

The reconstruction of Beirut: sowing the seeds for future conflicts?

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Periods of post-war reconstruction are often the backdrop for new socio-economic and political dynamics. In Beirut, the rise of market-led urbanism, a lack of proper urban planning and the far-reaching sectarian polarisation are all factors that could raise questions about the model of urban regeneration implemented and arouse new socio-political tensions.

“Beirut in times of peace has been more disfigured and destroyed than in times of war.”¹ While the city centre, devastated by the combats of the civil war (1975–90), has now been largely rebuilt, the Lebanese capital is now faced with something of a paradox: its regeneration model seems to be bringing with it the seeds of future conflicts. The spread of speculative urban development – based on demolition and reconstruction – from downtown areas to the socially diverse neighbourhoods surrounding the city centre is a key event in Beirut’s recent history. These densely populated areas, largely unaffected by the destruction wrought by the war, are nonetheless subject to politico-sectarian polarisation, rekindled by the assassination of prime minister Rafic Hariri in 2005. Beirut’s pericentral neighbourhoods, under pressure from these two dynamics, seem to be in the throes of a process of “deconstruction by reconstruction”.

Solidere’s legacy

In the aftermath of the war, the reconstruction strategy adopted by the government was primarily economic: the renewal of the whole of Lebanon would be based on the dynamism of tertiary functions in downtown Beirut, through the re-creation of a regional hub oriented towards finance, business, culture and tourism (Schmid 2006; Ragab 2010). This strategy was embodied in a vast urban project,² entrusted in 1994 to a private land and real-estate and firm (Solidere), which adopted a planned approach of “insular urban development” (Saliba 2000). This approach led to the radical transformation of central Beirut,³ while the pericentral districts and the suburbs were barely, if at all, concerned by the project.

¹ Interview by Yaara Bou Melhem (10 October 2010) with the spokesperson of the association Save Beirut Heritage, in the television programme “Saving Beirut” (SBS Dateline, Australia, available at: www.sbs.com.au/dateline/story/watch/id/600811/n/Saving-Beirut).

² The operational area covers more than 160 hectares, comparable in size to La Défense business district in Paris.

³ The number of buildings demolished for the project has exceeded the number destroyed by 15 years of civil war, corresponding to an overall destruction rate of up to 80% of the original urban fabric.

The modern towers of Solidere, seen from a pericentral neighbourhood (© M. Krijnen)



Solidere's developers laid the foundations of a political and economic model of reconstruction that favoured private investment, inspired to a certain extent by the model used in major urban regeneration operations in many Western cities.⁴ The master plan for this project is clearly influenced by this model, which seeks to maximise profitability and returns for investors through the reconstruction of the built environment. To this end, Solidere released a huge number of development rights (4.7 million square metres of net floor space) covering an area twice the size of the pre-war city centre (Verdeil, Faour and Velut 2007). Tower blocks accommodating offices and luxury apartments, combined with the development of a Western-style shopping mall in place of the former *souks*, structure a project that has preserved and renovated only a small number of pre-existing city blocks.

Zokak el-Blat: where pericentral Beirut meets market-led urban development

In the space of just a few years, these transformations have gradually extended into the neighbourhoods bordering the city centre, such as Zokak el-Blat. This area, though perceived as poorer and less attractive than other districts (such as Gemmayze and Ain el-Mreisseh), is nonetheless home to a remarkable architectural and residential heritage, as well as important public facilities (schools, places of worship). Furthermore, the area used to be marked by a unique way of life based on a relative coexistence – or, at least, co-presence – of different sects, today called into question by a gradual appropriation by the Shia populations that took refuge there during the civil war.

⁴ In particular, the revitalisation of docklands and other waterfront spaces in London, Dublin and Toronto.

The risk of forced residential mobility within Greater Beirut



Following the annexation of a third of its territory by Solidere in the early 1990s, Zokak el-Blat piqued the interest of a growing number of Lebanese property developers, and tower blocks were built on empty plots of land or to replace old housing composed of large villas that formerly housed the Beirut bourgeoisie and small apartment blocks (ground floor plus four storeys) that had been subdivided into flats rented out to low-income families. While the income from the rental from these old buildings was relatively low and their maintenance often quite expensive, the land-use coefficients were far below the legal limit; landlords thus became the favoured “prey” of developers prepared to offer significant sums of money to obtain the land and building rights.

This neighbourhood’s proximity to the reconstructed city centre has incited developers to build upmarket apartments in order to attract a population with higher spending power, at the risk of destabilising the economic and social equilibrium of the local land and real-estate markets. In December 2011, 17 developments had been completed or were under way in Zokak el-Blat (Majal 2012). This “real-estate fever” has contributed to a doubling of house prices (US\$5,000/m²) in a period of just a few years, particularly in areas adjacent to Solidere. Although the rental market appears to be following the same trend, a lack of in-depth surveys means that the only evidence for this is certain residents’ individual experiences.

Furthermore, the neighbourhood and its population are subject to constant surveillance by Hezbollah: Zokak el-Blat is a particularly strategic area for the “Party of God” owing to its direct access to the political, economic and symbolic functions of the city centre. Like the other major politico-sectarian groups present in Beirut, Hezbollah keeps a close eye on land and property transactions, while at the same time allowing the neighbourhood’s physical and socio-economic transformations to take effect. However, with the departure of a proportion of the low-income households from the neighbourhood, the party is likely to lose a significant part of the political support it enjoys locally.

This exertion of territorial control by a political party is not to be ignored, as it forms part of the polarisation dynamic that structures the political and sectarian geography of the pericentral districts surrounding downtown Beirut. This phenomenon of politico-sectarian territorialisation, accompanied by an increased politicisation of the production of urban space, is particularly strong

in neighbourhoods that were initially mixed and in areas adjacent to the Damascus road, i.e. the former Green Line that separated East and West Beirut during the civil war.

Zokak el-Blat. Tower blocks replace villas and small traditional apartment blocks
(© M. Krijnen)



Complexities and shortcomings of the regulatory and institutional framework

In Zokak el-Blat, as in other pericentral districts of Beirut, such property projects can develop all the more freely given that no new strategic plan⁵ has been adopted by the city council or the Council for Development and Reconstruction since the end of the civil war. Therefore, the 1954 master plan remains the legal frame of reference, allocating the highest densities to the central and pericentral areas. These regulatory shortcomings are exacerbated by the virtually systematic delays that affect the city council's attempts at urban action.

While the private sector has developed rapid and aggressive operating methods for accomplishing its real-estate projects, Beirut city council has not managed to exert its full powers in the field of urban planning and development – particularly in terms of applying land-use rights and creating infrastructures – owing to a lack of human, legal and financial resources. The city council is therefore in a position of permanent reactivity in the face of the *fait accompli* strategy implemented by developers. To address this problem, the Lebanese ministry of culture has, for a number of years, tried to list a certain number of notable buildings; however, until quite recently,⁶ developers have been quick to find ways around such protective measures, managing to regularise their demolition and planning permits after the event directly with the regional authority (*mohafazah*),⁷ in somewhat opaque conditions. Finally, the dominance of private interests, which is

⁵ The master plan currently in force dates from 1954 (the work of G. Riachi), complemented a few years later by the Écochard Plan (1962–63).

⁶ A ministerial decree passed in 2010 was supposed to have put an end to these practices.

⁷ Lebanon is divided into eight *mohafazat* (singular: *mohafazah*), the equivalent of regional administrative districts that are under central-government control. The Beirut metropolitan region is covered by a *mohafazah*.

not new in Lebanon, is facilitated by the absence of a respected and efficient local public authority, with the Beirut metropolitan area being administered by both the city and the regional councils. Although the municipality theoretically has wide-ranging prerogatives with regard to urban planning and development,⁸ in reality it plays only an advisory role, with executive power exceptionally devolved to the regional prefect (*mohafez*) (Lamy 2010). This overlapping of local powers severely hampers the implementation of coherent urban action, particularly when the two tiers of governance are led by opposing political groups, as has often been the case since the 1990s.

Gentrification: the source of new socio-political violence?

The spread of market-led planning practices to pericentral districts, in the form of the gentrification of territories with strong politico-sectarian identities, could have pernicious effects: if current trends continue, the population dynamics across the metropolitan area will only reinforce the inequalities between municipal Beirut (i.e. downtown and pericentral districts) and its suburbs. The significant increases in land prices, property prices and rents⁹ could ultimately result in the abolition of the *de facto* territorial compensation in place for certain low-income populations, who would be forced to leave their neighbourhoods, close to the city centre and its opportunities for low-skilled jobs, for outlying suburban areas.

These disadvantaged populations – spatially and politically invisible, discriminated against socio-economically, and subject to forced residential mobility – could then bolster the influence of more distant sectarian neighbourhoods and/or municipalities,¹⁰ or of certain marginal territories,¹¹ which could become home to a new underclass in search of affordable housing. This phenomenon could prove particularly worrisome, bearing in mind that the high level of socio-economic and spatial inequality in Beirut – combined with the frustrations of new urban populations with regard to long-standing urban populations – was one of the key factors that triggered violence in 1975 (Hourani 1976).

It would therefore seem that the gentrification dynamics currently under way in Beirut – as in many cities around the world – are set to result in increased socio-economic polarisation. However, the consequences of this process could be much more serious for a society permeated by numerous tensions: the spread of the urban development model promoted by Solidere seems to carry with it the seeds of future socio-political unrest, inexorably propelling Lebanon towards a level of inequality comparable to that which, in part, led to the outbreak of civil war. It would seem that the case of Beirut, in addition to its omnipresent sectarian issues, clearly illustrates the limits and dangers of a reconstruction model that gives priority to speculative investment and market-led urban development.

⁸ By dint of the decree-law of 1977, Beirut city council's remit theoretically includes urban planning, highways and the application of land-use rights. However, derogation arrangements specific to the Lebanese capital, demolition, subdivision and building permits continue to be granted at the discretion of the regional prefect (Lamy 2010).

⁹ Most tenants occupying apartments in old buildings benefit from the rent control measures voted into law at the end of the civil war, thus ensuring a certain social diversity in pericentral districts.

¹⁰ Such as the Tarik el-Jdideh district (predominantly Sunni), the municipalities of Dahiyeh (predominantly Shia) and certain areas of the municipalities of Furn el-Shebbak and Hazmīyeh (predominantly Christian).

¹¹ In particular the municipality of Burj Hammoud (predominantly Armenian) and the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila.

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