Ghosts filled with money. Yes I remember very well my first day at this Downtown. It was a day filled with promises; we were almost all Lebanese walking among the streets, Lebanese middle class. It was a beautiful spring, it was a feeling that I didn't relive thereafter during springs and autumns, and in the summer. Forget about it; it is awful.

"Memory (understood as historical imagination) and narration play important roles in the constitution of national and post national consciousness" (Silverstein and Makdisi 2006, 11), and in this case, they even became tools to form a false consciousness based on nationalism and a false sense of history. According to Anderson, each nation builds a national imaginary of itself on a symbolic monument like the tomb of the Unknown Soldier that is supposed to represent its history and offer a common neutral ground for all ideologies to meet and witness their unity and struggles for their countries. In the case of Lebanon, the martyr statue in the middle of Martyrs' Square was the major unifying nationalistic monument that was extremely prominent in all the postcards and stamps during the First Republic and even during the war and was the focal point of all the political activities. After the war, Solidere took the statue for nearly ten years under the pretext of fixing it, and one day, after many complaints and pressures, the statue came back hardly touched, and its installation was made without any

public announcements or gathering but only as a piece of the puzzle in the reconstruction process.

> Yasmine: another sad memory is when they took the martyrs statue. I thought that this symbolic place that is between all the areas (Christian areas and Muslim areas) and a uniting area, even if destroyed, was disappearing for economic reasons and Solidere was taking my country...

Martyr statue in 2011 (Photograph by the author)

Martyr statue before the war (http://souwar.yaacoub.com/index.php)

While during the last political uprising in Lebanon thousands of people protested in the streets and filled Martyrs' Square, giving it back a sense of being a political centre, it is clear that the focus of Solidere in their marketing and layout was to erase Martyrs' Square and switch the symbol to the French colonial clock tower at the centre of Place de l'Étoile instead. This shift of symbol characterizes the installment of a new beginning and the imposition of a new centre stage. Solidere also took the fatality of the war that revealed the archeological remains in the Downtown area and transformed it into a nationalistic discourse. As distinguished by Anderson, "it is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny" (Anderson 2006, 12). The archeological finds were also used to prove continuity with Phoenician times and create the idea of a nation that "looms out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glides into a limitless future"

(Anderson 2006, 11). The politics of forced forgetting are also inscribed within the nationalistic approach of the new regime that tries to build a single convenient national memory while attempting to erase many collective and individual ones, a forgetting that Ernest Renan, as quoted by Anderson, defines as a founding concept of a nation: (my translation from French) “the essence of a nation is that all the individuals have many things in common, and also that they all have forgotten many things” (Anderson 2006, 6).

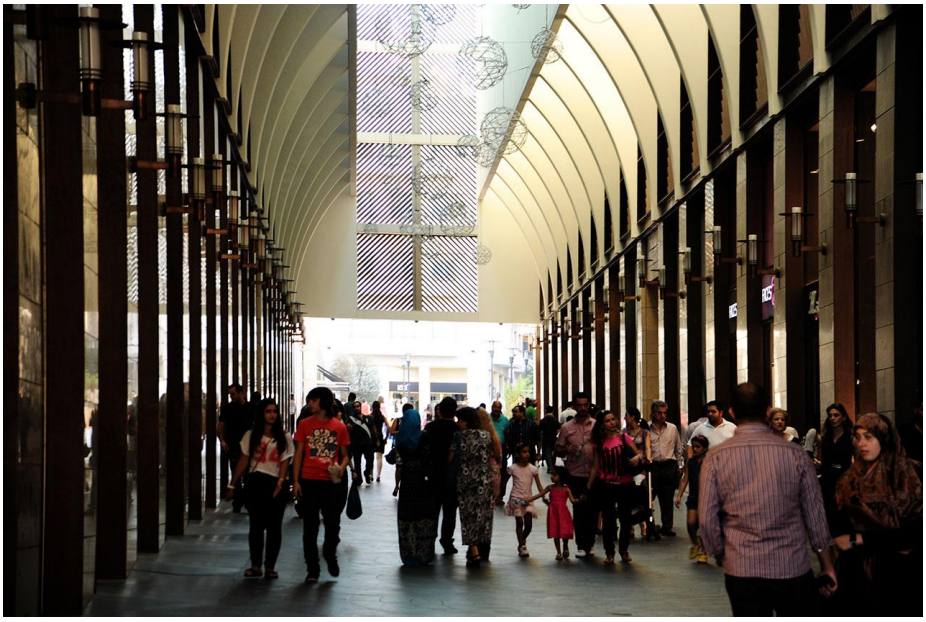
Chapter 4

Modernity and Forgetting

Souks

Memory of the Souks

In 2009, Solidere had the official opening of the long awaited Beirut Souks that are supposed to replace the destroyed ones of pre 1982. The new Souks are located in the same plot as the old ones. They keep the same names like Ayas and Arwan and the same street grid. In the 2008 annual report, while announcing the not yet opened Beirut Souks, Solidere claimed that they are "Re-structuring a city precinct, not designing a shopping centre" (Solidere 2008, 55), and the report dedicated 17 pages to explain the detailed concepts and visions of the five non Lebanese architects commissioned to build the Souks. While careful research and expertise can lead them to remodel a physical place into what they thought it looked like, the space itself can hardly be what it was without the input of the culture.



Souk el Tawileh. (http://www.solidere.com/beirut-souks/)

However, now that the Souks are open, on the current website entitled Beirut Souks, Solidere presents a very clear directory of the new shops in the Souks, their locations and their design. The shops are grouped into different categories: Shoes & Bags; Women; Men; Kids; Lingerie; Eyewear; Accessories & Gifts; Food & Beverages; Sports & Fitness; Electronics; Jewelry/Watches; Restaurants; Banks; Housewares. As a result, the website, its organization and the categories offered do not look any different from any other mall in Beirut or elsewhere on the planet, which justifies Salam's lament: "one stands as a witness to the death of a city, serving as a background for an appropriate food court" (Salam and Capezzuto 2003). Some of the answers to my question "how often do you go there and what do you go there mainly for?" show that the perception comparing the Beirut Souks to a shopping mall is common, and that the Beirut Souks lost the attraction and the uniqueness that the old ones had in the first place.

> Ghassan: I rarely go there since this new mall (Beirut Souks) opened.
>
> Carole: I stopped going there. If I need to shop I opt for other malls, they are more crowded, less expensive and have free and safe parking lots.
>
> Chadi: Downtown Beirut is not the heart of the Lebanese capital anymore, it is simply a big outdoors mall and companies head quarter.

Solidere again uses the 'ancientness' of Beirut as a marketing strategy to describe the layout of the Souks: "As they follow the ancient street grid implanted since pre-Roman times, and integrate archeological features and historical squares and monuments, the Souks consecrate the historic value of the place. The project reshapes the oldest retail precinct in the world, bringing back people to a place they did visit and enjoy for the last three millennia" (Solidere 2008, 55). This historical marketing can be a naïve falsification of facts since it is impossible to 're-build' an ancient place; what makes it ancient is precisely its resistance to destruction throughout time. The character 'ancient' here is used as a building style and has nothing to do with its relation to the old space, time and people. While the majority of 'ancient' archeological monuments are usually restored, what makes them ancient is the fact that they are restored back to their original form and displayed as a museum piece, or like in the case of the other old Souks in different cities of Lebanon, that they keep their original function and for the most part even the same shops and trades. Therefore the new Souks can only be an attempted reconstruction of the old Souks if it respects the feeling, the structure and the identity of a Souk to be called as such. "Something strange is happening to our sense of history when we can confuse a shopping mall with a Souk, or rather when we can think of a shopping mall not just as any old Souk, but

specifically as the recreation of a particular historic Souk" (Makdisi 1997, 24), and this is not only because the nature of the shopping mall is different than the one of the Souk, but because it highlights the desire to remodel the past into something else. It is not only that the old Souks have been transformed into a new shopping mall in the present; it is also rather our present perception of the old Souks that has been transformed into a perception of a shopping mall and thus changes the ways we view our history and its Souks.

> Salma: The Jewellery Souk was another shocker to me. If I thought the ruining of the ruins was bad, nothing came close to what I felt when I saw this area, I think I was a bit disgusted of course and appalled but mostly insulted. A piece of our history was appropriated, deformed, owned and simply devalued and then given to us as history revived!! As if the city is a private property and they can do whatever they want with it.... so sad.

The re-construction of the Souks has been done then in both space and time where the present space and the past recollection of the old Beirut have been altered. In a similar manner, Gavin describes the uses of the original street grid as a preservation of the memory: "a form of layering and 'city memory' is present in surviving street grids" (Gavin 1998, 223). Once again, the acclamation of the Souks as a reclamation of a lost past instead of just a shopping mall inscribes itself in the general memory politics of Solidere that uses memory to market its project; according to Connerton, "memory has then become a bestseller in a consumer society" (Connerton 2009, 3).

Building the Souks

In order to build the Souks, Solidere launched in 1993 an International Competition for Ideas in Architecture under the theme 'designing the new Souks of Beirut'. 51 countries entered the competition and a total of 357 submissions were presented to the International Jury. Not being able to agree on one winner, the jury chose three final projects and bestowed upon the following competitors three equal awards (SOLIDERE 1994): Drisin, McFarlane (USA); Akk & Valode & Pistre (France); Mark Saade & Associates (UK). Below are excerpts from the Chairman's and the Project Manager's messages that were published after the competition, followed by the breakdown of the participants and their respective countries:

> Chairman of the board (Nasser S. Chamaa)
>
> Today, Beirut is turning the page. The task of reconstruction, however, needs to go beyond simply rebuilding the physical environment, to attend to the social and economic factors that breathe life into the city. The reconstruction of the Central District must contribute to the creation of greater harmony in the social fabric of Beirut, and must be able to recapture its spirit. To many generations, these Souks have represented the very soul of the City Centre. By attracting the brightest talents, those of us associated with SOLIDERE hope to revive and enrich Beirut's particular character, combining a Mediterranean and Levantine temperament to a cosmopolitan outlook.
>
> Project Manager (Oussama Kabbani)
>
> The theme of this competition revolved around the notion of the Souk, used to mean not only a commercial space, but an image, a place that honors tradition and enhances kinds of interaction between merchants and customers. The new

Souks are expected to create a modern commercial facility within an environment that will still be identified by all as a 'Souk', and which revives a "traditional" art of living and trading.

Country	Registered	Participated
Argentina	4	2
Australia	7	7
Austria	19	10
Belgium	12	6
Brazil	6	3
Bulgaria	3	1
Canada	24	7
Cyprus	2	1
Denmark	6	2
Egypt	4	3
Finland	4	2
France	162	79
Germany	19	4
Greece	8	3
Honk Kong	2	0
India	3	1
Iraq	1	0
Ireland	2	1
Italy	112	73
Japan	15	3
Jordan	6	1
Kazakhstan	2	2
Korea	2	0

Kuwait	1	1
Lebanon	119	31
Luxembourg	2	2
Macedonia	1	1
Mexico	1	0
The Netherlands	20	6
Norway	1	1
Pakistan	1	0
Peru	1	0
Poland	4	2
Portugal	5	1
Qatar	1	1
Saudi Arabia	10	3
Singapore	1	1
Slovakia	2	2
Sudan	1	0
Spain	20	11
Sweden	5	3
Switzerland	46	28
Syria	6	2
Tunis	3	1
Turkey	5	1
UAE	3	0
UK	35	13
USA	102	39
Yugoslavia	1	1
Vietnam	1	1
Luxembourg	2	2

In my opinion the International Competition was unnecessary and was used solely to raise the market value of the Souks. Nonetheless, in an attempt to create a public dialogue and engage the community, Solidere included in the jury vocal critics like Samir Khalaf. The attempt was closer to trickery since the results of the competition were not taken into consideration and later on Solidere hired different architects that were not part of the competition to design the Souks. While the Chairman's message strikes a chord for the need to revive the spirit of Beirut, it remains difficult to see how a top-to-bottom building strategy can do so, especially if from 357 participants only 31 were from Lebanon and 8 from other Arab countries. According to Khalaf, the ultimate triumph of modernity is epitomized not by the disappearance of pre-modern elements but by their reconstruction and artificial preservation in modern society (Khalaf and Said 1993); the construction of a Souk can therefore in modern times be made by any architect foreign to the specific culture and foreign to Souks in general. The concept of the Souk is nowadays separated from the function, history and content of the Souk. Furthermore, Chamaa points to Beirut's Mediterranean and Levantine temperament in an effort to link the Lebanese identity to a larger regional one that is not specifically Arab but rather Mediterranean and therefore part of a greater regional commerce. Similarly to the function of the Phoenician identity, the insisting on the sea and Mediterranean allusions echoes an imposition of a commercialist identity that is supposed to be engrained in the Lebanese sprit: "the Phoenician imagery is intended to symbolize a linkage between Lebanon's

ancient seafaring inhabitants, who once controlled Mediterranean commerce, and today's Lebanese, who according to Solidere are united by their commercial interests and entrepreneurial spirit" (Nagel 2000, 222). In a similar manner, one informant pointed out the ways the Beirut Souks imposes an economic status on the visitors:

> Nisrine: I rarely go but when I do, I go to shop in the Beirut Souks. But it has the same stores that you find elsewhere, no creativity... it is architecturally interesting though. I go when I have money in my pocket. When you walk in the DT it gives you the impression that you are rich, this city imposes social codes on you if you like it or not.

As for the message of Kabbani, the project manager, his use of the term 'traditional' is stressing again the supposedly traditional trading skills that the Lebanese are expected to possess and the imposition of a commercialist identity on Lebanon. Therefore, the Souk can be seen as a modern abstraction that extracts the essence of the old Souks, and, according to Solidere, this essence is Trade.

Modernizing the Souks

Souks Directory

While in the old Souks local artisans and merchants worked together and thus produced, sold and consumed products and created jobs for all social classes, the new Souks are a collection of international companies and multinational stores with headquarters outside of Lebanon.

> Zeina: Downtown is a memory for my parents and grandparents, of a popular area, filled with big businesses that the Beirutis owned. It didn't distinguish classes. I wish today, such a place could exist.

Since I never knew the Souks and could not imagine them, in order for me to try and place myself back in time and space, I gathered all the information I could about the contents of the old Souks and placed them on a personal map. The map is taken from the Solidere website; I then added color codes to distinguish the old Souks by their function and transposed images that I found either of each particular Souk or images of the artisans that used to exist in this Souk. I then learned for example that Souk Arwad was for cotton while Souk Boutros had shoe makers and Souk Eltawileh fine imported cloth.

Placing myself in the Old Souks (Photograph by the author)

In accordance with ‘Horizon 2000’— the economic plan of Hariri based on cutting subsidies of local industries, opening the market and augmenting the imports— the Souks offer a perfect example of a late capitalist approach which, according to Solidere, “was conditioned by the urge to circumvent obstacles to the Beirut Central District reconstruction, and to incorporate emerging global trends in privatization, commercialization and deregulation” (Saliba and Solidere 2004, 198). This global trend gives corporations and the market the ultimate power over nations since they can transgress borders and make nations seem obsolete.

> Nisrine: No of course not. We are in a City Centre that is becoming bourgeois. The retail space is for the most part far from being cheap, plus they are found everywhere else, we are far from any uniqueness. They are globalized areas, very little national character at this level. It is very difficult for a creator or a Lebanese grocer, cheese maker, florist or others to find their place; the small quality businesses do not exist anymore.

Consequently, after looking at the Souks directory filled with brand names that lack any national or cultural attribute, I then had a great trouble finding the originating country of each company. Below is the directory as it appears on the website, with my addition of countries of origin when I could find them:

Ajami:	**Al Franj:**
Magnet Café.	Milord
Silver by C&G (Lebanon)	Samsonite
The Met Eatery (Lebanon)	St Dupont
Allenby:	Occhi De Prada
C&F (Lebanon)	Au Petit Point
Bottega Veneta (Italy/France)	**Jewellery Souk:**
Burberry (UK)	Bank Med
Damiani (Italy)	Momo's
Louis Vuitton (France)	Sweet Tea
Rodeo Drive (UAE)	Antoine Wadih Salamoun
Arwad:	Atamian Exclusive
Coco and Cassia (UK)	Azar Jewelry
Especialistaen Habanos (Argentina)	Boucheron
Arwam:	Chronora
Accessorize (UK)	Diadème
Claire's (USA)	Diamond Creations
Nomination (Italy)	Farah Shanal
Sony World (Japan)	Finecraft
Optik Studio	Gc Boutique
From the Tree (Lebanon)	Gemmes
Body Shop (UK)	George Hakim/Alain Philipp
Zara Home (Spain)	Girard-Perregaux
Toy Watch (Italy)	Hublot
Original Marines (USA)	Imad Baadarani
Calvin Klein (USA)	IWC
Socks	J.F. Gioielli
Cole Haan (USA)	Joaillerie Moukarzel

Converse (USA)	Juicy Diamonds
Geox (Italy)	Les Diamants de Dikran
Kathy Van Zeeland	Mouawad/Chopard
Linea Max (Italy)	Mukhi Sisters
Minelli (France)	N. Mouzannar
Shoe Avenue (Canada)	Nada G
Anne Klein (USA)	Or La Loi
Adidas (Germany)	Pierre Germani
Nike Women (USA)	Poe Tahiti
Outdoors	Pomellato
Reebok (UK)	Rami Abboud
Roxy (USA)	Shada Jewelry
Cortefiel (Spain)	Tag Heuer
Timberland (USA)	U Boat
Quiksilver (USA)	Vartan
Dunkin Donuts (USA)	VHP Jewelry
I Heart	Voyageur
Maje (France)	Yeprem Jewelry
Room One	Yessayan Jewelry
Zara (Spain)	**Jamil:**
Ayyas:	Pieces
Eclat de Mode	Haagen Dazs (USA)
Piquadro (Italy)	La Senza (Canada)
L'Optique	Oysho (Spain)
Bali Balima	Puma (Germany)
Café M	H&M (Sweden)
Guess Kids (USA)	Jack &Jones (Denmark)
Hush Hush (Lebanon)	Monsoon (UK)

Jacadi (France)	G2000 (China)
Kenzo (France)	Guess (USA)
Mothercare	Salsa (Portugal)
Name It	MEXX (USA)
Neck & Neck	Adolfo Dominguez (Spain)
Okaidi (France)	Desigual (Spain)
Pablosky	Esprit (USA)
Young Gangs	Motivi (Italy)
Francesco Biasia	Punt Roma (Italy)
Maria Pino	Vero Moda (Denmark)
Baramode	XOXO (USA)
Caroll	**Patriarch Hoyek:**
Kookai (France)	Samsung (Korea)
Pink Powder	Pull &Bear (Spain)
Sinequanone (France)	Bershka (Spain)
A/X Armani Exchange (Italy)	Stradivarius (Spain)
Boss Orange (Germany)	**Sayyour:**
Tommy Hilfiger (USA)	La Cave de Joel Robuchon (France)
Massimo Dutti (Spain)	TSC Signature
Bab Idriss:	Sunglass Hut (USA)
Nana B	Zara (Spain)
Rony Nacouzy	H&M (Sweden)
TBS	**Tawila:**
Mephisto (France)	Mango Touch (Spain)
Shoe Box	Patchi (Lebanon)
Loft by Aspuce	Hallak Opticians
Rosea	Faces
Bustros:	L'Occitane en Provence (France)

Elie Khoubbieh	MAC (Canada)
Thomas Sabo	K-Lynn (Lebanon)
Magrabi Optical	Boggi (Italy)
Aldo (Canada)	Camper (Spain)
Bisou Store	Furla (Italy)
Vicky's	Nine West (USA)
Rectangle Jaune (Lebanon)	Depeche Mode
Fakhry Bey:	Derriere
The Counter	Mango (Spain)
Le Stay	Persona
Jimmy Choo (UK)	Promod (France)
Balenciaga (Spain)	See by Chloe (France)
Chloe (France)	Thierry Mugler (France)
Etro (Italy)	Uterque (Spain)
Stella McCartney (UK)	7 for all Mankind (USA)
Yves Saint Laurent (France)	Aïzone (Lebanon)
Weygand;	Dolce & Gabana (Italy)
Porsche Design (Germany)	Victoria Casal Couture (France)
Officine Panerai (Italy)	Carolina Herrera (UK)
Balthazar	Massimo Dutti (Spain)
Jaeger LeCoultre (France)	

Beirut Souk Directory (http://www.solidere.com/beirut-souks/outlets-listing/)

Looking at the companies the origins of which I could identify, the score would look something like the following: USA 21; France 20; Spain 17; Italy 15; UK 12; Lebanon 9; Germany 4; Canada 4; Sweden 2; Denmark 2; Japan 1; Korea 1;

China 1; UAE 1 and Portugal 1. If it was a game, Lebanon for sure would be losing against the big players. Currently the local scale is held hostage by footloose corporations who can simply relocate in order to maximize their profits and therefore the state ends up marketing the city often at the expense of the citizens (Nagel 2000). In the Souks, the Lebanese working population is then transformed into sellers of foreign merchandise, security guards, waiters, entertainers and taxi drivers for tourists. They have no control over the price or the merchandise they sell, no decision-making power regarding the food they serve, no contact with the production process and no sense of ownership. The few Lebanese-owned places that exist are mainly restaurants which limit the expression of the culture into solely consumption of food and music. Kracauer describes the process of capitalist production by commenting that "community and personality perish when what is demanded is calculability (…). A system oblivious to differences in form leads on its own to the blurring of national characteristics and to the production of worker masses that can be employed equally well at any point on the globe" (Kracauer 1995, 78). Zara and H&M for example opened in Downtown Beirut and throughout the country and already effectively destroyed the other small markets and standardized the retail work force. Again quoting Kracauer, "everyone does his or her task on the conveyor belt, performing a partial function without grasping the totality" (Kracauer 1995, 78), therefore serving the interests of the international community at the expenses of the Beirutis. Presently, the general Beiruti business barely exists in the Souks while the Beiruti work force has become far removed from the source of its

production which; in the case of a small politically unstable country like Lebanon, can be devastating. This removal leaves the economy with no viable alternatives other than a complete dependence on tourism and a marketization of identity.

> Nisrine : The mutations that are happening in Downtown trickle Downtown on the rest of the country: the neighborhoods nearby suffer the same changes, the land values are skyrocketing, creation of markets far more expansive then the standard of many, malls and H&Ms everywhere.

According to Solidere, the Downtown has a "broader vision, related to late capitalism, to reconvert city cores into efficient corporate centres within a national, regional and global network" (Saliba and Solidere 2004, 199). In this case, it is a network that places the Lebanese in a service provider position connected to the rest of the globe via advertisements and consumerism. It also becomes a gentrified neighborhood with built in luxury residential areas like Saifi village, which was built on top of the old carpentry district and has buildings that copy exactly the destroyed ones but with the addition of attached rooms for chauffeurs and maids. Likewise, the Souks inscribe themselves on this luxurious island by offering merchandise that is always more expensive than anywhere else in Lebanon even if it is the same product.

> Maha: I have a memory of a small grocery store where the merchant was around 60 or 70 years old. A man who had always worked in the Downtown before the war and who returned and rented a shop there at an exorbitant price. He told us he had to sell everything at a higher price because he could barely pay his rent.

Saifi village or the 'Island of luxury' (Photograph by the author)

Capitalism and the re-enchantment

Solidere is quite clear in its modernizing efforts and profit making approach that are described in the Master Plan: "to revive Beirut's leading role in the Arab Middles East; to renew the image and function of Downtown Beirut and reinforce its centrality; to modernize it through contemporary urban design and planning models and state-of-the-art infrastructures; and last but not least, to enhance the real estate asset value of the City Centre" (Saliba and Solidere 2004, 198). Consequently, according to those criteria, in order for the project to be successful, Solidere has to enforce its notion of modernity and progress on the cityscape whereas at the same time it has to make profit from the people; a capitalistic strategy that clashes with the views of many:

> Ziad: I find the Downtown not welcoming for those who do not share a specific ideological standpoint when it comes to the meaning of development, entertainment, and finances.

Now that the Solidere reconstruction project is almost done, especially with the openings of the Souks (the entire project was supposed to be finished by 2025, but recently the completion date has been pushed to 2030); the resulting Downtown is a mix of all foreign department stores, retail outlets, restaurants, offices, exhibition areas, residences and parking facilities. But nearly all that is sold in the Downtown is imported, since there is no more room for small Lebanese businesses and artisans, Lebanese society is then pushed in the Downtown to solely consume:

> Layla: You feel you are in a fancy cheap postcard, or in some big mall where you are a customer. Actually that is it, when you are there you think about yourself as a customer, because that is all you do, buy stuff and eat, you do not have any other life or experience. You do not have the chance to... It's like the little empty whole spot in the middle of a crazy crowded undisciplined city; and you just bypass it…

Downtown became so out of reach for the average Lebanese that people nowadays go there to walk around and look at the glass showcases without buying. Sellers and buyers both cannot afford the products and thus both play the game of pretending to sell and pretending to buy. They both put on masks in order to fit the image of the enchanted consumer in a tourist oriented capitalist Lebanon:

> Ghassan: sometimes when I am too tired from my life in Beirut and from my poverty, I just trip in there, it gives me a feeling as if I travelled somewhere than

> reality hits me and I realize that this is a big shopping centre and that I cannot afford most of the things I like there.
>
> Carole: My mom always say that there was some kind of an unspoken rule in the old Downtown: "you are OBLIGED to buy something when you go Downtown", unfortunately I don't think that's the case anymore.

While talking about the design of the movie theaters and the cult of distraction in a capitalist society, Karacauer considers that “the interior design of movie theatres serves one sole purpose: to rivet the viewer’s attention to the peripheral, so that they will not sink into the abyss” (Kracauer 1995, 325). Likewise, the beautiful objects displayed in the Souks act as a distraction that brings the Beirutis into their own externality, and fixes them on the showcase of shops and away from their internal struggles. The Souks, their cleanliness and the exorbitant prices are also a way to hide the reality of Lebanon from the tourists and portray instead an image of a gleaming rich society that shops in a three millennia-old Souk:

> Hala: It is a kind of "masque" de camouflage! As if it's made for the pleasure of the rich people of the world and the tourists and not for the Lebanese!

Distraction and enchantment are elemental to a capitalist market since it needs to always create the need for consumption, but at the same time give a sense of choice and stress the concept of free time that needs to be filled with costly distractions. In order to attract those who can afford to shop in Downtown, the Souks offer some unique varieties that try to justify the elevated price, enchant the buyers and present them with the possibility to distinguish themselves from the others on the basis of taste. Furthermore, according to Khalaf, the nostalgic retreat towards an idyllic past and the obsession with memory and heritage hide a secret

quest towards a‘re-enchantment’ by the city. While capitalism generates a demystification of values, nations, religions, ideologies and other aspects of culture in general, as a replacement it tries to offer an ‘amazement’ or an ‘enchantment’ of the world via buildings, distraction and new products.

> Nadine: yes I was 15 years old and I went with my friend from school. It was new at that time and we were amazed looking at all these renovated and beautiful buildings.
>
> Yasmine: I use to go there only for shopping in Beirut Souks today. I can buy nice foreign clothes and eat nice food, I can also buy chocolate very beautiful and organic and acacia honey from UK... that's one of my favorite shopping market because when I go there, I feel richer and respected since it's well organized and CLEAN. And it's a place where only rich and upper middle class people go and it's a protected place. You have security persons and cameras everywhere. I feel modern there.

Habitus

According to Connerton, the physical spaces we grow up in are engrained in our bodily practices and guide our likes and dislikes and affect our interactions with our surroundings. Therefore, since the body remembers, we tend to recreate physical spaces in accordance with our bodily practices and transmit them to the next generation (Connerton 1989). For example, the ways we sit to eat at a table and the placement and height of the table itself in relation to the rest of the furniture is intimately tied to our ways of eating. Those bodily practices learned from such spaces (kitchen, market) are part of a whole series of bodily practices and habits transmitted by the culture. If we consider then that the habitus is

formed by a complex whole of interconnected components, every component (like the physical space) tends to reflect the general theme that duplicates the original concept which was transmitted in the habit memory of our childhood. This is not to say that cultures are homogeneous entities based on a repetition of a founding myth, but it is to say that people try to organize their lives and the things that surround them according to their beliefs and their ways of life. In the famous example of the Kabyle house presented by Bourdieu, the gender division that is prominent in the Berber culture is reflected in the physical layout of the house (Bourdieu 1990). Similarly, Lebanese houses are laid out, divided and furnished in ways that reflect the particular concept of each family in relation to the communal family life. If we extend this notion, we can say that the original Souks that were narrow, busy, loud and crowded are part of the Lebanese/Arab culture and embody in their architecture a general Arabic way of life. While it is difficult to define or even discern what an Arabic culture is, I can only describe what feels natural to me within my culture. I never experienced the Beirut Souks, but when I go to Damascus or to another Souk in Lebanon, I blend in with great ease and the place lends itself organically to me. Although it can be perceived as pure chaos by a foreigner, to my eyes the chaos seems perfectly orderly, justifiable and above all extremely familiar. The Souks are one of those places that I already knew before having to experience them first hand. Therefore, they inscribe themselves perfectly well with my way of life since they are an intricate missing part of my general habitus and thus, once in contact with them, I 'find' them again. The Souks do not contradict the world I was raised in, but a shopping mall does. In an

example given by an informant while answering the question "do you find it affordable and/or accessible for all?" the new Downtown is so foreign to her and probably so contradictory to her way of life that she does not even pay attention to it. It becomes invisible:

> Salma: Definitely not. There are stores and restaurants, but to me they're part of the environment, like the rest of the buildings, banks or even walls. I never paid attention to them, and I definitely never see them as places to go into, not even out of curiosity... they just never seemed places that I had any business (or pleasure) being there. They felt more like banks, if you have no business in that particular bank you wouldn't normally pay attention to it or think of going inside. So, it definitely felt expensive and pretentious and it was obviously not created with me and most of the people I knew in mind.

Knowing that we are living in an ever changing, modernizing world and that shopping malls and chain restaurants are anyway taking over Souks and bazaars all over the world, losing the memory of our Souks that is engrained in our bodily practices and confusing our past Souks with shopping malls will take us one step further towards becoming global consumers with an identity crisis.

On Forgetting

The importance of forgetting

"Whenever yesterday comes to me, I say to her, Now is not the right time. Go and come tomorrow!" (Darwish 2010). Going back to the role of memory, while I was interviewing my mom about her war memories, we both realized that she had stopped recalling memories after some point in time. I asked why and she said that it was not joyful and not worth remembering anymore and refused to

continue digging in the past. She then decided to only remember the good parts of the war and intentionally dropped the rest out of her memory. While it might seem contradictory, the war generated a multitude of happy memories fueled by neighborhood solidarity, communal living and an immense sense of hope. However, the logic of memory is different than the logic of the present, and a good memory can be generated in the worst situations, notably a war. In the case of my mom, it was necessary to forget in order for her to stay sane and keep looking towards the future. It became a sort of a defense mechanism and a happy-memory preservation, as if she could remember only a certain finite amount of memories and had to choose which ones to keep. As Connerton explains, quoting Antoine Compagnon, "without this unnatural capacity to forget, you would never really be anywhere" (Connerton 2009, 4). Likewise, Peleikis quotes Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury describing the vital need of the prewar generation to forget many things in the war: "People have to forget. If I do not forget my friends who died in the civil war I cannot live, I cannot drink and eat.... The question is what to forget and what to remember. It can be an ideological choice" (Peleikis 2006, 145). But sometimes the memory is so painful that it is just dropped without any conscious effort. When I asked the mom of a friend what she remembers of the Israeli invasion of Beirut, she replied that she has a vivid memory of the Israeli tomatoes being delicious. It was all that she could remember. I cannot be sure if she experienced atrocities and her memory was lost or that she only was in contact with delicious ripe tomatoes, but her answer reflects the absurdity of our memories: "We are never real historians but near poets and our emotion is

perhaps an expression of a poetry that was lost" (Bachelard 1969, 6). Injuries too well-remembered cannot heal, and therefore forgetting is crucial for the end of the war. It can only be consciously forgotten once it has been remembered, however. It has to be a choice, not an imposed forgetting.

The role of globalization in forgetting

In the case of Downtown, at the same time that memory is being used as a political tool, forgetting appears to be a founding block of the re-construction process. In order to buy into the new Downtown and its modernizing attempts, one has to forget the old one. The erosion of the building blocks of the city is thus accompanied by an erosion of its memory: "turbo capitalism leaves no room for attachment for old bookshops, old buildings or anything that matters" (Connerton 2009, 129). However, in a general sense, modernity is losing its capacity to retain its own past and instead is generating its own source of forgetting through "consumerism disconnected from the labour process, the short lifespan of urban architecture and the disappearance of walkable cities. What is being forgotten in modernity is profound, the human-scale-ness of life, the experience of living and working in a world of social relationships that are known" (Connerton 2009, 5). The globalization of Downtown transforms it into yet another city to visit on a larger global-scale map, but in order to compete on that map, it has to offer a marketable identity. On the other hand, while Solidere alienates the Beiruti customer and distances them from their 'local' Downtown, the adoption of the same restaurant chains, multinational stores and standardized malls that exist

throughout the world link the consumers to a virtual global network and transform the Downtown into a Global entity. According to Castells and as quoted by Connerton, "it is this distinctive feature of being globally connected and locally disconnected, physically and socially, that makes megacities a new urban form" (Connerton 2009, 127). Thus it creates a double space for the customers of the city that is neither really local nor fully global. According to Nagel, individuals can nowadays exist both 'here' and 'there' and thus their localities and cultures become 'deterritorialized' with the presence of global cultural flows that transcend boundaries (Nagel 2000). The Beirutis lose their locality in order to open up to the global network, but only, to find themselves solely at the consumer level on the global-scale. It is the tourists and the transnational communities that benefit the most from the modernization of Downtown and visit Beirut to find the same standardized spaces they are used to, from the shoe shop to the morning coffee. They thus travel in a homogenous bubble and "live in a habitus, which supersedes the historical specificity of each place, therefore inclines them to forget those borders" (Connerton 2009, 133). In this case, not only the history of Beirut and its Downtown are forgotten, but the actual crossing of borders and travel to Beirut itself can also be forgotten. Globalization in its pretense to open up a place towards the globe ends up limiting the choices that this space can offer and homogenizes it in order to cater to the international hegemonic group. As put by Connerton, "the subaltern groups are tied also to specific places, but their ties are to the particularity of local settings, rather than to a lifestyle potentially available to the hegemonic group everywhere" (Connerton 2009, 133).

Globalization in its attempts to erase the particularity of a local setting is thus also depriving the local groups of their spaces.

Production of objects

"Forgetting is built into the capitalist process of production itself, incorporated in the bodily experience of its life spaces" (Connerton 2009, 125) since producing and consuming objects in a marketplace like the Beirut Souks, which is linked to a series of connections and productions processes, makes these processes invisible and unknown to the seller and the buyer. In order to produce more, the capitalist system has to constantly generate a new need for consumption and for possession of a particular product and thus has to make the old product seem obsolete and ultimately forgotten. In the past, many generations could share a memory of a building, a theatre hall or a café because the building, theatre hall and café was standing long enough to be experienced and remembered by all these generations; places and objects watched the people live and die. Contrastingly, "as Baudrillard has said, we are now living in the period of objects; we live by their rhythm, according to their cycles" (Connerton 2009, 122). We watch them die and be reborn, which increases our capacity to forget them. Also, since capitalism needs to sell to all social classes, religions, and cultures, it then tends to present itself in an abstracted form away from any cultural allusions. The Downtown maps, for example, abstract the history, placement and even names of the buildings and favor an aesthetic representation that uses orderly colors and shapes but gives very little information. "The ornament, detached from its bearers, must be

understood rationally. It consists of lines and circles like those found in textbooks on Euclidean geometry" (Kracauer 1995, 77).

The abstraction of the Lebanese currency

Another example that is not directly tied to Downtown but that happened during the Hariri years and is intimately tied to his economic policies is the changes made to the Lebanese currency. The old Lebanese currency had different Lebanese symbols with archeological monuments from different parts of Lebanon on the different bills. With the inflation that accompanied the beginning of the reconstruction and as a result of Hariri's decision to put the country in debt, the Lebanese bank had to print new money with higher values and opted for "neutral geometrical shapes that cannot be associated with any religious or political subgroups replaced archaeological monuments that once represented all Lebanese" (Kabbani 1998, 258). Such a choice, while trying to hide cultural differences, again forced a cultural forgetting on the Lebanese in the name of national unity and modernity. The Lebanese unit after the inflation became the 1000 Lebanese Lira (roughly equivalent to 0.66 US$) and, while the old 1000 L.L. had a map of Lebanon, an image of the national bank and an image of Baalbek (Roman ruins); the new one has geometrical shapes accompanied by the Phoenician alphabet, to stress once more the supposedly Phoenician seafaring, mercantile aspect of the Lebanese. It also is formed by lines, circles and abstract geometrical shapes like the ornament described above by Kracauer.

Old 1000L.L with the National Bank, Baalbek and the map of Lebanon on the other side (http://almashriq.hiof.no/lebanon/300/330/332/332.4/)

New 1000L.L with the Phoenician alphabet (http://www.ask.com/wiki/File:1000_Lebanese_Pounds_Reverse.jpg?qsrc=3044)

As for the new 10.000L.L., it depicts the Downtown area by showing the martyr statue. In his work "MonoPolyPolis: Banknotes and Beirut," architect Ayssar Arida makes an interesting comparison between the grid on the 10.000L.L. and an aerial shot of Downtown: "While the rest of Beirut retains its character, the design of the bank notes has somehow been updated to reflect the basic flavors of the new centre: a regular grid, empty lots, and abstracted symbols, almost apologetically superposed, as on the new 10,000 Lira note. Even the color reflects that of the dirt filled lots" (Arida 2000). In a double entendre on the word Monopoly, the new bills and Solidere's influence on the economy reflect "the

reduction from national currency to one fit only for a game of monopoly" (Arida 2000).

Comparison made by Arida between the 10000L.L and an aerial photo of the Downtown. (http://www.111101.net/Writings/index.php?http://www.111101.net/Writings/Articles/ayssar_arida_02.php)

Chapter 5

Relationship to the city

Experiencing the city as a home

The house

Everything I have written about the destruction of Downtown Beirut can appear seem unimportant to someone who has experienced time and space and cities differently than the way I believe we do it in Lebanon. Knowing that I am addressing myself to a mainly western public, I wish to highlight what I believe are fundamental differences in our perceptions of home and the city. Bachelard (1969) in *The Poetics of Space* gives an excellent account on the meaning of home and the function of inhabiting. He makes a brief comparison between city homes and country homes, considering the latter ones to have greater cosmicity, and portrays the house as a safe place to dream and a place of solitude: "but however cosmic the isolated house lighted by the star of its lamp may become, it will always symbolize solitude" (Bachelard 1969, 36). Maybe this is true of houses in the western world, but in my opinion, this is generally not true in Lebanon and is certainly not true in my case and the case of many of my friends. I hope that by now my reader can start to picture Beirut; it is a crowded city with new buildings mixed with old ones, and few open spaces, therefore making the streets, the gutters of the city, the only really walkable spaces. Space being hard to find, the majority of the people live in rather small apartments with balconies that

look to the street, and since families tend to be rather large, children have to share rooms. I never had a room as a kid or as a teenager and do not remember knowing anyone who had a room alone. I did not even have a private closet, and my bed was a mattress that I placed each night in a different place according to who was using which room. I also rarely had my own clothes or bags or shoes bought for me, but rather received hand-me-downs from family members. This behavior was not only caused by a difficult economical situation. Rather it arose because the concept of living in a family is more communal, and private rooms and personal belongings do not often exist. Being then always with and around others, I barely had times of solitude in my house and I was never allowed to be bored. In my adolescent years, if I was not studying, I would have to help in the house, entertain guests, go play at the neighbors' place, help the neighbors, interact with a member of the family in the house, make coffee for my dad… It was impossible to do nothing, even if I wanted to, and this was typical of most other kids my age. So the house in my experience was never a place of solitude and boredom but a place of meeting with others, a communal open place full of expectations and duties to fulfill and service exchanges. Again Bachelard was right when saying, "how happy the child who really possesses his moments of solitude! It is a good thing, it is even salutary, for a child to have periods of boredom" (Bachelard 1969, 16). In my case, I possessed my moments of solitude and boredom while walking in the streets of the city instead, not in the house. Similarly, the Downtown in its reconstruction phase served as a solitude playground for one of my informants that I quoted earlier in chapter 2:

Salma: My house had a great location, but sometimes you just needed a break, or an escape, and Downtown was, for a while, my break, away from home.

The neighborhood

The neighborhood in Beirut is an extension of the house and has everything a house needs for it (and its inhabitants) to survive. The routes we take to get our needs draw the lines and the trajectories of our daily life and become part of our organic whole. As described by Perec (1999), a neighborhood is "that portion of the town you can get around easily in on foot or, to say the same thing in the form of a truism, that part of the town you don't need to go to, precisely because you are already there" (Perec 1999, 57). In the immediate neighborhood that I grew up in, for example, there was a barber, a hair dresser, a dry cleaner, a tailor, a carpenter, a plumber, a broom maker, a bakery, two food street vendors of different kinds, a juice vendor, a restaurant specialized in beans, three vegetable grocers, a snack grocer, a butcher, an internet shop, a gadget shop, a music shop, a pharmacy, currency exchange shop and a taxi office. This is considered a very low key neighborhood and was one block away from a main road that has a bigger market. Needless to say, everybody knew me in this little square of life, and I knew everybody. So our house was intimately connected to all those places and literally fed off them, especially since we had accounts with every store that we settled by the end of the month. As a kid I could get food at a street vendor without having to pay; this absence of money helped foster a greater sense of ease and familiarity and created a forever renewing trust. So my refuge away from the house was actually the street, and it was the same for all the other kids in the

neighborhood. It was our playground and our moments of solitude in familiar places. Furthermore, behind my house was the church I used to go to, my school was 15 minutes away on foot, and many friends and family lived in the neighborhood. So my daily and weekly trajectories were all done on foot and inscribed in the same neighborhood. They became mechanical, leaving me enough freedom and time to dream. Perec argues (and rightly so) that those habits could all be cultivated through time, "but it wouldn't work, it still wouldn't make a life, couldn't even give the illusion of being a life. It would create a familiar space, would give rise to an itinerary, a pretext for a few limp handshakes, but that would only be ever putting a mawkish face on the necessity, a way of dressing up commercialism. Obviously, you could start an orchestra, or put a street theatre. Bring the neighborhood alive as they say. Weld the people of a street or a group of streets together by something more than a mere convenience: by making demands on them, making them fight" (Perec 1999, 58). It is thus by taking the streets of Downtown during music concerts and demonstrations that we truly make a life in our city.

Security in the house

Bachelard considers the dream of the refuge seeker to be living away from people, "in the house itself, in the family sitting room, a dreamer of refuges dreams of a hut, of a nest, or of nooks and corners in which he would like to hide away, like an animal in its hole" (Bachelard 1969, 30). Coming from Beirut, this struck me as a rather individualistic dream if basing it on my concepts and experiences of

security and refuge I learned in my city. While the myth of the lonely cowboy and the culture of the isolated ranches are very prominent in western media, the case is very different again in Lebanon. For sure there are Bedouins and shepherd in Lebanon (what I thought would be an equivalent to cowboys), but they are not lonely; they live, work and travel in pairs, groups, families and tribes. On the contrary, it is quite difficult to live alone in the Lebanese countryside and very few people have a farm by themselves since farming is one of the most collective jobs. As for living in security in the city, the Lebanese war proved very quickly that the least secure place to be during the war was one's own home, and the very least secure thing to do is actually to be alone. During the war we lived on the eighth floor of a ten floor building, and since there was practically no electricity, we had to climb eight floors of stairs. We also had to fill our small electricity generator with gas and carry it up the stairs every once and a while, for which of course we needed the help of the neighbors. The stairs were always pitch black, so we never knew who we bumped into on the way, and therefore, it was better to not be alone and to always identify oneself out loud when we heard footsteps. For sure this entails the assumption that the other will recognize us in the dark according to our names and the names of our parents' and that they already knew us. During the bombing, the safety logic that quickly developed was to be in the centre of the building away from any wall facing the outside of the house. This actually meant that we gathered on the stairs of the building between the apartments and not inside the house, since the apartments have windows and only one wall that separate it from the exterior. The second logic that developed was to

not be too close to the tenth floor since plane bombs could reach it, and not too close to the ground floor since tank bombs could reach that. Therefore all the residents of the building used to gather and sleep on the stairs between the fourth and the sixth floors, and if someone was alone in their house or missing, this meant they were in danger. Furthermore, when the bombing was even stronger, the whole neighborhood would gather in one underground parking lot of a building facing us that served as a makeshift shelter. Consequently, people felt more secure being outside of their individual houses and preferred to be with others in a communal space.

Verticality of the city

"In Paris there are no houses, and the inhabitants of the big city live in superimposed boxes (…) but our abode has neither space around it nor verticality inside it" (Bachelard 1969, 27). I believe this also does not fit with Beirut. It is true that apartment houses are horizontal, but the verticality of the city imposes itself on me since I cannot bring myself to amputate my house from it. I can only see the city as a whole organism which is characterized by its verticality and see my apartment that is situated on the eighth floor of a vertical building as a part of this organism. This verticality is also present in the culture of balconies that is very prominent in Beirut. In the late afternoon, people in my neighborhood and in almost all the neighborhoods of Beirut, sit alone or with company on their balconies and watch each other. They smoke water pipes, drink coffee, eat fruits, visit each other and experience the verticality of their house. If they live up high,

few people will see them while they see all the others. They scan all the levels of the building in front of them up and down and watch their neighbors or the movements of the street. The city appears to them like a forest of vertical buildings partly lit by the setting sun. Then the sound of a street vendor pushing his cart and clapping a metal instrument with the same rhythm over and over again and calling out about his products reaches our ears. All the heads look down, some people will shout from their balconies to know the price, order what they want and then bring down a basket from the balcony with money in it attached by a string. While the street vendor makes the transaction, other baskets will be going down and up on other balconies and other buildings. Then another vendor comes with something else and the same thing happens. So the experience of the house in the city, being always connected to the street, is a vertical one; the further high above the street one lives, the further down one will have to look and the longer the basket string will be. And again, the focal point is always the street and the neighborhood, not the apartment.

People watch the street from their balconies (Photograph by the author)

Verticality of the city as seen from my balcony (Photograph by the author)

A typical afternoon (Photograph by the author)

On cosmicity

"When insomnia, which is the philosopher's ailment, is increased through irritation caused by city noises; or when, late at night, the hum of automobiles and trucks rumbling through the Place Maubert causes me to curse my city dweller's fate, I can recover my calm by living the metaphors of the ocean" (Bachelard 1969, 28). The people living in Beirut do not have to imagine the sounds of the

city as the roars of the ocean in order to experience a greater cosmicity. The sounds of the city are not mere noise; they have meanings and communicate specific messages. In my neighborhood for example, the bells of the church have different rhythms to indicate a normal Sunday, a wedding or a funeral. The bell of the other church has a different tone that identifies it. The azan (call of prayer) five times a day of the mosque nearby is not a noise, it is a message and a prayer. Messages arise from the street vendor with his metal instrument, the ice cream vendor with his ice cream tune, the vegetable truck vendor with a speakerphone calling out about his tomatoes, the guy who buys house junk asking with a loud monotonous voice for broken appliances, the funeral and morning declarations made out loud, the political party slogans, the heart breaking lamentation of a beggar walking and singing the same song over and over always just before the last call of prayer at sunset and to whom people will send down their baskets with money, and the mousahirati who walks the streets singing and drumming at 2 am during Ramadan to wake up those who want to eat at night in preparation to the following day fast. All of these sounds reach my balcony and I can decipher them; they are not noise but legible messages directed towards me and towards anyone else in my neighborhood. The city then communicates with us and we answer back just like nature does for countryside houses. I am saying all this to try to prove that in Beirut we can experience the city as an extension of our homes and the boundary between private and public, home and city is fluid and does not just stop at the door of our apartments. When living in such a city, dreaming in its streets, feeling safe in it, and interacting with it, its Downtown will feel like the

core of our perception of home, of the notion of inhabiting our city. “All really inhabited places bear the essence of the notion of home” (Bachelard 1969). We inhabit Beirut and the Downtown is the centre of our home and all that can be said about the emotional attachment to the home can also be said about the emotional attachment to the city and the Downtown.

Homelessness

“The sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter. He experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams” (Bachelard 1969, 5). The Downtown is still dreamt as a symbol of the prewar days and as a home to many. This might explain the deep reactions that some people had towards its destruction and the sad stories I heard. My mom for example for years refused to go Downtown once the reconstruction/destruction started. Her cousin from her same village and who never lived in Beirut, still considers his saddest day ever to be the day when they demolished the Souks, and he remembers that he gathered all his extra money for months and bought a good camera to take pictures of his favorite places in it before they destroyed it. But Solidere didn’t let him enter the site. A taxi driver I met was obliged to sell two shops in the Souks area for 3000 dollars in 1993 while now one square meter of rental in the new Souks is 13000 dollars a year. He told me that he buried the flower of his youth and all the work he did for his kids in these two shops and that he can never go back there again, even if he gets a passenger wanting to go to Downtown. Another taxi driver told me that a friend of his had a building in

Downtown that he was obliged to sell and the building, years later, was restored. His son, knowing that the building was restored, wanted to show it to his father, and, according to the taxi driver, the dad looked at the building and dropped dead on the sidewalk from a heart attack. A similar memory is shared by one of my informants:

> Yasmine: I remember a TV conference where some person had a heart crisis while the conference happened. He was an owner of a land in DT and Solidere took his land without paying him enough money and he didn't want to sell it, they took it by force. I don't know by which force.

I cannot be sure if the story of the taxi driver is true (neither the story of the TV as matter of fact), but regardless, the general feeling of loss among those people is genuine and their wound is so deep that even if the story is untrue, it is felt and accepted as truth. This may be because these people experienced the loss of a home and of their dreams in the rubble of the old Downtown.

The city is alive

The city as the body

While reading the answers of many informants, I noticed that often they spoke about the city as a living organism that breathes, grows and even dies:

> Nisrine: Then there's the old Downtown that I could "glimpse at" through the super 8 videos of my uncle: a popular Downtown full of people, alive, living with smells, with sweat ... For sure I would choose the old Downtown, a Downtown who perspires, who mixes with the other, who is not afraid of the other. Currently the Downtown is gentrified, cloistered in a bubble and like in many other Downtowns, the snobbery is spreading. But is it serious doctor?

The Downtown is portrayed then as a person that not only is alive, but also resembles us Lebanese, full of smells and sweat. Bachelard considers the house to be "the non I that protects the I" (Bachelard 1969, 5); and I would similarly argue that the body also protects the I. The relationship between the house and the body goes a long way in literature and religion. "The life history of the house is interwoven with the life history of the body. Both have in common a quality of taken-for-grantedness" (Connerton, 2009, p. 20). It is only when we are sick or when we lose the house that we notice how important those protectors are in our lives. And since in the case of Beirut the city is an extension of the house, the city then becomes also in direct relation with the body: "As I know my way around the limbs of my body, as a pianist knows her way around her piano, as I know my way around my own house, so I know my way around the paths, landmarks and districts of my city" (Connerton, 2009, p. 32). Therefore, to no longer know anymore my way around my city would be as traumatizing as to not know my way around the limbs of my body. My father for example cannot find himself anymore in the new Downtown and is unable to place his memories in the geographical spaces of their happenings. "This would be a defamiliarisation that would shake my very being" (Connerton, 2009, p. 32). If we then consider the city to be the body that surrounds us, the injection of new modern elements in Downtown, the amputation of the local system of production and the implant of a global network can then be compared to surgery being done to the city and to a drastic change in the whole body system. "The breaking down of these building blocks, the district, the square and the street, is not simply a direct attack on the

body of the city; it is an indirect attack on the human body too" (Connerton, 2009, p. 120). Therefore the question of my informant 'is it serious, doctor?' is very appropriate, since the city appears to be on a hospital bed and definitely needs a doctor and not a realtor. I am not a doctor, but to answer the question: yes I think it is serious!

Death and revival of the city

Downtown Beirut the way the old generation knew it has been severed and therefore, as described earlier by Salam, Beirut has become 'The city with a hole in its heart', a dead city.

> Nabil: I think Down Town represents the heart of Beirut. Yes. But it's the dead heart, which is true. We are dead in a way. Our civil life is torn, and it survives at the edges of the city both metaphorically and physically. Beirut itself is divided into ghettos and what binds them is business and money.
>
> Ghassan: It is the commercial part of the city that has no spirit at all.
>
> Layla: Downtown is lifeless, you only see Arab tourists and fancy people.

The death of the Downtown entails the death of the heart of Beirut and thus it paralyses any real attempt for reconciliation that could happen between the different ghettos of the city. The replacement of the heart with a new one that has no memory and no traces of life is then only a cosmetic surgery to hide the obvious: "Do not be fooled by the subterfuge: their curiosity for the excavated past and the speculative future is an alibi for a morbid fixation for the scene of the absent centre" (el-Khoury 1998, 260). It is serious, doctor, because Beirutis, as mentioned before, tend to love their city and take pride in its resiliency to wars

and destruction and have hope for its revival. But "if the theory is correct that feeling is not locate in the head, that we sentiently experience a window, a cloud, a tree not in our brains but, rather, in the place where we see it, then we are, in looking at our beloved, too, outside ourselves" (Benjamin, 1989, p. 68). We then see Beirut as us in our externality; we become the city, and its death entails our death or more precisely, the death of our perception of self.

On the other hand, the term 'revival' was used over and over again in the past chapters by spokespersons of Solidere, by informants and by me. For example, Nasser Chamaa in the introductory notes for the Souks competition said that "Solidere hopes to revive and enrich Beirut's particular character"; Oussama Kabbani in the same notes considered the new Souks to be "within an environment that will still be identified by all as a 'Souk', and which revives a 'traditional' art of living and trading"; Robert Saliba described the role of the Master Plan as "to revive Beirut's leading role in the Arab Middles East"; and finally an informant while criticizing the Jewelry Souks exclaimed, "a piece of our history was appropriated, deformed, owned and simply devalued and then given to us as history revived!!" The desire to revive Beirut proves once more that Beirut is actually on a deathbed waiting to be reassembled together, but it also highlights the uncanny desire to bring back to life what is long gone: "Beirut is dead; long live Beirut" (el-Khoury 1998, 262).

The Ghost of the city

When asked "do you remember the old Downtown? If yes which one do you prefer?", the majority of the respondents said that they only saw the ruins of the old Downtown but that they prefer it in its destroyed form to the new one.

> Ziad: I remember the down town before the reconstruction. I prefer the one that was in ruins to the fake one that is present now.
>
> Hisham: A little bit and even if it were in ruins I prefer the old one.
>
> Rouba: I recall going there when I was 18 and it was beautiful and half destroyed.

While the answers can be interpreted as a complete rejection of the new Downtown, what I am interested by here is the fascination and the attraction that many Lebanese have with both ancient and urban ruins. This attraction also appears in the choice of the new generation to appropriate as its symbol the only still functioning destroyed building of Downtown: the Egg. Ruins are mirrors towards the past and serve as a window towards an unknown place and time. They give the passerby a complete freedom to reconstruct and imagine the past of the destroyed place as they desire. This fascination with urban ruins maybe comes from a general disenchantment that the new generation has of the new Lebanon and a discontent of the present political situation. As another example, the Saint Georges that still stands destroyed has an open restored swimming pool that overlooks the destroyed hotel. While the pool is visited for its good location, a great deal of the attraction towards the pool is the fact to be able to swim back in

time amongst urban ruins. Those spaces are neither old nor new, neither destroyed nor standing. They are transitory spaces that resist time: they are uncanny spaces.

> Nabil: My other favorite spot is a bench in the main street overlooking the ancient ruins. There is something chilling and mystical about that spot.

Smoking water pipe on a backdrop of the Saint Georges (http://www.theage.com.au/travel/middle-east-meets-west-20100923-15nsj.html)

In her work on modernity in Japan, anthropologist Marilyn Ivy emphasizes the presence of the uncanny in modernity: "this home which is not-home (…) comes compellingly close to what Freud called the 'unhomelike', or as it is most commonly translated in English, the 'uncanny'"(Ivy, 1995, p. 106). Quoting Freud she explains that "this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old established in the mind that has been estranged only by process of repression. This reference to the factor of repression enables us, furthermore, to understand Shelling's definition of the uncanny as something which ought to have been kept concealed, but which has nevertheless come to light" (Ivy, 1995, p. 107). The ruins were supposed to be repressed and destroy

the past in order to make space for the new Downtown, but from their cracks, stories and narrations of other times crept out like a ghost of the past:

> Carole: We call it Ghost Town. It's a beautifully marked location with scary empty offices and apartments.
>
> Nisrine: In my short life the old Downtown was roads with holes in them and degutted buildings. The DT was very clearly the district of all the sorrows; it was a ghost town par excellence.

The 'revival' of Downtown seems also as an uncannily morbid process that tries to bring back to life a dead place while at the same time it tries to omit its spirit and its memory. It then creates the Ghost of Beirut. "An entire past comes to dwell in a new house" (Bachelard 1969, 5), and despite the Master Plan, the maps and the modern design, the Ghost of Beirut walks in the streets of the Downtown howling in the wind, telling stories of Beirut's past for those who can hear:

> Yasmine: The first time I think is in 96 or 97. It was very destroyed, we used to hang out there with my school friends, it looked like a phantom place. A place that was very "percé" and old. It was not beautiful. A lot of green moss was growing there. But there was the proof that Beirut had been "destroyed 7 times" (as my parents say) in the ruins near Casper and Gambini café today. I remember Martyrs' Square was a beautiful space-full place. It had a lot of nostalgia... I don't know why... maybe because it was like a ruin that is abandoned... But at the same time it had a lot of symbols. Symbol of a nation... that has disappeared maybe... my friends [the boys] used to play imitating the militants by shooting at each other's between the columns of the destroyed buildings. I remember it was half re-built. I remember having no attachment to it or maybe an indirect attachment... some place that was the main city but is not anymore... as if Beirut was only my own neighborhood, and Achrafieh and Downtown were an extra area that we go to visit or to hang out there and

> discover new places. It was like an adventure to go there. You had so many destroyed buildings; some of them had some secret doors since the ruins made it "secret". I mean by secret, some places only we could discover. It was such a joy to look at these ruins. Every time I went there I was imagining a society inside that doesn't exist anymore. A society that used to party in those buildings.... a society that lived independently from us today... a quite happy society... and on another level, I remember imagining militias who had drug and combating there. They were mythical and kind of heroes that I was trying to understand their ways of fight... moral image to them was behind…

Here lies the importance of remembering the atrocities that happened during the war and the understanding of why the war took place and who were those ghostly fighters. The problem is that the Ghost of Beirut can deceive us and tell us attractive, exotic and even mythical stories of the prewar and war times. The fascination of my generation with the Lebanese war is still barely hidden under the fresh coat of homogenizing paint that covers the Downtown. It is thus essential to really fill the Downtown with life and noise and make it again the centre of the nation in order to silence the ghostly voice.

Conclusion

In 1958, Jane Jacob, while talking about the urban planning on North American cities, remarked that "there is no logic that can be superimposed on the city; people make it, and it is to them, not buildings, that we must fit our plans" (Jacobs 1958). Half a century later, and applied to a city on another continent, this remark is still valid. Beirut and Downtown is for its people, and it is only they that have the power to make it again their own.

My voice throughout the thesis got mixed with the different voices of my informants, and it was hard for me to discern when I was drawing on their answers in my analysis and when it felt like they were actually putting words into my mouth. When I asked my informants at the end of my survey if they had anything more to add, some of them expressed their fears, hopes and views of possible solutions much better than I could. I therefore prefer to leave to them the concluding remarks.

What to do in order to save and take back the Downtown:

> Nabil: I don't hate the organized buildings in Downtown. I like them. What I hate is the commercialization of it all. Downtown needs to be occupied. Theaters need to be established there and it is the responsibility of intellectuals. The walls need to be slashed with paint and graffiti. Cafes should be affordable and a park for all Lebanese should be there. Instead of the fancy Souk Beirut there should

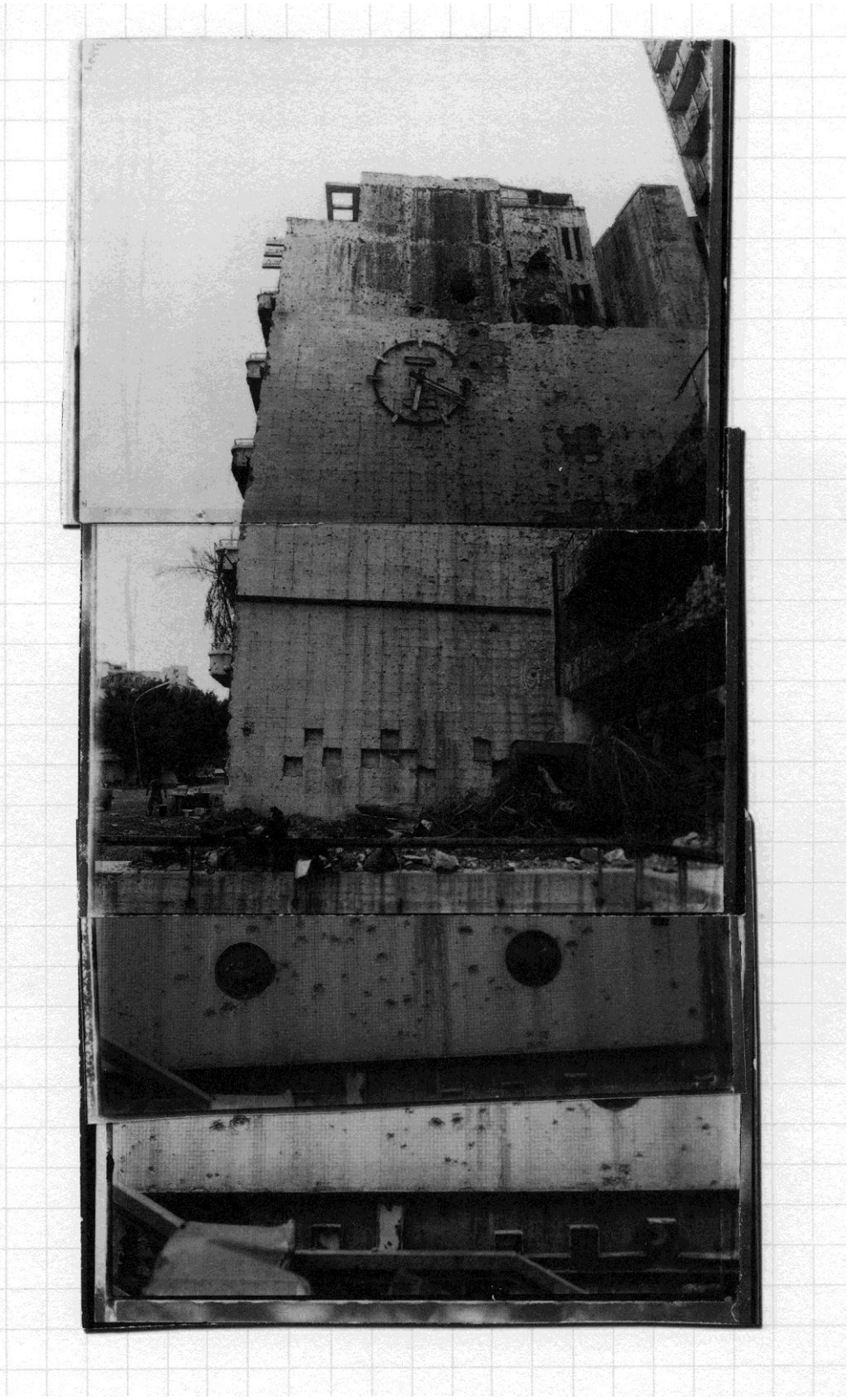
be a huge vegetable market and middle class "Souk" in order to bring back a plurality to the urban space there.

Fears of a 'Downtownisation' of Lebanon:

Ghassan: the bad thing is that Downtown is for rich people, but the population is not rich; when the country becomes like the Downtown where does everyone go?? Why building all these towers and people are not being able to pay the rent for apartments in Dahyeh (poor suburb of Beirut)!!!!!?

Throughout my thesis I criticized the role of Solidere and the reconstruction of the new Downtown, but to conclude, I would like to end on a more positive note. After all, the many wars and instability of the region taught the Lebanese to have a positive outlook on life and constantly rebuild their destroyed houses, neighborhoods and cities. The quote below is then in line with the spirit of Beirut.

Nisrine: What is the Downtown? It resembles a teenage girl going through puberty who believes that the best way to grow up is to imitate the adults: to dress like a lady, wear brands clothing, put on high heels … she doesn't look at all her age, a teen who believes that this is how we reach maturity; but this girl does not realize that she is basically living a crisis, a teenager crisis, and she will eventually grow up...



The stopped clock of war. Appeared in a book entitled *Come Again* (Frank 2006, 15).

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