Spatial Erasure: Reconstruction Projects in Beirut

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Abstract
Often associated with processes of healing, postwar re-construction projects may be less related to the pre-destruction phase than to the actual act of destruction. This, at least, is what the Lebanese case suggests. In this essay, we argue that the spatial erasure initiated by war destruction is consolidated during postwar reconstruction. We developed this argument by analyzing two of the main postwar reconstruction projects that have marked Beirut’s urbanization since the end of its civil war in 1990. The first project, the reconstruction of Beirut’s downtown, was undertaken starting 1994 by a private real-estate company, Solidere [1], extends over an area of 191 hectares that mainly includes Beirut’s historical core. Solidere was founded to this end by the late Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and is widely considered as the emblem of his ten-year era in Lebanese postwar history – an era commonly associated with the advent of neo-liberalism to the country. The second reconstruction project was initiated by Jihad al-Bina’ (a Hezbollah affiliated NGO specializing in development projects and post-war reconstruction building works) in the neighborhood of Haret Hreik in Southern Beirut in the aftermath of the 2006 Israeli summer war on Lebanon. Planned, organized, and supervised by a special private agency, Wa’d, established to this end by Jihad al-Bina’, the project’s main aim is to re-settle on site the 20,000 displaced dwellers of the neighborhoods in an estimated 200 apartment buildings, extending over 40 hectares. [2] The essay begins by documenting and analyzing the impacts of each of these two reconstruction projects and concludes with a wider analysis of processes of spatial erasure incurred in postwar reconstruction.

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Often associated with processes of healing, postwar re-construction projects may be less related to the pre-destruction phase than to the actual act of destruction. This, at least, is what the Lebanese case suggests. In this essay, we argue that the spatial erasure initiated by war destruction is consolidated during postwar reconstruction. We developed this argument by analyzing two of the main postwar reconstruction projects that have marked Beirut’s urbanization since the end of its civil war in 1990. The first project, the reconstruction of Beirut’s downtown, was undertaken starting 1994 by a private real-estate company, Solidere [1], extends over an area of 191 hectares that mainly includes Beirut’s historical core. Solidere was founded to this end by the late Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and is widely considered as the emblem of his ten-year era in Lebanese postwar history –an era commonly associated with the advent of neo-liberalism to the country. The second reconstruction project was initiated by Jihad al-Bina’ (a Hezbollah affiliated NGO specializing in development projects and post-war reconstruction building works) in the neighborhood of Haret Hreik in Southern Beirut in the aftermath of the 2006 Israeli summer war on Lebanon. Planned, organized, and supervised by a special private agency, Wa’d, established to this end by Jihad al-Bina’, the project’s main aim is to re-settle on site the 20,000 displaced dwellers of the neighborhoods in an estimated 200 apartment buildings, extending over 40 hectares. [2] The essay begins by documenting and analyzing the impacts of each of these two reconstruction projects and concludes with a wider analysis of processes of spatial erasure incurred in postwar reconstruction.

Solidere and the Reconstruction of Downtown Beirut

An aerial view of today’s Beirut eloquently reflects the way the Solidere’s postwar reconstruction project re-invented the city’s historic core into a separate enclave, abruptly severed from the rest of the city by a network of highways that constitute solid physical barriers.
This separation is reinforced by the morphology of large blocks designed to accommodate the new landscape of high-rises that now constitute the bulk of the built environment. The new blocks stand in stark contrast with the dense morphology of the neighborhoods surrounding the area; those that once constituted the historic city center’s first expansion. Furthermore, the morphology of large blocks points to the imposition of a different process of spatial production in the city, where the thick web of social relations that have sustained the urban production of the historic core since the 1800s are abstracted into property shares controlled and managed by a central real-estate company.[3] It implies a reduction of the significance of spatial production to economic profit maximization, prioritized over other social dimensions of the old city core, such as its religious and class mixity. This is indeed how the post-civil war reconstruction of Beirut’s historic core was orchestrated by Solidere, the private real-estate company, since its initiation in 1994. The company, widely considered as the embodiment of a
new political and economic era associated with the neo-liberal project of the Hariri mandate in Lebanon (1995-2005), states as its main aim the establishment of Beirut as a global destination for international capital and investors[4], in line with other so-called neo-liberal urban interventions in the Arab Middle-East and elsewhere.[5] The project is hence driven by a vision of a post-civil war Beirut that aligns the city's recovery to the interest of private Lebanese and Arab Gulf capital. In light of this claim, the project has thus benefited from an array of public subsidies, such as tax exemptions and infrastructure, as well as public facilities in the modalities and forms of the company's trading of shares, enshrined in a special regulation designed à la carte to fit the needs and interests of the private company.[6] The company has redrawn the landscape of the old city, demolishing many of its architectural and urban landmarks.[7] Historical buildings, when kept, are re-defined in line with the new projects, as forms of enhancing the “trading value” of the city's landscape.[8] On the basis of a new set of social and economic relations, Solidere did not only re-invent the spatial composition of this area but also –and maybe most poignantly, re-invented Beirut's old downtown into an exclusive, high-end, separate entity in the city.

It is significant at this stage to point out that the new city center departs from the historical and social morphology of the historical core and from its role/position as a central transportation hub that connects across neighborhoods in the city. As a result, the new city center preserves the separation that the war imposed between the area and its surroundings. Downtown Beirut was a no-man's land during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), the city center, turned battlefield, in which only militia men circulated freely. Solidere perpetuates the isolation of the city's historic core in abiding to the boundaries articulated during the civil war, extending precisely over the no-man's land and hence permanently inscribing the spatial impacts of the civil war on Beirut. The battle zone is transformed from a space of military violence to a space of free flow of capital without altering the very violence that detached spatially the historical core from the rest of the city. As a reconstruction project, Solidere extended the latter acts of violence by consolidating the spatial separation and permanently replacing the social networks (of production) that such a historical space embodied, hence erasing the spatial embodiments of the social interaction the war displaced. This dual process of consolidation and erasure can also be traced in Wa'd, the postwar reconstruction project of Haret-Hreik. The similarity between the two projects challenges the common view in Lebanon that positions Solidere and Wa'd at opposite ends of the political spectrum; the former is a neo-liberal project associated with the current government while the latter is associated with the opposition representing forces of resistance to imperialism and its embodied capitalistic interests. The next section illustrates that even though Wa’d has a different story of reconstruction from Solidere, it replicates Solidere through its impact on the city space by consolidating the war-initiated processes.

Wa’d and the reconstruction of Haret Hreik

Haret Hreik is today a major construction site: work is proceeding in at least 200 apartment buildings at various stages of completion, rebuilding the residential and commercial infrastructure that was erased by the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon.
Construction works rebuilt slightly modified blueprints of the pre-war residential structures, attempting to reverse the direct impacts of the Israeli blitz by re-housing on site the 20,000 or so displaced neighborhood dwellers. More than 90% of households who have lost their homes have legally delegated, in the form of notarized authorization, the responsibility for reconstruction to Wa’ld; the private agency entrusted with the entire reconstruction task from collection of public financial compensations, to commissioning architects and supervision of contractors’ work. Pre-war resident households are to be handed a finished apartment unit that retains the location and size of their pre-war unit. [9] In that, Hezbollah intends to accomplish yet another victory against Israel by rebuilding what the Israeli Army had destroyed. It also hopes to consolidate its oppositional position against the national government which, to date, failed to issue the necessary regulations and compensations to facilitate the reconstruction process. [10]

The passive role of public authorities, both local and central, in this reconstruction process was instrumental to the implementation of the current scheme. In spite of their intimate relations and support to Hezbollah (sometimes even actual political affiliation), engineers and elected representatives of the local authority, the Haret Hreik municipality, have played a minimal role in the development of the project. Municipal council members have conceded in interviews that their role was limited to on-site observation of construction works to insure buildings being implemented did not trespass onto public property. As for the national government, its
reconstruction policy can be summarized to a proposition, still under study, for a legal exemption that would enable the reconstruction of the neighborhood to its pre-war density and the disbursement of a lump-sum monetary compensation package to property owners, to finance the reconstruction of their apartments. These policies, in line with the postwar reconstruction policy of the Hariri era (1995-2005), signal Haret-Hreik (and the southern suburbs of Beirut, more generally) symbolically as outside the geography of the national reconstruction project that includes notably the above-described reconstruction of the historic core, an array of landmark projects scattered around the city, and the infrastructure network that connects them—be they highways and/or airport, port, etc. The significance of Haret Hreik’s position as outside this reconstruction project translates into a relief-type policy: the disbursement of individual compensations or financial indemnities to alleviate costs incurred by neighborhood dwellers and a legal exemption where the state declines further social responsibility. This public position is particularly telling in a neighborhood known for the paucity of its public spaces, the poor quality of its road and service networks, the inadequacy of its urban regulations, and very high population density. It suggests a disinterest on the side of policymakers to actually intervene in a neighborhood that lies outside the city they project for the future, a position further exacerbated by the divergent political position of the dwellers as supporters of Hezbollah—hence of the political opposition to the government. [11]

It is important to dwell further on the modes of operation of the private agency in relation to the project’s definition and to the neighborhood past. Here we see indeed that despite divergent visions/valuations of pre-war built forms (that Wa’d sought to replicate and Solidere to erase) and also despite divergent positions vis-à-vis pre-war dwellers (that Wa’d sought to re-settle on site and Solidere to permanently displace), the two private agencies display nonetheless similar modes of operation. Thus, Wa’d introduced to Haret-Hreik a new mode of spatial production, strongly centralized in the hands of an architectural board of eight members, eventually delegated to the members of Wa’d, that worked within the tight guidelines imposed by the Party’s leadership. [12] It also imposed a very restrictive understanding of space, limited—in classic postwar quantitative assessments— to the number of lost units, the sizes of apartments, and the financial estimates of dwellers’ losses even as architects deploy instrumentally the language of social and urban memory to justify poor architectural choices. [13]

Needless to say, this reconstruction contrasts powerfully with the historical processes of spatial production. Haret Hreik developed as a dense residential neighborhood during the years of Lebanese civil war when the area transformed from a remote suburban green zone to a main destination for Muslim Shiite families. These families fled life-threatening danger posed to them by the Arab-Israeli conflict in south Lebanon, and/or neighborhoods in which they dwelled that fell under the control of Christian militias that considered their presence undesirable. At the time, land became available since many of the neighborhoods’ (Christian) property owners/dwellers were themselves displaced with the consolidation of religiously homogeneous neighborhoods throughout the city, rendering their presence as Christians in a predominantly Shiite area difficult, if not impossible. [14] The neighborhood was moreover built by a handful of developers, themselves displaced from other areas/regions of Lebanon, who tied their practices of land development to a particular religious/social position connecting them to the social groups to whom they provided housing.
Land development eventually became a way to invest capital earned elsewhere (especially in Africa and/or the Arab Gulf), to consolidate and improve its value, and to earn social standing in the community for the provision of housing.

The neighborhood destroyed by the Israeli blitz in 2006 hence embodied the experiences of forced population displacements (civil war, Arab-Israeli conflict), circulation and consolidation of know-how in the making of urban spaces, networks of capital that connected the geography of the Lebanese civil war to extra-national contexts, social solidarities, etc. It is precisely this experience which is left-out by the reconstruction project that replaces the thick web of social relations formed and/or maintained during the historical phase of spatial production, with the private agency’s hierarchical organizational model of operation. This socio-historical aspect of space is currently being permanently erased through the postwar reconstruction project. Indeed, the centralized mode of operation in which Hezbollah’s Wa’d is operating leaves little room for other actors to intervene. Taking the formal dimensions of the buildings as they stood in 2006 prior to their demolition, the agency has, as described above, established a completely
different model of spatial production in which the entire interface between client/dweller and developer goes through the agency that is also responsible for all decisions regarding common building facilities. Moreover, the agency has also single-handedly developed the design guidelines implemented in the reconstruction of all public spaces (e.g. streets, sidewalks, etc.) in the neighborhood. Hence, the new neighborhood is exclusively produced by Hezbollah and it is in the modalities of this production process that boundaries created by the war are consolidated.

The negation of the historic mode of production and the adoption of the boundaries of the buildings demolished by the Israeli air raids as the actual limits of the reconstruction project reveals an actual dismay/distaste for the pre-war fabric. This distaste is perhaps best revealed in the motto of the project –posted on the panels of every building and on magazine advertisements, that promises that Haret Hreik will be rebuilt more beautifully than it was: “nu’amirouha ajmal mimma kanat”

Figure 4: An advertisement in Cedar Wing: the inflight magazine of Middle East Airline,
Needless to say, the motto carries an undertone of resistance; one that suggests that what was lost is not worth lamenting for since it will be recovered, albeit in a more beautiful form. [15] Representations of the project on its website suggest that this form is considered more beautiful mainly because of the new material finishes that will be applied on apartment blocks and streets that are still rebuilt with stringent spatial conditions and inadequate public facilities; but a critique of this approach is outside the scope of this essay.

Spatial erasure

Judging from the analysis of these two projects, it is possible to argue that reconstruction consolidates the geography of war and accepts its new timeline as fact. The two postwar reconstruction projects described in this essay are conceptualized in continuity with the war that delineates their geographic extent and marks the starting point of their respective histories. In this regard, the projects bear little resemblance to the pre-war fabric. In fact, anything prior to demolition is reduced to a reservoir of moments, selectively invoked to serve the interests of the new project, stripped from social and/or political significance. Economic entitlements are also dis-embedded of their social milieu and abstracted into shares and/or forms. Hence it is possible, indeed important, to speak of spatial erasure. It is an erasure that operates on the social, political, economic, legislative, and environmental dimensions of space. These dimensions are subdued to the consolidated, abstracted definition of space that the conquerors of the new space impose, namely that of capital – be it economic and/or political. In this re-formulation of space, both the Wa’d and Solidere projects replace an existing social network of developers and/or property owners and users by a centralized network, that of the political party’s agencies in Haret Hreik and of neo-liberal capital in Beirut downtown. In both cases, individual claims are addressed to the newly established central authority on urban development (Wa’d and/or Solidere), which replaces all other authority, whether traditional (familial, social) or non-traditional (government). The centralization of decision making breaks down social networks by marginalizing their holders and allowing production to happen in one form only: between individual (resident/ client-developer) and central privatized authority (Wa’d/Solidere). The spatial entities defined by the projects eventually emerge as privatized spaces in the city, where the role of state authorities is – whether antagonistic or sympathetic – always that of a facilitator rather than an engaged public planning actor. Far from a process of healing the scars of war, this radical change in the characteristics of the ‘reconstructed’ neighborhoods positions reconstruction projects as a continuation and even a consolidation of the war-induced processes of change.

Notes:

[2] Figures vary according to sources. The numbers we are listing are the latest we could obtain from the Wa’d Public Relations office.

[3] The writ of the 1991 regulation that allowed the establishment of the company, also enabled the transformation of individual property claims (whether actual property titles, rental, and/or otherwise) into shares that amount to two thirds of the company’s stock. The remaining third was opened for investors to bring capital and allow the company to operate. Shareholders in this category were Lebanese and Arab—the largest being Rafic Hariri. For more details on this process, see Joe Nasr and Eric Verdeil, “The Reconstruction of Beirut,” in Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Renata Holod, Attilio Petruccioli, and Andre Raymond, eds., *The City in the Islamic World* (Leyden: Brill, 2008) pp. 1116-1141.


[5] Law 117/1991, the real estate company, modified the original formulation of the real-estate company in the Lebanese Planning Legislation (*Loi de l’Urbanisme* 1963) in order to account for the special demands made by the main investors of the private company. For more, see Saree Makdissi, *Laying Claim… op.cit.*


[9] Residents are consulted once in the process, at the stage before construction orders are issued.

[10] It is expected that parliament approves soon the legislation put forth by the government in January 2007 which allows dwellers in Haret Hreik to rebuild their houses as they were in 2006, despite the fact that these apartment buildings do not conform to the Lebanese building law and the urban regulations of the area. In this absence of this text, Wa’d is currently building without building permits and blaming its illegal activity of undue state delays. A large percentage of the compensations pledged by the national government to property owners in the aftermath of the 2006 war, that were to be used for the reconstruction of demolished apartments in Haret Hreik, has not been disbursed yet. While many property owners have received of the two promised installments, few have collected the two installments. Furthermore, in an area where property titles are commonly clouded with multiple inheritances and other issues, many property owners who have lost their homes have been caught in legal loopholes and hence unable to collect their compensations.

[11] In moments of high political tension, the divergence between government and community translates into the criminalization of the neighborhood’s residents accused, for example—, by Prime Minister Fuad Saniora, of illegal building practices and hence condemnable. Refer to PM Saniora’s speech on May 7, 2007.

[12] Decisions are taken behind two layers of closed doors, the first dictates Hezbollah political
prerogatives (e.g. retaining a territorial base, limiting negotiations for a potential legalization of the reconstruction process, etc.) and the second works within the confines of Hezbollah’s prerogatives to bring the neighborhood up to what has repeatedly been described as “modern” and “built to standards”. Both operate by direct derogations of the dwellers who, even as they delegate all authority to the Party for reconstruction, seem hardly able to adopt any other position given the harsh set of legal, financial, and political constraints they face in this reconstruction.


[15] This lack of appreciation of the pre-war spatial fabric, it should be pointed, is not restricted to Haret Hreik, but also extends to other areas in Lebanon destroyed during the 2006 war such as Bint Jbeil, Ayta el-Sha’eb, and elsewhere where bulldozers cleared the rubble of the historical core as soon as the war ended, seeing in this postwar reconstruction an opportunity to redraw the historic core along new guidelines. A thorough description of these processes was provided in several presentations during City Debates 2007, Cities After Disasters: Filling the voids. Conference held at the American University of Beirut, May 8-12, 2007.